

twentieth-century analysis: essays in miniature

by lothar klein

BRAHMS, BOULEZ, AND THE BEATLES. Brahms once remarked that composition is an easy matter: "One must simply know what notes to throw away." Pierre Boulez, French composer, brilliant conductor, and avant-garde theorist, speaking seventy-five years later agreed with Brahms that composing must proceed with the strictest possible discipline. Although their music is diametrically opposed, both men voiced extreme concern for technique, which marks overripeness in art. Toward the end of his life, Brahms found it in greater accord with his aesthetic principles to compose brief, complexly structured piano pieces, rather than to uphold symphonies. Boulez disavows emotional intentions and creates complexity as an essential facet of his music. Brahms, in the Western tradition, believed in a coordinated response between musical gesture and its effect on the listeners. To Boulez, music has become a spray of sound minus melodic or rhythmic gesture, requiring exploration and re-creation on the listener's part for individual interpretation. Western musical thinking, that is, the Doctrine of the Affections, has taught us that definite musical gestures must be evoked for the representation of any mood or emotion. This denial of musical cause and effect displayed by Boulez's music is one of the most intriguing and difficult chapters in recent musical history.

These essays have contended that music, above all other arts, is closest to feeling the pulse of psychic history that causes men to change their minds about themselves. An understanding of Bou-

lez's musical development is imperative if we wish to be in a position to join or refute the changes transforming not only Western music but also our changing world. Music has always been considered the impassioned gift of the gods; now that the gods no longer exist, we must take music seriously.

Boulez, born in 1925 in Montbrison, exhibits a refined Gallic thoughtfulness that warily sidesteps the intellectual malapropisms of his confreres Stockhausen and Nono. During the late forties, Boulez embraced twelve-tonery, favoring middle-period Webern, however, over Schoenberg. Boulez's formidable intellect seemingly forces him to favor an objective music that results from keen analysis of psychological and historical factors influencing music. For him, Schoenberg had to be indicted for failing to realize all implications inherent in his twelve-tone method. Why should the dodecaphonic method regulate only pitch rows and stop at the systematizing of all musical parameters—rhythm, dynamics, range, and articulation? Obviously, Schoenberg's initial idea must be led to its logical conclusion: the strict control of all musical elements. In this ultimate realization, serialism was born, and the composer as a carrier of divine inspiration disappeared.

The compositional act for serial composers consists of tabulating series of pitches, durations, or any element important to a particular sound fabric; correlating their possibilities on a graph; and automatically carrying out the bookkeeping of his calculations. (See Messiaen's *Mode de valeurs et d'intensités*—

easily the strangest piano piece ever written.) In defense of this method, it must be said that (apart from romantic notions, which demand ceaseless inspiration) many masterworks of the past *are* contrived to accomplish a specific effect. Pre-serial composers *were* concerned with inspiration, which might appear as a melodic phrase, chord, rhythm, or as any poetic impetus that fired the imagination. After this initial inspiration, technique would strive to coalesce idea with method. The serial composer demonstrates an approach radically different from any previous concept of artistic creation. In predetermining every detail of his total composition—programming himself, as it were—composition becomes a game to be played with strict rules, the outcome of which is not known and possibly is unimportant. Formerly, music resulted from fire and algebra, inspiration and technique, moving from inwardness to lucidity. To the serialist, composing is akin to Sisyphus eternally rolling his huge stone up a hill, knowing fully it is always destined to roll down again. In existential terms, the act of creation is more important than the results.

Like much modern art, serialism is a product of historical and psychological perspectives. It was most likely Brahms, more than any other composer, who was forced to assess his historical position in relation to his contemporaries. Reflection made Brahms, who began as a Romantic, a staunch defender of classical ideology. To Brahms, sensing the ever elusive realities of music as a personal art, continually eroding by passing time, this proc-

ess must have been a pessimistic mellowing. The figure of Brahms defending classical realities against the magic of Wagnerian emotion invites comparison with Boulez.

Disenchanted with nineteenth-century Romantic values in all forms (musical, social, political) seeping into our ravaged century, Boulez, as an individual, creative personality, like Brahms, was forced to create his own reality. Thus, the forging of a new musical world and technique, regardless of its communicative power, is an act of idealism. A post-Freudian, psychology-wise man of our times, Boulez must take psychological differences into account in a manner spared Brahms. The Viennese master's efforts to transmit his musical realities were controlled by standardized, accepted notational procedures that quite accurately indicated the realization of a particular creative effort from composer to performer. The essential participants of the musical experience—composer, performer, and listener—are still present in Boulez; the eliciting response relationship between these partners is, however, wholly ambiguous.

Boulez's *Third Sonata*, a work in progress since 1958, consists of several sections, each of which in terms of time is as long or longer than a "normal" sonata. "Constellation," the third section, is printed on 36" by 25" sheets of piano music. Some of the minuscule engraved sheets are red, some green; arrows and curved lines suggest continuity of incomplete staves. The score's size and appearance already challenge the performer; one must *want* to play this music, to create order from myriad possibilities. Boulez has constructed a maze through which the pianist wanders within circumscribed possibilities. Each performance, for composer and performer, must be new, while the listener must burrow his way to comprehending safety. *In toto*, the score seems a notational Rorschach test. For the classicist, music is expressive of itself, but for Boulez, it must turn inward on itself, commenting and reflecting on its own course through a labyrinth of possibilities. Individual differences in hearing constitute multi-life cycles of the work. Nothing is passive; the composer guides his performer by offering

various routes that the performer is free to reroute, while the listener creates his own itinerary.

Formal literary concepts play a crucial part in the music of Boulez. For his fluid, open form, the composer takes his cue from the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé. The music of words for Mallarmé, that is, their sound plus association, is more important than their conventional meaning; as suggestion is superior to statement, so the hover-

This article is the tenth in a series of "Essays in Miniature" featuring important musical compositions and developments of the twentieth century. The series includes analyses of works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, Stravinsky, Stockhausen, Cage, and others. The author is Assistant Professor of Theory-Composition, Department of Music, The University of Texas, Austin.

ing image is preferable to stationary meaning. Ultimately, typography, different spacings, sizes and fonts of type exuded their own precise, expressive significance. Even the physical aspects of a book or score (thickness, depth) may become part of its formal makeup. Whereas a piece by Brahms may require five printed pages, Boulez might consider each page a unit, evocative of its own form. Layout and manufacture suddenly assume unexpected importance. Music, spiral-bound with swiveling pages, becomes a spiral *through* time.

Music conceived as action via the chance methods of performing and listening reconstruction suggests that music has become an ethical rather than an aesthetic venture. Boulez concedes "music has become a way of being in the world." Despite its beauties, the aleatoric position (leaving musical creation, interpretation, and consumption to luck) is not without problems. The serialist basically thinks himself the ultimate result of music history the same way a Marxist considers himself a historically determined solution to all social and political problems. As a Marxist is pledged to certain economic principles to bolster feelings of righteous invincibility, so must the serialist depend on serial techniques to maintain his superiority. In defining its art, serialism must stress *its* sovereign techniques, but art, defined solely as method, is an

incomplete definition of art. One wonders if, in the quest for new music, serialists have ever asked themselves whether a composer shackled with the ball and chain of serial method can run faster than a composer employing traditional techniques.

Today, serialism is on the wane. Boulez is still its high priest and most accomplished practitioner, although in relation to even newer musical developments, he may assume the position held by Brahms in his day. (All great thinkers eventually defend one view of reality.) Boulez's music is most appealing when one pierces its forbidding shroud of Eastern thought. Much avant-garde music relies on intellectual armor for survival, and this has driven many serious musical devotees into the arms of the Beatles. This situation could not be healthier.

Recent musical manifestos based on historical, social, or technical pre-eminence are being unmasked as egotistical idealism. The Beatles prove that man does not only want to think, but that he wishes to laugh, to elbow his way across historical boundaries, to possess his past heritage and make it his own. Within the tightly structured world of commercial music, the Beatles' stylistic strides have outdistanced the advances of serious music. They are not anti-intellect, but simply artistically tolerant, proving that music today is more a matter of attitude than of method or theory. By comparison, recent serious music is haunted by its own inhibited image. The mechanical nature of serialism is not so much a mirror of our scientific age as it is a desperate dive for security. By re-evaluating his attitude to music of the past, a composer, now as never before, can condemn himself to freedom, expressing love of all styles. If today's composer wishes to reestablish contact with the world, he must become a prophet of the past.

It is only within the capabilities of music, as a multi-layered language, that one can span the feelings and ideas of continents and centuries. The man sensitive to this transmigration will be that compendium of personal wisdom, which is the aim of all art and education. ■