RICHARD WAGNER • Siegfried-Idyll for Chamber Orchestra, WWV 103

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG • Chamber Symphony No. 1 in E for 15 Solo Instruments, Op. 9

PIERRE BOULEZ • sur Incises (1996/1998/2006) pour 3 pianos, 3 harpes et 3 percussions-claviers

Wagner-Schoenberg-Boulez: it is a teleology worthy of any of those three, highly teleologically-minded composers. Both Wagner and Schoenberg are composers who have featured heavily in Pierre Boulez’s conducting, compositional, and polemical life; all three are crucial figures to Daniel Barenboim too, and indeed to the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. In this programme, however, we can hear not only inspiration but also the need to go beyond, even to disavow. ‘Schoenberg est mort,’ was Boulez’s celebrated, if, in all but the most literal sense, premature claim in 1951. Parricide, though, has long been a guiding principle of the Western ‘classical’ tradition.

Wagner had declared both his lineage in Beethoven’s example and the necessity of its overcoming by positing his music dramas as the successors, perhaps even the only successors, to the symphonies of his revered predecessor. An early, C major Symphony (1832), is a better work than detractors, or mediocre performances permit, but is ultimately too imitative to stand entirely on its own two feet. There is also a fragmentary E major Symphony from two years later, and there are various sonata-form works for piano. The *Siegfried-Idyll*, however, remains in a different class. Moreover, for all Wagner’s ongoing worship of Beethoven, it is not an especially Beethovenian, or even sonata-principled work – and is probably all the stronger for that.

Thematic material is taken from the final scene of the third act of *Siegfried*, often considered the ‘scherzo’ – Beethovenian terms die hard – of the *Ring*. Composed in late 1870, the *Tribschen Idyll with Fidi* – the present title seems not to have been used until 1877, coined for a performance in Meiningen – is subtitled, on the autograph score, ‘Birdsong and Orange Sunrise, presented as a Symphonic Birthday Greeting to his Cosima by her Richard, 1870’. Which is what happened on Christmas Day, in gratitude, as a short poem makes clear, for the birth of Siegfried Wagner the previous year. Beethovenian dialectics are largely eschewed in favour of a formal conception of development rooted in Wagner’s own musico-dramatic ‘endless melody’, albeit without words. If anything, it is Liszt’s symphonic poems – Liszt being Cosima’s father – that come to mind as progenitors, a poetic ‘idea’ made manifest in music.

Not only does this lullaby of peace, joy and world-inheritance, to employ conventional leitmotif references from the opera, present a (hopeless) spur to our imagination with respect to the post-*Parsifal* ‘symphonies’ Wagner often envisaged, yet was never granted time to write. It also shows how Wagner’s mature compositional method could, despite the claims of detractors and some admirers alike, adapt and even renew later-nineteenth-century symphonic form. Carl Dahlhaus, writing of Wagner’s music dramas, admirably described the composer’s leitmotif technique as ‘the binding together of a music drama through a dense web of motivic connections from within’. Such, in place of Beethoven’s symphonic goal-orientation, viewed by many modernists with suspicion, offered the prospect, subtly realised here, of instrumental music founded upon similar principles. Indeed, a gradual, if far from complete loosening of association between concrete objects and motifs in the music dramas – the *Ring* the high water-mark, *Tristan* and *Parsifal* freer in association – had already done part of Wagner’s work for him. Richard Strauss and Arnold Schoenberg would be two of his, and Liszt’s, most important successors. Moreover, what Schoenberg would analyse in earlier music, particularly but far from exclusively that of Brahms, as ‘developing variation’ is certainly present in Wagner’s expansion – prophetic also for Boulez’s technique of ‘proliferation’ – of his opening motivic material.

Liszt, Wagner, Strauss, and Brahms certainly vie, most productively, for attention in Schoenberg’s First Chamber Symphony, one of the composer’s sunniest, indeed life-affirming works. It follows the sonata-form example of Liszt’s Sonata in B minor for piano, radically integrating the traditional multi-movement sonata/symphony structure – Sonata Allegro-Scherzo-Slow Movement-Finale – into the traditional structure of a single sonata-form movement: Exposition-Development-Recapitulation. Another important predecessor is Schubert’s *Wanderer* Fantasy, which Liszt edited, re-wrote, and transcribed (both for piano and orchestra, and for two pianos). Equally important as such formal considerations, which undoubtedly help account for its exhilarating concision, are instrumentation and harmony. In the more commonly-played original version for fifteen solo instruments – Schoenberg would later arrange the work for full orchestra, as Wagner had intended to do with his *Idyll* – there is a significant shift away from the string-saturated, or at least string-founded, textures of the Romantic symphony (Brahms) or late Romantic symphonic poem (Strauss). At the same time, that technique of developing variation, which Schoenberg avowedly derived from Brahms, but which was also present in his Wagnerian inheritance, and an almost-but-not-quite Expressionist tinge upon Strauss’s harmonies contributes to the historical and formal struggle. The opening horn calls signal to the possibility of constructing harmonies upon the interval of a fourth: present in late Liszt in Mephistophelian guise, but perhaps more commonly associated with subsequent experiments by Bartók.

And yet, a symphony this undoubtedly remains, far more so than Wagner’s *Idyll*. Schoenberg was always as much conservative as radical; indeed, it was, he would claim, to maintain the supremacy of German ‘tradition’ that he would soon feel compelled by historical necessity to take the fateful steps he did, first renouncing tonality (although he would, not unreasonably, reject the term ‘atonality’), and then developing his twelve-note method. We are not there yet; the tonality of E major remains a guiding principle, as do modulation and key relationships. Op.9 offers as inventive a solution to the problem of the twentieth-century symphony as Haydn had to a genre he may not have invented, but which he surely transformed into the force with which Beethoven, Wagner, and ultimately Schoenberg would have to reckon. With the Second String Quartet, op.10, however, Schoenberg – and we – would feel the air of another planet.

Boulez’s relationship towards much of Schoenberg has long been ambivalent, even prior to that article of 1951. That despite the fact that few, if any, performers can have consistently, persistently done so much for his music; perhaps Boulez’s only rival in that respect would be Schoenberg’s son-in-law, Michael Gielen. It is, Boulez has long insisted, a short period in Schoenberg’s œuvre, that of so-called ‘free atonality’, prior to the composer’s turn to dodecaphony, which most interests him; and yet, he has continued to perform, in most cases, highly persuasively, later as well as earlier works, remaining the only conductor to have recorded *Moses und Aron* twice. Brahmsian influence is, at bottom and somewhat to simplify, what most concerns Boulez in the work of the later Schoenberg. For him, at least, it is Wagnerian tendencies that remain more fruitful – hardly surprisingly, given the preponderance of Wagner in Boulez’s operatic repertoire, and the importance of both Wagner and Mahler for later works such as the orchestral *Notations*.

*sur Incises*, like many of Boulez’s works, has its seeds in an earlier work. Just as Wagner would take problems, whether musical, philosophical, or both, which had arisen in previous works as starting-points for subsequent explorations – and indeed, just as he used material from *Siegfried* for the *Siegfried-Idyll* – so Boulez has, sometimes repeatedly, returned both to material presented in earlier works, and in some cases, to earlier works themselves, in order to expand them. This exploration falls into the former category. *Incises* is a piano piece written (1994, revised 2001) for the Umberto Micheli Piano Competition (with which Maurizio Pollini, long an advocate of Boulez’s Second Piano Sonata, had a strong association), is a brilliant, toccata-like work, written with typical éclat. Boulez first intended, as he explained in an interview of 1998, to ‘transform this piece into a longer one for Pollini and a group of instrumentalists, a kind of piano concerto although without reference to the traditional form. … Therefore, I produced a piece for three pianos, assuming that there already exists enough interesting literature for two pianos and ensembles, especially in the modern age – take for example Bartok's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*. (In my opinion, everybody would have been reminded of this world if I had also written a piece for two pianos.) I have also considered the possibility of four pianos as this constellation is very attractive and provides a good balance.’ Then, however, the siren call of Stravinsky – that great anti-Wagnerian, long also considered Schoenberg’s antipode – and especially *Les Noces* suggested another path. As Boulez remarked more recently, in 2010, ‘This is the reason why I ended up with three pianos - incidentally three pianists are part of our ensemble [Intercontemporain].’ There were likewise three percussionists in the ensemble, and subsequently, the idea of adding three harps occurred to him, an idea rendered more attractive by his use of the instrument in *Répons*.

It would be possible to say much more about its genesis, and indeed its different versions, but the work itself, even as work-in-progress – Boulez’s conception of serialism as ever-expanding, open-ended, means that many of his works remain in this state – requires more immanent attention. The spatial element is crucial: we hear solo lines but also different groups: three groups, considered vertically, each of percussion, harp, and piano, and, considered horizontally, the three percussionists, the three harpists, and the three pianists. A startling aspect of the latter formations is to hear passages transferring spatially across, say, the three pianos, whilst remaining in a sense part of the one giant piano, played, as it were, by the conductor. It is as if Boulez plays with a musical magical square, three rows and columns constantly shifting, and yet always adding up to the required total, even if we do not know what that should be. Then there are the beguiling sonorities: Boulez offers harmonies of Debussyan – again, one might say, post-Wagnerian – sumptuousness. Listen also for the Romantic tinge to the piano writing; Boulez has long admired the expansion of the instrument’s capabilities by composers such as Liszt and Chopin. A kinetic, rhythmic energy brings to mind Stravinsky and Bartók. Indeed, that distancing from the *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* notwithstanding, Bartók’s ghost seems present in some of the piano writing, contagious for the other instrumentalists. Despite the sense – and, perhaps for some of us, the desire – that this universe might continue expanding forever, its material in perpetual proliferation, the conclusion, whose surprise I shall not reveal, proves decisive. At least for now.