**‘Dialectical Games’: The Piano Music of Pierre Boulez**

PIERRE BOULEZ

*Notations*

Sonata for piano, no.1

Sonata for piano, no.2

Sonata for piano, no.3

* Constellation-Miroir
* Trope

*Incises*

*une page d’éphéméride*

*Structures* for two pianos: Livre II

*Notations* is the earliest of Boulez’s piano works to have been published and thus acknowledged. Written during his time in Messiaen’s composition class, the *Notations* were given to Boulez’s fellow pupil and friend, Serge Nigg, and long thought lost. Their polemical intent is certainly a harbinger of things to come. Already impatient with ‘orthodox’ dodecaphony, as personified in Paris by René Leibowitz, a pupil of Webern, Boulez decided to satirise what he – interestingly, not entirely unlike Stravinsky – saw as a ‘mania for twelves’. And so, he composed twelve piano pieces, each based upon a twelve note-row, each twelve bars long.

Satire aside, much engages the ear. One hears ‘influences’, to be sure, but also the beginnings of paths that were not to be taken up, and also, most intriguingly, hints of things to come – which may fruitfully be pursed in a concert such as this, in which we hear the published œuvre. Readily apparent is the delight in the music of Debussy (no.8 might almost be a mini-*Prélude* composed by a Debussy returned from the dead in the 1940s), that of Bartók (no.7 in particular), and, in the nature of the piano writing, the Schoenberg of the op.11 *Three Pieces*. There is a crucial tension already to be heard between freedom and determinism, here most strongly in contrasts between individual pieces, for instance between the post-Debussyan ‘vagueness’ of no.9 (‘Lointain – calme’) and the mechanisation of no.10 (‘Mécanique et très sec’). The stillness of the ninth offers, at least in retrospect, a foretaste in miniature, of the slow movement of the Second Sonata, its air as rare and bracing as that of a mountain lake.

The First Sonata came first though, a two-movement work written in 1946, roughly contemporary with the *Sonatine* for flute and piano. As with the *Notations*, one hears small, musical cells, readily grasped by the ear even on a first hearing, but there is greater scope for development. ‘Dialectical games’ – a telling description Pierre-Laurent Aimard has employed – between different types of material thrill and beguile, often simultaneously. ‘Freedom’ is always relative, indeed controlled, in Boulez’s music, even in subsequent, ‘aleatory’ form, such as we shall hear in the Third Sonata. Nevertheless, freer material comes into musical, productive conflict with a toccata-like strand in the composer’s piano writing we shall hear further unleashed in Incises. The second movement offers sinuous serial process, perhaps already pointing, if ambivalently, to Boulez’s later attraction towards the music of Berg – whose desire for ‘reconciliation’, especially in late works such as the Violin Concerto and *Lulu*, the young composer, ‘like a lion who has been flayed alive’ (Messiaen) still suspected of reactionary backsliding. Anger towards such tendencies is still, however, more apparent, than reconciliation. The final six bars alone offer a *perpetuo moto* across almost the entirety of the keyboard, stretching dynamically from *pp* to *ff* to *fff* with further violent accents, to a long pause, followed by a relatively rare five-note final chord, marked ‘arpèger très brutal et très sec’. This is not music for the fainthearted.

Nor, by any standards, is the Second Sonata, still Boulez’s most celebrated work for the instrument. Completed in 1948, it is a still angrier, still more ambitious, still more ‘achieved’ work – and a ‘work’ it is in the most emphatic sense. Confronting not only his more immediate forebears, but the example of Beethoven himself in his *Hammerklavier* Sonata, op.106, Boulez’s task is to destroy the very idea of the Classical sonata. Not the least of his reproaches for the twelve-note Schoenberg was the Austrian composer’s recourse to old forms, furthered by his increasing closeness to Brahms, never a figure of whom Boulez has thought especially fondly, despite occasional performances of his music. Yet perspective changes over time; new generations of performers can hear things that others did not think were there – and perhaps were not, at the time. It is ironic, then, that, according to one distinguished contemporary exponent of the sonata, the pianist and conductor, Michael Wendeberg, ‘the second sonata is to the first, you could say, as Brahms is to Mozart. The piano score is richer, using the entire pitch range; furthermore, the rhythmical structures are decidedly more complex, and the polyphony is more clearly brought out.’

Heard immediately after the First Sonata, the first movement can impart a sense of continuing, deepening exploration. Aspiration to – and at the same time, dialectial denial of – post-Messiaenesque melody is integrated into a structure of disintegrating Beethovenian sonata form. Freedom and mechanism: that dialectic apparent between *Notations* is here present within, and indeed propels, the progress of a single movement. The close came both as confirmation and as surprise. In the slow movement, Boulez’s parenthetical method, still more crucial to the Third Sonata, comes to the fore, an almost Wagnerian conception of ‘endless melody’, itself of course a conception reliant upon Romantic reception of Beethoven, increasingly disrupted, even annulled, by lengthening interjections and eruptions. The third movement might justly be considered the work’s scherzo; ‘presque vif’, (almost lively) cautions against too straightforward a Beethovenian understanding. Disintegration, even Terror, is the post-Robespierrian order of the day in the finale. The *Hammerklavier*’s all-encompassing fugue may or may not be deliberately parodied, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the sparks sent flying by furious piling up of post-Webern shards are not part of the crossfire as Boulez’s own, slower, perhaps underlying fugue meets its very different fate. The post-war avant-garde’s insistence upon a ‘Year Zero’ following the horrors of the Second World War may have been unhistorical, impossible, but it helps account for the rage we so often discover in its earlier works. An almost Bergian synthesis seems briefly within reach, yet is never achieved. If the final, slow section cannot reconcile, in a fine performance, it will speak, even sing: the song of aftershock.

Boulez’s Third Sonata remains, like a good number of his works, a work-in-progress. Work began in 1955. The premiere was given by the composer at Darmstadt in 1957. Boulez outlines the intended circular structure of the work – four ‘Formants’, of which ‘Trope’ is the only one to have been published, encircling a central ‘Constellation’, also to be mirrored (‘Constellation-miroir)’ – in an article whose title knowingly echoes Fontenelle’s celebrated question, ‘Sonate, que me veux-tu?’ (Sonata, what do you want of me?) The two movements heard this evening were published in 1962 and 1963; there are numerous sketches for what may follow at the Paul Sacher Foundation. As Peter O’Hagan has pointed out, in his 1998 consideration of the materials, ‘A central concern is the integration of serial organisation on a local level with large-scale structure.’ ‘Trope’, when performed as here, with ‘Constellation-miroir’, will follow it; it would precede ‘Constellation’.

Reconstruction, then, following the scorched earth of the Second Sonata? Yes, although certainly not reversion. The pianist must make choices concerning the very ordering of the music, Boulez here attracted by the idea of a maze or labyrinth, a matter of finding one’s way in the heat of the moment – although the chosen path through the labyrinth and, by extension, even the moment itself, must, by virtue of the work’s complexity, actually be prepared beforehand. A linear path, a vertical one, something else? (Ideally, then, one would hear at least two different performances back-to-back. Ideally, though, we might have the ‘complete work’ too!) The ‘openness’ of Boulez’s Mallarmé- and Joyce-inspired ‘Livre’ faces dialectical assault from a post-pontillistic style still acknowledging the early 1950s’ high-watermark of total serialism. Even, perhaps particularly, as a work-in-progress, Boulez certainly achieves his desire to ‘jettison the concept of a work as a simple journey starting with a departure and ending with an arrival’. It also reflects upon itself as a musical work, as Joyce’s two great novels reflect upon themselves as novels – and it does that not simply as part of the composer’s ‘intention’. In a 1988 interview with Peter McCallum, Boulez avowed: ‘Yes … I will finish it, certainly one of these days, because I conceived it as a total, global architecture, and now there are only two doors instead of five. I feel obliged to make a complete five movements.’

If most of Boulez’s solo piano works come from the earlier part of his career, then *Incises* and *une page d’éphéméride* qualify as ‘late’ works. At a safer distance, the composer seems more willing – and able – to offer a rapprochement to the sonorities and perhaps even to the harmonies of twentieth-century composers: not only Debussy and Ravel (*Gaspard*, surely, in *Incises*) but even Schoenberg too. Once more, the toccata is the thing, as is a taste for decoration, for ornamentation, even for proliferation, we might even trace back to earlier French composers such as Couperin and Rameau – whose music Boulez has occasionally conducted. The material of *Incises* is derived from *Répons*, whose antiphonal structure it also shares, slow sections punctuating the toccata material. *une page d’éphéméride* seems perhaps to open a new path, which may or may not be taken up, its bell-like tones at the same time harking back to one of the *Notations*; at any rate, it was intended as the first piece in a new cycle for piano.

Finally, *Structures*. Boulez had partly intended to teach Messiaen a total ‘serialist’ lesson in the first chapter of the first book, which the two composers performed together. The second book is already a considerably ‘freer’ work. Indeed, it is, perhaps above all, high drama, which reconstitutes, reworks material from the earlier work. Artaud-like frenzy, familiar from the Second Sonata in particular, remains, extends; decision-making from the Third is also with us. Watch – and listen – for decisions signalled by one player to another and then responded to (or not). These, again, are ‘dialectical games’. The music incorporates rather than moves beyond earlier serialism; at the same time, its shows something new. Perhaps most intriguingly of all, we know that the free and determined are doing battle, but are unsure which is which. Identity, perhaps, is not the point. To quote Andrew Infanti, ‘fixity becomes a governing principle frequently attacked by the musical matter it devises to control.’ An ever-expanding universe of serial possibilities – and clashes – is musically and visually dramatised.