

PIERRE BOULEZ AND THE PIANO

A STUDY IN STYLE AND TECHNIQUE



PETER O'HAGAN

Pierre Boulez and the Piano

Pierre Boulez's first piano pieces date from his youth, prior to his studies in Paris with Messiaen, and his subsequent meteoric rise to international acclaim as the leader of the musical avant-garde during the 1950s. His most recent published work is a solo piano piece, *Une page d'éphéméride*, written some sixty years after his first attempts at composition. The piano has remained central to Boulez's creative work throughout his career, and although his renown as a conductor has to some extent overshadowed his other achievements, it was as a performer of his own piano music that his practical gifts first found expression.

Peter O'Hagan has given performances of various unpublished piano works by Boulez, including *Antiphonie* from the Third Sonata and *Trois Psalmodies*. In this study, he considers Boulez's writing for the piano in the context of the composer's stylistic evolution throughout the course of his development. Each of the principal works is considered in detail, not only on its own terms, but also as a stage in Boulez's ongoing quest to invent radical solutions to the renewal of musical language and to reinvigorate tradition. The volume includes reference to hitherto unpublished source material, which sheds light on his working methods and on the interrelationship between works.

Peter O'Hagan is a pianist and writer specialising in contemporary music. He is editor of *British Music of the 1990s* (Ashgate, 2003), and co-editor of *Boulez Studies* (2016).

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Pierre Boulez and the Piano

A study in style and technique

Peter O'Hagan

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**In memory of my parents,
John and Doris,
who gave so much**

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Peter O'Hagan, 2016

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Introduction

At first sight, Pierre Boulez is not the most obvious subject for a study of piano music in the post-war era. Remarkable as they undoubtedly are, the first two sonatas were completed before the age of twenty-five, since when Boulez failed to complete a single work for solo piano until the appearance of the final version of *Incises*, after an interval of some forty years. Such seemingly sporadic output is in contrast not only to that of many other nineteenth and twentieth century composers, but to Boulez's teacher, Messiaen, whose oeuvre is dominated by the great keyboard masterpieces of the 1940s and 1950s as well as subsequent major compositions for solo piano. However, this seeming hiatus in production obscures the reality that the instrument occupied a central role in Boulez's creative thinking from his earliest unpublished student works through to his last published compositions some sixty years later. Thus the radical nature of the first published works, in which the young composer's style seems to emerge fully formed, was in reality a slow and painful evolution, a process of selection, the extent of which is revealed by a study of preceding works for piano and their relation to the first drafts of published works. The era of the 1950s is bounded by the two volumes of *Structures*, the work for two pianos which functioned almost as a laboratory in which to test the far reaching stylistic and technical changes of the decade, whilst even the comparatively less fruitful period of the following decades includes works which relate to material which first appeared in published form in the Third Piano Sonata. With the opening of IRCAM in 1977 and the beginning of a new phase in Boulez's career, it was again the piano to which he turned in realising the ground breaking integration of computer generated programmes with traditional instrumental forces. The instrument lies at the heart of the concept of both *Répons* and *sur Incises*, with their deployment of two and three pianos respectively, and both these large-scale works have an intimate relationship to the solo piano work, *Incises*. To trace the development of his writing for piano is to undertake a study of Boulez's stylistic development as a whole, and the creative dilemmas which characterise his output.

As suggested by this outline, a characteristic of Boulez's compositions is their interrelatedness, with groups of works having their origins in seemingly insignificant scraps of material which convey no sense of the extent of the developments to which they will give birth. Such production of independent yet related

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groups of works is certainly not unique to Boulez, and indeed is a feature of the output of many of his contemporaries – one thinks for example of the numerous offcuts from Stockhausen's *Licht* cycle, and the works spawned during the prolonged gestation of Birtwistle's *The Mask of Orpheus*. Yet the distinctive nature of Boulez's working methods is that, such is his unyielding capacity for self criticism, works which were conceived as independent projects in their own right have become to all intents and purposes preliminary studies for later works, and have themselves remained unpublished. Thus the withdrawn choral work *Oubli signal lapidé* (1952), itself utilising material originally developed in an earlier unfinished work for three percussion instruments, is the progenitor of both *Le marteau sans maître* (1952–5) and *Cummings ist der Dichter* (1970/1986). Even more extensive is the network of connections derived from the unpublished music for the Renaud-Barrault Company's production of the *L'Orestie* trilogy, a precursor of the incomplete Third Piano Sonata (1955–63), *Doubles* (1957–8) and *Eclat* (1965). Threads from both these cycles of works are drawn together in the five movements of *Pli selon pli* (1957–62), the work which above all is a summation of Boulez's creative life up to that point.

It is tempting to observe that the growing use of pre-existing material happens to coincide with the expansion of Boulez's conducting activities, with a series of major posts held successively in Germany, the UK and the USA from the late 1950s onwards. Yet whilst his time for composition during these years would undoubtedly have been restricted, to suggest that he embarked on a series of hasty raids on previously composed works in an endeavour to meet successive deadlines is to put aside his confessed love of working with pre-existing material – but '... with my own *objets trouvés*', (rather than those of other composers), as he disarmingly put it during the course of an interview reproduced in the Appendix of this book. Such appropriation of material is found in his first period of composition during the latter half of the 1940s, long before he was distracted from creative work by other duties: thus the Second Sonata (1946–8) evolved over a two-year period from the miniature *Variations-rondeau* (1946), whilst the second movement, *La Sorgue* of the cantata *Le Soleil des Eaux* (1948/1958/1965) is closely modelled on the final movement of a withdrawn Sonata for Two Pianos (1946–8). A feature of the compositions of the last three decades has been exploitation of further *objets trouvés* – manifestly so in the case of the orchestral recomposition of *Douze Notations* (1945), a work which remained 'in progress' with five of the twelve pieces having been completed. Overlapping with this project is a series of other works linked to the six-note SACHER cipher, with material originally developed in the slight *Messagesquise* (1976) being extended onto the vast canvas of *Répons* (1980–4). Similarly, the tiny *Incises* (1994/2001), originally a competition piece written for the inaugural Umberto Micheli Competition in Milan, became the basis for the enormous *sur Incises* (1995–8), dedicated to Paul Sacher, and likewise developed from pre-existing material based on the same six-note cipher. One can extend the connections further to include the works based on the seven-note cipher of ... *explosante-fixe* ... which in its original form was a matrix of compositional possibilities for future development. It seems fitting that this

cell is coincidentally found in the seventh of *Douze Notations*, thus serving as a reminder, that whether by accident or design, the principle of self borrowing is one which Boulez has embraced unashamedly throughout his career.

That the nature and extent of Boulez's use of existing material varies considerably from work to work is evident from the discussion so far. It is certainly the case that these interrelationships have attracted a good deal of scholarly attention in recent years, a process assisted by the acquisition by the Paul Sacher Stiftung of a substantial collection of sketches and drafts, making it possible to study and observe these various connections and the process of composition in individual works. Such networks of connections are comparatively straightforward to perceive in the later works, but had previously remained virtually undetectable from the published scores alone in many earlier works – as indeed had the serial processes themselves.¹ This study contains many examples of Boulez's use of *objets trouvés* in his piano music, yet although fascinating in musicological terms, the connections as such reveal little about the process of composition in individual works – and still less about how one might approach the music as performer or listener. Whilst there are instances in Boulez's music of the original context leaving its imprint on the new work, it is usually the case that the material will be totally transformed, the original serving to ignite the creative process, as in the vocal lines of the three *Improvisations* from *Pli selon pli* which take as their starting point a few bars from *L'Orestie*. Another favourite compositional shortcut (also found in *Pli selon pli*) is to take compositional raw material such as chordal blocks (*blocs sonores*) and re-use them from work to work. Certainly this is a useful basis on which to base an exploration of stylistic connections and developments, but the nature of the acquisition is such that the material is capable of exploitation in a vast range of ways: it is almost akin to the basic scale structures of traditional music, or nearer to home, the modes of limited transposition of Messiaen. Hence the choice of borrowed material marks the start of the compositional process, but its essence lies elsewhere, in the creative decisions which are subsequently brought to bear on it.

The successive stages in Boulez's development of material are evidenced by the extensive quantity of sketches now available, at least for certain works. Unsurprisingly, and the more so on account of his intransigent stance concerning the centrality of the serial principle, Boulez's approach to serialism has attracted considerable attention, and indeed is a recurring theme of the following study. This is despite, on the one hand, his insistence that serial mechanics are among the least important aspects of his music, and on the other, the teasingly elusive references to technical procedures scattered through his own writings. This has produced something of a paradox in Boulez scholarship, in that prior to this point studies were based primarily on the evidence of the published material, and often attempted a comprehensive survey of Boulez's music, best exemplified in Paul Griffiths' compact but valuable study *Boulez*, and Dominique Jameux's later, more extended *Pierre Boulez*. Studies such as Gerald Bennett's chapter, 'The early works', in William Glock's *Pierre Boulez, a symposium* which included examples drawn from unpublished material, were notable for their rarity. It is

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precisely because Boulez's forging of a personal style is so inextricably bound to his expansion of the serial principle that an approach which fails to take account of the means he used, as based on the evidence of unpublished drafts and sketches, runs the risk of being restricted in scope and partial in its conclusions. On the face of it, the availability of a vast volume of such material should lead to a greater understanding of the composer's music and of the stylistic developments in post-war music in which he was arguably the leading figure. Certainly access to withdrawn works and their related sketches provides opportunities for a degree of in-depth study denied to a previous generation of researchers, and a growing awareness of the essential unity of vision throughout his career. Yet whilst detailed studies of Boulez's music have proliferated and interest in his achievement has grown as he entered his tenth decade, the tendency has been for commentaries to become increasingly specialised and narrow in focus, as if the sheer quantity and richness of material currently available inhibits the production of comprehensive studies of a type essayed by earlier writers.² Certainly there is a snare attached to sketch studies, in part a consequence of a fascination with unpicking the processes whereby Boulez has so to speak covered his tracks, so that a detailed exposition of the successive stages in the generation of material can appear synonymous with the creative act itself – a skewing of the process of analysis and with it an attendant loss of a broader sense of perspective. At the furthest extreme, the process can result in precisely the type of numerical analysis, pursued as an end in itself, against which Boulez reacted so violently in the continuing stream of derision directed against his teacher, René Leibowitz. Hence the ambivalence shown in certain quarters towards György Ligeti's landmark analysis of *Structures 1a*, the first successful attempt to unlock the technical processes in a work of integral serialism, and yet one which in so doing raises further issues concerning the nature of the piece itself and the serial principle in general.

Yet how real is the seeming dichotomy between the detailed examination of source material, with its attendant dangers, and an approach based solely on the evidence provided by published works? In the case of Boulez, the relationship between available source material and completed projects falls into three distinct phases, reflecting the composer's changing attitudes and working methods. Prior to 1950, he was unsystematic concerning the preservation of sketches, with much of the material dispersed in the form of gifts to friends and colleagues, or simply lost. As a consequence, virtually no sketch material has so far surfaced in relation to the First and Second Sonatas, or indeed to earlier works such as *Douze Notations*. By contrast, in the works composed after 1950, Boulez was much more systematic in retaining and preserving his drafts, with the result that a wealth of material is available for both volumes of *Structures* and the Third Sonata. In the case of the works composed after 1980, much of the sketch material formed part of 'works in progress', being retained by the composer for subsequent projects, including works based on the SACHER cipher, such as *Incises*. Since the quantity of available sketch material varies so greatly from work to work, one therefore needs to be mindful of the fact that a study of the piano music involves a shifting relationship between the music and its sources on various levels – and of course

always bearing in mind the possibility that the unexpected appearance of a new source can shift decisively one's view of a familiar work. Precisely such a situation arose at a late stage in this study, when a previously unavailable manuscript of the First Sonata proved to be an intermediate stage in a series of revisions of the original, and shed crucial new light on Boulez's development during the early Paris years. Such was his remorseless capacity for self-criticism that even works which were to all intents and purposes complete and published could be subject to further revision: again a reminder that all commentary, whatever its basis, can never aspire to more than a provisional status.

On a more fundamental level, the examination of source material might well be extended to embrace all that we are able to know concerning the circumstances surrounding the composition of a work, including such matters as biographical details, involving contacts with colleagues in the form of letters and (more contentiously) informal reports of conversations. These can provide details which assist with the chronology of compositions, and even in some cases with the precise dating of individual sections of a work: at worst, they convey something of the flavour of the times. In truth, the border between rigorously tested research and anecdote is by no means a clearly defined one, especially in the decade of the 1950s, when a strongly competitive edge emerged as an underlying presence among the members of the post-war generation, and with it a degree of posturing on the part of some of the leading personalities. This was especially the case at a time when the mathematical certainties of serialism were shaken by contact with the indeterminacy of a younger generation of American composers under the spell of John Cage, and notwithstanding his intransigent response, the episode undeniably left an imprint on Boulez's thinking and on his relations with colleagues such as Stockhausen and Pousseur. The information provided by surviving letters and other more anecdotal sources is of relevance here insofar as it enhances our understanding of the music and the creative impetus behind it. This context includes the circumstances under which works were produced, be they in the form of homage to a teacher or performer, a response to a formal commission, or simply an irresistible internal impulse, as was certainly the case with some of Boulez's music of the first decade.

Nonetheless, in seeking to provide a context for enhanced appreciation of Boulez's creative achievement, the present study is unapologetically focussed primarily on a detailed analysis of the music itself. A chronological examination provides a key to tracing the developments in his style, and his 'cherishing' of traditions which are subsequently laid aside. The unpublished early works provide the first insights into this progress, as he undertakes a series of what amount to stylistic exercises, and the influences of various teachers – Messiaen, Vaurabourg-Honegger and Leibowitz – are successively absorbed within the context of his own strong creative personality. Some such influences are soon to be violently rejected as his individual style is forged – the melodic and harmonic language of Messiaen, the academic tendencies of Leibowitz – whilst others are transformed and incorporated within his highly individual treatment of the serial principle. Seen in context, the First Sonata emerges as the culmination of this process, with the remaining vestiges of tradition gradually stripped away from a

style characterised by sparse contrapuntal lines, rhythmic fluidity, and extremes of dynamic and textural contrast. The assault on tradition is complete with the annihilation of classical form in the Second Sonata, after which there follows a fundamental reassessment of his musical language. Again it is the piano which is central to this process, and we observe him rebuilding the elements note by note in the integral serialism of *Structures premier livre*. The corresponding chapter in this study is unavoidably technical in its demonstration of the serial processes at work in Boulez's music during this crucial period, yet it is designed in part to address the gap in detailed studies of the final two pieces in the volume which were crucial to Boulez's later development, paving the way for the more flexible musical language of *Le marteau sans maître*. During this time he is able to develop a compositional technique which whilst still rooted in serial principles allows for a reinvention of harmonic relationships, and with it progress towards the realisation of a universal serial language. The shattering of this aspiration is addressed in subsequent chapters which chart Boulez's reaction to the issue of indeterminacy during the second half of the 1950s, marked by the slow gestation of the Third Sonata and its subsequent abandonment. Equally importantly, his expansion of the serial principle reaches a point of flexibility which calls into question its very nature, a crisis marked by the final piece of *Structures deuxième livre*, which at the same time suggests ways forward from a looming impasse. An eventual return to writing for solo piano is marked by a new exuberance emanating from the composition of *Répons*, with its extension of the resonating capacities of the instrument and a reclaiming of pulsed time, combined with a consummate mastery of serial principles which allows for the generation of enormous structures from the tiniest of melodic cells. In many respects, the combination of alternating passages in pulsed time and the rhythmically free, almost rhapsodic writing which also characterises parts of both *Incises* and *Une page d'éphéméride* represents a return to certain stylistic hallmarks of his earliest published works, notably the Flute *Sonatine* and the First Sonata, and is illustrative of the essential unity of vision in this multi-faceted and complex creative artist.

Boulez's characterisation of the piano as an instrument 'remarkably prone to delirium' (*délire*)³ is well known, as is his citation of the expressionistic violence of the last of Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke* Opus 11 and *Die Kreuze* from *Pierrot Lunaire* as exemplars for his own first published piano works. (The word *délire* occurs in a different context in an article written in 1958 when after a reference to Antonin Artaud he concludes with, 'More and more, I imagine that in order to create successfully, it is necessary to consider delirium and, yes, to organise it.')⁴ During the early 1950s, a stereotype of the young composer quickly became established, based in large part on the explosive qualities of early works such as the Second Sonata, as an *enfant terrible* of the new post-war generation, an impression reinforced by the incendiary language of his first published writings. Yet Boulez was undoubtedly aware of the partiality of his views in relation to Schoenberg's music as a whole: in opposition to the frenetic character of these pieces are the delicate nuances evoked elsewhere in *Pierrot Lunaire* and in *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke*, and at another extreme, the abstract, almost neo-classical

pianism of some of the twelve-note works – a complement to the stylistic conservatism which provoked the stream of invective in Boulez's notorious article 'Schoenberg is Dead.'⁵ In the broader context of twentieth century pianism, even Schoenberg's range of deployment of the instrument seems comparatively limited when placed alongside Debussy's 'instrument without hammers', the percussive writing found in Prokofiev's sonatas, and the subsequent development in Boulez's own later music of the instrument's capacities for resonance. If the various styles of the twentieth century may be viewed collectively as a reaction against the lyrical outpouring of the previous century, it is also the case that the instrument has proved itself uniquely adaptable to a vast array of subsequent uses, from late Romantic through to its deployment as an electronic instrument *manqué* in the latter part of the twentieth century. It is this adaptability which accounts in large part for its survival, in essence mechanically unchanged over a period of more than a hundred and fifty years, and its continuing centrality in music written in the twenty-first century. In the words of Béla Bartók, '... the piano always plays the part of universal instrument,'⁶ and its unique versatility is no better illustrated than in Boulez's own music, where the piano is transformed successively from the early instrument of frenzy, through the abstract, multi-voiced textures of the serial period, to emerge as the gigantic resonating chamber of the later works.

In seeking to shed light on this development, a holistic approach is attempted in the present study. Given the range and variety found in the music, an analytical strategy based exclusively on existing methodologies developed in other contexts would be a limiting one, the more especially as Boulez set himself the ambitious aim of redefining musical language, and indeed eliminating past influences from the outset of his career. As he himself put it: 'History as it is made by great composers is not a history of conservation but one of destruction – even while cherishing what is destroyed.'⁷ Therefore, this study has the modest intent of treating each work on its own terms, consulting source material when available, and including where appropriate an examination of the background against which the music was conceived. Above all, the aspiration is to help provide a context for others to share a heightened appreciation of the music of one of the major figures of our time. As a quintessentially practical musician himself, Boulez remained conscious that our perspective on music – whether as composer or listeners – is constantly changing, shifting at times almost imperceptibly with each hearing. Hence his comment, less a reminder of the provisional nature of all commentary, but rather an invitation to continue to explore the inexhaustible richness of music: 'The great works, happily, never cease to reimburse the inviolable darkness of their perfection ...'⁸

NOTES

1 A justly celebrated exception is Lev Koblyakov's study, *Pierre Boulez, a world of harmony*, (Chur: Harwood, 1990) an analytical study of *Le marteau*, undertaken before any sketch material became available.

2 Notable exceptions to this are Jonathan Goldman's *The Musical Language of Pierre Boulez: Writings and Compositions* (CUP, 2010) and Edward Campbell's

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groundbreaking *Boulez, Music and Philosophy* (CUP, 2010). An impressive recent study, Joseph Salem's *Boulez revised: Compositional Process as Aesthetic Critique in the Composer's Formative Works* (PhD thesis, Yale University, 2014), is a wide-ranging survey of the composer's stylistic development.

- 3 *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, p. 30. The original French, *délire*, has a more nuanced meaning than simply 'delirium' or 'frenzy', also connoting mania.
- 4 *Son et verbe* (see *Points de repère I Imaginer*, p. 430) 'De plus en plus, j'imagine que pour créer efficace, il faut considérer le délire et, oui, l'organiser.'
- 5 *The Score*, 6, February 1952. The article is reprinted in Pierre Boulez, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, collected and presented by Paule Thévenin, tr. Stephen Walsh (Clarendon Press Oxford, 1991).
- 6 *Béla Bartók Essays Selected and edited by Benjamin Suchoff*, University of Nebraska Press, 1976, p. 288.
- 7 *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, p. 21.
- 8 *Stocktakings*, p. 145 'Les grandes œuvres, par bonheur, ne cessent jamais de récompenser leur intransgressible nuit de perfection ...'

1 A Parisian Apprenticeship

It was in autumn of 1943 that Pierre Boulez arrived in Paris to enrol as a student at the Conservatoire. Yet, limited though his musical horizons may have been in wartime France, he was already a fledgling composer, having written assiduously over the previous year. With one exception, the sonata for violin and piano, the pre-Paris works fall into the categories of solo piano and accompanied *mélodies*. The most impressive, if not the most ambitious, of these works is a short piano piece, *Psalmodie*. The movement has a curious history: the manuscript was in a private collection until 1983 when it was acquired by the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF). In the previous year, it was evidently first offered to the composer himself, whose amusing response is of some interest in revealing the mature composer's attitude to his student compositions:

To tell the truth, I think that this ancient piece must live its own existence, having left me so long ago. It would be like trying to graft a dead leaf onto a tree which is still green.

I would not therefore consider acquiring it for myself ...¹

The manuscript bears the dedication, 'To my dear master L. de Pachmann² from his respectful and grateful student P. Boulez',³ and is dated September 1943. To judge from the style of this final offering to his piano teacher in Lyon, the young musician already felt a strong affinity with the music of Debussy and Ravel, and has recalled specifically the influence of the Prelude *La puerta del Vino*.⁴ The languid opening *avec douceur* recalls the Prelude's Habanera rhythm, whilst the piano figuration of the contrasting mid section suggests a possible acquaintance with the pianism of Ravel's *Le Tombeau de Couperin*. If elsewhere the sequences are rather predictable, and the texture of parallel harmonies over a sustained bass somewhat conventional, the ambiguous tonality of the final bars strikes a personal note and the stirrings of an exploratory turn of mind.⁵

The *Psalmody* is in effect Boulez's signing-off piece in terms of his musical experiences during his period in Lyon, and is almost exactly contemporary with the final song of a set of three poems by Rainer Maria Rilke for voice and piano. The first two of these, *Après une journée de vent* and *La Mort* were completed respectively in April and May 1943, whilst *La Passante d'Été* was evidently finished in October, the month after *Psalmody*, and (presumably) just before his

departure for Paris. If the choice of poetry and indeed the musical style reflects the young composer's impressionist sympathies, the settings themselves show considerable imagination and poetic sensibility. Word painting is a feature of all three songs: in *La Mort*, the image of Death luring his victims by seductive phrases on the violin is evoked in an extended piano interlude marked *doux et méditatif*. Among the impressive features of this setting is the declamatory vocal line in the opening section set against the relentless dissonances of the chordal accompaniment (Example 1.1):

♩=72 Martelé et pesant

Grave Pesante

p *ff* *p* toujours accentué

8^e

9

en-tre dans les mai-sons El-le cher-che

mf *cresc.* *cresc.*

16

f imprécis et rêveur *legato*

la soeur, le pè-re, Et leur joue de vio-lon

sempre cresc. *ffz* *ff*

8^e

Red Red Red Red

Example 1.1 *La mort*, bars 1–25.

2 *Quasi recitativo*
Comptez à la croche (♩=184)

21 *doux et méditatif*

23 *simile*

Example 1.1 Continued

Boulez evidently had second thoughts about the ending, since an extra bar in the pencil manuscript was omitted from the pen copy of the song. The revised ending creates its own sense of foreboding at Death's unfinished business, but the extra bar, consisting of the dominant chord with an added major seventh, is still more stark in defining its kinship with the tonic/leading note clashes of the opening phrase of the song. The slightly earlier *Après une journée de vent* is a charming depiction of evening calm after a turbulent day. In style, it is the most traditional of the three settings, being heavily reliant on whole tone harmonies, and indeed the tonal ambiguity of the ending recalls Debussy's *Voiles*. Most successful of all is the final song, *La Passante d'Été*, whose pastoral character bears some resemblance to that of *Après une journée de vent*. However its greater range of texture and more advanced harmonic vocabulary testify to the speed with which the young composer was developing. The promenading lady is portrayed in a chordal phrase whose dissonant harmonies resulting from the parallel motion between the hands had been anticipated in the setting of *La Mort*. At the end of *La Passante d'Été*, the much admired woman evidently continues her promenade, as the song ends with the same tonally ambiguous chordal progression as had greeted her original entrance.

It is worth noting in passing that the most ambitious vocal setting of this period remained unfinished. Boulez worked on a setting of Emile Verhaeren's extended poem *Le Vent*, completing six sides of a pencil draft, the final page of which is on the verso of *La Passante d'Été*, suggesting that work on it is likely to have been abandoned prior to his departure for Paris in the autumn of 1943. The virtuoso pianism of the accompaniment with its alternating hands and rapid scales in thirds has a *Scarbo*-like character, whilst the uncompromising bitonality of the climax, where F major and F-sharp major chords are opposed, recall the atmosphere of Szymanowski's *Mythes*, a work which is known to have impressed him at this time (Example 1.2).⁶

Presto

Très marqué

5 *p* Sur la bruy --- è - - re *poco*

11 longue in - fi - - ni - ment *poco*

16 *mf* Voi - ci le Vent cor - nant No - vem - bre *sfz*

21 Sur la bruy - è - re

Example 1.2 *Le Vent*, bars 1–25.

Clearly, a range of stylistic influences were being absorbed at a rate which suggests that, in purely musical terms, the young composer was more than ready to move away from his provincial roots.

* * *

Boulez's years at the Conservatoire National de Musique are as yet lacking detailed documentation, but it is likely that among his first experiences in Paris were the admission auditions for the *Classes de Piano Supérieur* at the Conservatoire, which took place on 13–14 October 1943.⁷ The auditioning was conducted rigorously, with each of the twelve members of the jury given a vote, and the proceedings were chaired by the Director, Claude Delvincourt. Boulez was one of the last to be auditioned (no. 119 of 124), on the early evening of 14 October, and failed to attain the minimum of six votes required for admission to one of the piano classes. As a result, one of his first musical experiences in Paris ended in failure, and he was not listed among the fifty-one students admitted to these courses. More successful was his experience in the examination for admission to the Harmony Class of M. Georges Dandelot, which took place on 17 January 1944, and which he passed with the comment 'Bien'. Boulez's progress was so rapid that in M. Dandelot's report of May 1944, Boulez is described by as '... the best of the class ...',⁸ and with the additional comment: '... has nothing further to learn at first degree level ...'.⁹ Of greater significance in terms of Boulez's future trajectory was a contact made during these months. Among the other eighteen students registered in M. Dandelot's large class was a Mlle Vaurabourg – none other than Annette, the niece of Andrée Vaurabourg, wife of the composer Arthur Honegger.¹⁰ Evidently, it was through this connection that Boulez was introduced to Andrée Vaurabourg-Honegger, with whom he commenced private lessons in counterpoint, beginning in April 1944 and extending over a period of some two years.¹¹

Recent research has enabled precise dating of Boulez's first direct contact with another crucial pedagogical influence – Olivier Messiaen.¹² An initial visit to Messiaen's apartment on 28 June 1944 was followed by enrolment in his Harmony class at the Conservatoire for the academic year 1944–5. Further evidence of an immediate rapport between the student who '... likes modern music, wants to take harmony lessons from me...' ¹³ and the composer of the recently completed *Visions de l'Amen*, is provided by the fact that Boulez evidently re-visited Messiaen's apartment on four subsequent occasions prior to his formal enrolment in the class: on 10 July, 11 August, 23 September and 6 December.¹⁴ It was two days after this final appointment that Boulez first attended one of Messiaen's private classes for the group known as *Les Flèches*, where he would have come into direct contact with Yvonne Loriod and Yvette Grimaud, both important figures in the performances of his earliest published works. Later that month, Loriod gave two pieces from Messiaen's recently completed *Vingt Regards* cycle in a recital at

the Conservatoire, and there is every reason to assume that Boulez would have been aware of the new work, and even attended the concert. In the meantime, having finally abandoned his pianistic ambitions, at least through the official Conservatoire route, Boulez was inspired to resume his own compositional activities. The result was a profusion of works for solo piano produced over the next few months.

The young composer's attendance at Messiaen's Harmony Class at the Conservatoire began with his formal enrolment on 23 January 1945, and among others who enrolled on the same day was Pierre Henry.¹⁵ Otherwise, the list of enrolled students makes for sombre reading, including as it does, three students who had been enrolled since 1942 but unable to attend, having been taken prisoners of war – a reminder of the unstable background to the young Boulez's formative years. The end of year examination took place on 11.06.45, and Boulez was described in the examiners' report as '... the most gifted – a composer ...'¹⁶ He was one of four students awarded *premier prix*, and the only one from Messiaen's class to achieve this distinction. At this point, Boulez evidently left the class: a comparatively brief, but decisive encounter.

* * *

The principal products of this period of study with Messiaen and Vaurabourg-Honegger are dominated by two triptychs for solo piano, *Prélude Toccata et Scherzo* and *Trois Psalmodies*. The latter work was evidently completed in the summer of 1945, at the end of Boulez's year of enrolment in the Harmony class and his award of a *premier prix*, although as we will see, revisions to the final piece occupied him until at least November of that year. At present, despite the survival of a complete pencil draft as well as a fair copy in ink, there is no precise dating for the *Prélude Toccata et Scherzo* to support Gerald Bennett's assertion that it was completed in the winter of 1944–5.¹⁷ One's first impression of these student works is of their sheer scale and exuberance of invention, realised in a keyboard style characterised by extremes of register and dynamic, and expressed in terms of uncompromising pianistic demands. Perhaps the least ambitious of them is the single movement *Nocturne*, which bears the inscription, 'Prayer and incantation to the mysterious night'.¹⁸ Boulez was subsequently to draw attention to the influence of Honegger on both this piece and the first triptych, but in both form and musical gestures, *Nocturne* has links with the earlier *Psalmodie* from the pre-Paris years, features which argue for it predating the two triptychs. Judged by the standards of the later student works, where the influence of Messiaen's teaching has been more thoroughly absorbed, the procedures here are rather unsophisticated. Nonetheless, the outer sections show considerable development in harmonic language during his first year or so in Paris, and in the *animé* middle section, the young composer is seen experimenting with additive rhythms for the first time – even if this rather lengthy episode seems

unlikely to have survived intact had it been submitted for the critical scrutiny of Messiaen!

Internal stylistic factors support the hypothesis that the group of pieces comprising *Prélude Toccata et Scherzo* was completed prior to *Trois Psalmodies*. If taken as a whole they are rather less technically assured than *Trois Psalmodies*, they are nonetheless a remarkable advance on the pre-Paris works, and demonstrate the first fruits of his contact with Messiaen, both in his absorption of certain features of his teacher's style, and in his fascinating attempts to come to terms with a range of other influences. Principal among these are Arthur Honegger and André Jolivet, the latter a rather neglected composer, at least in terms of performances of his music in Britain. As is well documented, Jolivet's piano suite *Mana* was much admired by Messiaen, and subsequently featured in Messiaen's courses of analysis, while the flute work *Chant de Linos* was commissioned as a test piece for the Conservatoire in 1944. Boulez has likewise expressed his admiration for *Mana*, with which he became acquainted at this time, as well as the *Cinq danses rituelles*.¹⁹ The sombre opening of the first piece of Boulez's *Prélude Toccata et Scherzo* with its alternating chords and rising sequences recalls the atmosphere of the early Rilke setting, *La Mort*, as well as the ostinato patterns which dominate such pieces as the first and fourth of Jolivet's *Cinq Danses Rituelles*. However, elsewhere in this *Prélude*, the contrast between the rather four-square construction of its outer sections and the transformation of melodic material in the mid section is most effectively realised. In particular, the exploitation of irrational rhythmic values within a basically chordal texture combined with systematic foreshortening of the note lengths is a clear echo of Messiaen, as are the gamelan-like sounds in the extreme top register of the instrument in the section immediately before the reprise.²⁰

The central *Toccata* is the most extended of the three pieces in the triptych, and the most ambitious in its attempt to forge a musical unity from the alternation of sections in toccata-like figuration with three sections exploiting Boulez's newly acquired skills in fugal technique. Despite the motivic links between the rhapsodic interpolations and the three contrapuntal sections, the writing here is rather contrived and the overall effect is of a sprawling, loosely realised structure. There is an almost improvisatory character in the toccata sections, evocative of the spirit of the early keyboard works of J. S. Bach, or perhaps nearer to home, the organ improvisations of Messiaen himself. Yet in many respects it is the most interesting piece of the set, especially judged in terms of Boulez's future development. A striking feature of the otherwise rambling fugue subject is the appearance for the first time in Boulez's student works of sections which consist of all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. That the treatment is entirely melodic is unsurprising, given the almost total lack of opportunities for exposure to the music of the Second Viennese School during the Occupation. However Messiaen is known to have possessed scores of Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lyric Suite*, both of which he introduced to his

classes,²¹ and it is tempting to draw parallels between Berg's melodic treatment of the series and the patterning of alternating tritones and semitones in the opening of Boulez's fugue subject (Example 1.3) (a):



Example 1.3 *Toccata: Fugue subject.*

The opening fugal exposition builds to a climax, based on sequential repetitions of the first two bars of the subject, accompanied by the same material in diminution. After a return of the opening toccata-like flourishes, a new fugal section in two-part counterpoint introduces both retrograde and retrograde inversions of the subject. The effect here is less than convincing, with the rather forced climax again reached by means of rising sequences. It is as though the young composer is experimenting with the four forms of the series within the context of a traditional contrapuntal structure, sensing, as he later put it, the 'necessity' of twelve-note technique. A return of the toccata figurations brings only a brief respite before a new four voice exposition begins, based on the first two bars of the subject. If there is again something mechanical about the invertible counterpoint on display here, academic considerations are thrust into the background as the *vif et léger* opening gradually builds into a torrential outburst, the pianist layout of which anticipates the dénouement preceding the coda of the first movement of the Second Sonata (see Example 1.4).

However Boulez has not yet finished his display of contrapuntal virtuosity, and the final fugal section begins with a canonic treatment of the first two bars of the subject in all four voices. A full statement in octaves of the subject begins in retrograde in the right hand (x, bar 168 in Example 1.5 pp. 19–21) before being transferred, freely transposed, to the bass (y, bar 173). Finally, the first four notes of the subject are detached and sequentially extended into a three-bar motif (z, bars 176–8) which is worked canonically between the four voices: the climax of the piece is wrought from a series of semitonal transpositions of these three bars.

The contrapuntal rigour of much of the fugal writing in this movement brings to mind the compositional procedures in *Par Lui tout a été fait*, the sixth movement from Messiaen's *Vingt Regards*, and the one movement of the cycle which Boulez was to recall specifically as having studied with the