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Pierre Boulez, *Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures*. Edited and translated by Jonathan Dunsby, Jonathan Goldman, and Arnold Whittall. Preface by Jonathan Goldman; introductory essay “Pierre Boulez, Lecturer” by Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. xxvi + 662 pp. \$40.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780226672595; \$23.99 U.S. (pdf/epub). ISBN 9780226672625.

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From 1976 to 1995 Pierre Boulez was Professor at the Collège de France in Paris and *Music Lessons* is the English translation of the lectures he gave at this prestigious institution during those years. Edited and translated by three major figures in contemporary music studies, this volume is a long-awaited and crucially important addition to the body of Boulez’s writings available in English. The lectures were first edited and published in partial form by Jean-Jacques Nattiez as *Jalons (pour une décennie)* in 1989 [1] and it was only in 2005 that the complete lectures were published as *Leçons de musique* (volume 3 of *Points de repère*), once again edited by Nattiez.[2]

By 1976, Boulez had already established himself as a leading composer of challenging new music, as a world-class orchestral conductor and as an insightful and often polemical writer. He had left France in 1959 to live in a Germany that offered greater opportunities for performance, his geographical reach expanding further with the assumption of principal conducting positions simultaneously with the BBC Symphony Orchestra in London and the New York Philharmonic. After an acrimonious public dispute with French Culture Minister André Malraux in 1966, the mid-1970s marks the moment of his return to France.[3] He returned by invitation no less of President Georges Pompidou, to set up IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique), a prestigious research centre for music and technology linked to the Pompidou Centre (the Beaubourg). Boulez at this time also formed a new orchestra of virtuosic performers, the Ensemble Intercontemporain, which gave its debut concert at the end of 1976, and as if all of this was not enough, he was also to conduct Wagner’s Ring Cycle in Bayreuth each year from 1976 to 1980.

In 1975, in the midst of this astonishing range of demanding activities, Boulez was approached by Michel Foucault, who, together with Roland Barthes and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, nominated him for a professorship at the Collège de France. With Ladurie’s sponsorship Boulez was elected to the position in March 1975, and thereafter delivered lecture courses almost every year from 1976 until 1995, at which point he stepped down from the position.[4] This appointment gave Boulez both financial security and a renewed opportunity to reflect on various aspects of composition, much as he had done in his earlier years, from 1948 onwards.

The Collège de France lectures are the work of an older Boulez (he was fifty-one in 1976) and they are very different in content and tone from his writings of the late 1940s and 1950s. While he remains faithful to many of his earlier views, the lectures are not at all polemical in the spirit of the early writings, which Paule Thévenin collected and published as *Relevés d'apprenti* in 1966.^[5] They are also much more easily comprehensible than the earlier Darmstadt lectures which were published in partial form as *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* in 1963 and in English translation as *Boulez on Music Today* in 1971.^[6] The Collège de France lectures are the work of a more circumspect Boulez. While *Music Lessons* is not a systematic pedagogical treatise on composition, it nevertheless provides innumerable insights into what Boulez was thinking during the period in which he composed a number of his late works, including *Notations* for orchestra (1977-84, 1997, 2004), the successive versions of *Répons* (1981, 1982, 1984), *Dialogue de l'ombre double* (1982-85), *Dérive 1* (1984), *Dérive 2* (1988/2006), *...explosante-fixe...* (1991-93) and *Anthèmes* (1991-92).^[7]

Jonathan Goldman's preface to the volume and Jean-Jacques Nattiez's short opening essay are instructive in situating *Music Lessons* within Boulez's career as a writer as well as taking us through his working habits in preparing and delivering the lectures. Goldman provides a detailed list of dates for Boulez's inaugural address and for each of the sixteen lecture courses which followed. In terms of structure, *Music Lessons* divides Boulez's lecture series into six parts entitled: (1) Preliminaries; (2) From Work to Idea; (3) The Composer's Gesture; (4) The Problem of Thematics; (5) The Eye and the Ear, and (6) Memory, Writing and Form. With a volume of 600 pages, comprehensive summary of the contents is clearly not possible and I have opted instead to highlight some key threads which emerge within the lectures.

At the outset of the lectures Boulez recognises the changed musical context of the mid-1970s and the need to reconceptualise music once again. Given that the development of new technologies was a key component of IRCAM's remit, it is not insignificant that he begins his reflections by focusing on the current state of musical instruments. In "Invention/Research" (1976) he articulates the need for much greater collaboration between scientists and musicians (p. 13), announcing that "our grand plan for this era is...to engage in fruitful dialogue, and to arrive at a common language that takes the requirements both of musical invention and of technology into account" (p. 15). In doing so he recognises the need for new musical categories and the collective nature of the enterprise (pp. 16-17).

In "Idea Realisation Craft" (1977-78) Boulez addresses the question of the creative trajectory from the composer's initial idea to the final realisation of the completed score. He explains how, for him at least, the initial idea is "burned away" in the process of making the work so that "once realised, the idea itself can never truly be uncovered" (p. 21). Consequently, he suggests that music analysis, understood as "the pursuit of the labyrinth that binds idea to realisation," is "probably ultimately hopeless" (p. 24). This is a particularly interesting insight given the volume of sketch material Boulez has left behind and the great interest in poietic analysis among scholars of his compositions. Indeed, more energy has arguably been expended on the reconstitution of Boulez's working methods from initial ideas to completed scores than has been spent on the study of the published scores themselves.

We might wonder if Boulez has his younger self in mind when he writes in "Language, Material and Structure" (1978-79) that "creative minds have always invented rigid frameworks of activity

that can then be subjected to the fantasy that order can be destroyed with impunity. All discipline exists in order to be abolished..." (p. 64). Even more striking is the insight that "the illusion of a 'universal' solution flourished for one last time with the Viennese School" and that it is no longer "reasonable to hope to unify contemporary musical thought" (p. 71). While writing this, Boulez remains committed to the exploration of "musical language" and a mode of composition that is rooted in "pure musical introspection." He favours this over any resort to "non-musical commentaries" in the form of "political engagement, philosophical reflection, scientific idolatry, mystique [or] all sorts of cosmogonies," which, he judges, "evade the real issues" (pp. 71-72).

In "Composition and Its Various Gestures" (1979-1980) Boulez recognises in retrospect that his "use of 'automatic' structures without 'aesthetic' decisions, such as those found in the first book of my *Structures* for two pianos, and my use of aleatoric forms, as in my Third Piano Sonata or *Éclat*, are in reality statistical approaches to development" (p. 97). He now recognises a continuity in this earlier practice with the compositional solutions that have become possible by means of computers. Experience has taught him to question the value of technique "when its rationale can no longer be perceived" (p. 101). Focusing specifically on the integral serialism of the early 1950s he recognises that "there were many constraints to the way an object was formed" and that while "the transposition of these various constraints yielded a different object," the degree to which this could be perceived "as a transformation" was questionable. It was this amorphousness and lack of definition which led him to posit the necessity of reintroducing "family resemblance[s]" into his music by way of what he terms signals and envelopes (p. 102), of which more below.

The lectures contain innumerable insights into earlier repertoire of which Boulez the conductor has a profound knowledge and he makes rich reference to a range of musical predecessors including Bach, Bartók, Beethoven, Berg, Debussy, Mahler, Messiaen, Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Varèse, Wagner, and Webern. Maintaining the personal canon of favoured musical works well-known from his earlier writings and many recordings, he restates his continued fascination for certain early atonal works by Schoenberg and Webern as well as Debussy's late works which seem to evade satisfactory analysis (p. 23). Charles Ives, in contrast, remains something of a blind spot for Boulez and is judged less kindly as displaying "all the trappings of an amateur musician, with all the advantages and disadvantages this brings" (p. 172).

In terms of literature, René Char, Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, but also André Breton and the surrealists find their way into various discussions, as do a number of visual artists. Boulez reflects on his discovery of Mallarmé and on how the great French poet's radical formal experiments "corroborated" his own ideas "on multiple form" (p. 112). While cautioning against drawing direct parallels between individual composers and visual artists, Boulez nevertheless suggests that figures from music and the visual arts can share "a fundamental gesture" which is "dependent on its era, but unconnected to actual [biographical] circumstances" (p. 110). While acknowledging the limitations of this approach, he suggests the possibility of establishing in retrospect certain aesthetic "typologies" and gives the examples of Webern-Mondrian, Léger-Varèse, Schoenberg-Kandinsky, Stravinsky-Picasso, and Matisse-Ravel (p. 111). He acknowledges an "overlap" between his own "ideas on the organic development of pitch and rhythmic cells and [Paul] Klee's visual use of similar ideas," the way, for example, "one idea can *structurally* influence another (a line intersects a circle, modifies it and is modified by it, in a system of opposing forces acting reciprocally)" (p. 112).

In *Music Lessons* Boulez reviews his own musical development, recasting it in very clear terms. In the three lecture courses grouped under the title "The Problem of Thematics" and delivered

between 1982 and 1985, he discusses questions of difference and repetition within the context of twentieth-century thematicism and athematicism. Considering thematicism in the music of the first generation of European modernist composers, he attributes the greatest importance to Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern in whose work he identifies “a single principle” which he terms both a “principle of variation” and a principle of “non-repetition” (pp. 296-97). Singling out Webern as the most radical of the three Viennese composers, Boulez states that his “central achievement” consists in having “moved from the concept of real theme” to that of a “virtual theme” (p. 169), something which he locates specifically in the first movement of the Op. 27 *Variations* for piano. The *Variations* do not begin in the traditional way with a recognisable theme or primordial idea which is later elaborated upon. Instead, the “images” Webern engenders from his materials operate as diverse occurrences of an idea which never becomes perceptible itself and which is only ever perceived in its multifarious manifestations (p. 169; p. 340).

This point is crucial for the Boulez of the Collège de France lectures as he identifies Webern’s athematicism or virtual theme as the basis for the renewed variation principle that was so crucial for his own composition and arguably for the other members of the 1950s avant-garde. In what follows, Boulez recasts his own compositional development in terms of Webernian virtuality, first of all through the literal play of thematicism and athematicism in the *Sonatine* for flute and piano (1946), through the complete absence of thematic objects in *Structures I* (1951-52) to *L’Artisanat furieux*, the third piece of *Le Marteau sans maître* (1952-55), in which he acknowledges there is no literal thematicism but only certain similarities within the sound objects (p. 251). Indeed, he recognises in the 1980s that the opposition between thematicism and athematicism remained a fundamental one for him throughout his compositional life, though in ever more refined ways (p. 233).

This new narrative relating the early development of the fundamental elements of the musical syntax is followed by a concern with difference and multiplicity at the level of musical form in terms of the dialectic of ‘a finished, real score that emerges from fixed and favoured thematic material’ and ‘a potential, virtual score that materialises in the instant from reworked material in constant evolution’ (p. 266). This mobility is embodied in the aleatoricism of the open form works of the 1950s and 1960s such as the *Third Piano Sonata* (1955-57; 1963), *Structures II* (1956; 1961), *Éclat* (1965), *Domaines* (1961-68) and *Rituel in memoriam Maderna* (1974-75) and Boulez discusses in detail some of the problems inherent within the concept of open form (pp. 261-266). Moving beyond aleatoricism but remaining with the question of musical form, Boulez discusses the music he composed from the mid-1970s onwards in relation to Stravinsky’s sectional forms which he thinks of as “cumulative development[s]” (p. 179). He describes such compositions as having a “kaleidoscopic form, in which an alternation of cumulative thematic development creates the form” (p. 179). The notions of cumulative development and kaleidoscopic form are clearly applicable to a number of Boulez’s compositions including *Rituel* and *...explosante-fixe...*. This difference-based narrative reaches its denouement in the recasting of his interest in musical heterophony in terms of *difference* and multiplicity. While painter Paul Klee is not named explicitly, Boulez’s description of musical heterophony in “The System and the Idea” (1985-86) as “the aura of a melodic line” (p. 338) clearly echoes Klee’s celebrated images of taking a line for a walk.[8]

By the time of his Collège de France lectures Boulez is in possession of a fully developed musical vocabulary which is now much more focused on musical perception. He continues to invoke the contrast of smooth and striated pitch-spaces as well as that of pulsed and non-pulsed times, while

introducing the concepts of “signal,” “envelope,” “aura,” and “satellite.” Signals and envelopes are discussed throughout the lectures as compositional devices developed to counteract lack of differentiation by means of fixed reference points and perceptual landmarks within musical scores. He continues to display several modes of thinking familiar from his earlier writings including a rather historicist and evolutionary cast of mind: a penchant for binary or dialectical oppositions and a preference for deductive logic. The notion of the code, with its structuralist connotations, remains in Boulez’s vocabulary in *Music Lessons* though in these later texts the earlier structuralist impulse is tempered by a more post-structuralist difference-based thinking.

In summary, *Music Lessons* is an important contribution to the literature for those interested in what happened to European modernism from the mid-1970s onwards. It sets out a number of fascinating positions with regard to composition, music analysis, musical modernism, music and technology, the relationships between the arts, and a host of other topics. I congratulate the editors and translators on their achievement and recommend the volume strongly. The lectures (as *Jalons* and then *Leçons*) have been an important source for my own work since the 1990s and featured prominently in my PhD dissertation (2000) and my book *Boulez, Music and Philosophy* (2010).^[9] With Boulez’s passing in 2016 it will be interesting to see what a new generation of musicians now make of this rich body of reflective prose, through which he continues to stimulate and on occasions provoke us, albeit from a historical perspective that is already quite different from our own.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Boulez, *Jalons (pour une décennie): Dix ans d’enseignement au Collège de France (1978-1988)* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1989).

[2] Pierre Boulez, *Leçons de musique*, Points de repère, vol. 3 (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 2005).

[3] Pierre Boulez, “Pourquoi je dis non à Malraux,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 25 May 1966.

[4] Dominique Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, trans. Susan Bradshaw (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 198.

[5] Pierre Boulez, *Relevés d’apprenti* (Paris: Seuil, 1966). Translated by Stephen Walsh as *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

[6] Pierre Boulez, *Penser la musique aujourd’hui* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963). Translated by Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett as *Boulez on Music Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).

[7] As noted in introductory remarks by Jean-Jacques Nattiez in Boulez, *Leçons de musique*, p. xxiii.

[8] Paul Klee, *The Pedagogical Sketchbook*, trans. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy (London: Faber & Faber, 1953), pp. 16-17.

[9] Edward Campbell, *Boulez, Music and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

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