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## COMPOSER SPEAKS

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### **CRITICAL WRITINGS OF PIERRE BOULEZ – A TREASURY FOR THE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC Interview with François Nicolas<sup>1</sup>**

*In your writings, especially in the four volumes of your “Le Monde-Musique”<sup>2</sup>, Pierre Boulez occupies an important place as a “musician-thinker”, particularly in the third volume (Musician and His Musical Intellect). Boulez himself has repeatedly said that critical activity is indispensable in the act of creation (Thinking Music Today, 1963). You, however, do not regard “speaking about music” as a creative act. What is, then, the place that the writings of Pierre*

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<sup>1</sup> François Nicolas is a composer who connects composing with theoretical reflections on music. His compositions are published by the Jobert publishing house. A compact disk with his music performed by F. Millet, J.-M. Conquer and A. Damiens is available in the Tritone edition (*Infinis: TRI331176*). With the knowledge he acquired at the École Polytechnique and in philosophy (D. E. A), he was an assistant at the CNSMDP (Conservatoire national supérieur de musique et de danse de Paris), a composer-researcher at the IRCAM, and a professor-researcher associate at the ENS-Ulm (*École normale supérieure*). His current compositions investigate the idea of heterophony. He gave a keynote lecture at “Musical Practices – Continuities and Transitions”, The Twelfth International Conference of the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Music, University of Arts in Belgrade, April 23–26, 2014. He has repeatedly collaborated with the *New Sound* journal.

<sup>2</sup> François Nicolas, *Le Monde – Musique* ( I – *L’oeuvre musicale et son écoute*, II – *Le Monde – Musique et son solfège*, III – *Le musicien et son intellectualité musicale*, IV – *Les raisonances du Monde – Musique*), Paris, Edition AedamMusicae, 2014–15. 259+347+381+385.



François Nicolas

*Boulez have attained so far within his oeuvre, and in the contemporary world of music at large?*<sup>3</sup>

One must, no doubt, distinguish, here and elsewhere, between two types of criticism: one, the most common, is realized by means of language – one speaks or gives an account of a musical work in order to shed light on its qualities and weaknesses; the other, the most interesting one, is effected by the creation of a new musical work whereby the previous one is referred to, prolonged, re-orientated, commented on, the meaning of which is altered and so on.

This twofold critical activity – writing *about* and composing *starting from* – is irreplaceable in the act of creation, for it is through such an

activity that new works are allowed to enter into dialogue with the old ones.

When I say that “speaking about music” is not a creative act, it is because I speak here only about the first dimension of criticism – the one that passes through words. This notwithstanding, this verbal criticism is not useless, of course: it contributes to the constitution of possible favorable conditions for creation, rather than being creation in itself.

The critical writings of Pierre Boulez constitute, I believe, a treasury for the contemporary world of music, for they allow us to orientate ourselves within that world, to situate in the context great works that were instrumental in the structuring of that world as a world of contemplation, not merely a world of entertainment one attends on Saturday nights...

*You speak about three dimensions of musical intellect: theoretical, critical and aesthetic (III, p. 14), situating Boulez closest to the critical dimension (III, p. 15). Is it possible, in spite of this, to talk about a Boulezian dialogue/trialogue between these three dimensions?*

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ana Kotevska, *F. Nicolas: Le monde – Musique (I – L'oeuvre musicale et son écoute)*; *New Sound* 46, II/2015, 194–198.

Yes: if the axis of Boulez's musical intellect is heavily displaced and leans towards the critical pole (we can judge it by comparing each part of his texts dedicated to criticism, aesthetics and theory), he does not cease to confront the three dimensions, articulating them, of course, rather than separating them. Accordingly, when Boulez examines the theoretical questions of a "musical language," he does it from an angle which allows him to elucidate musical works that contain such a language; and then, critically reexamining them, he at the same time establishes an aesthetical relationship between the questions of "musical language" and the questions pertaining to other equivalent contemporary "languages" (pictorial, logical-mathematical and so on).

*You do not find coherent reflection on musical form in Boulez's writings (I, p. 107). How would you account for its absence?*

Pierre Boulez, I believe, wanted to put an end to a certain theory of musical form by assembling a large number of ideas explicated in *Thinking Music Today*. His idea implied that a theory of form ought to be the pinnacle of the construction of a new musical language, deemed necessary in the post-war period.

In contrast, such deduction is impossible, and we can perceive it with the aid of an example taken from linguistics: linguistics distinguishes grammar from rhetoric. Grammar is concerned with the construction of the sentence. Rhetoric takes over where grammar leaves off, and it is concerned with binding together different sentences in order to construct discourse (assuming that discourse begins with a conjunction of at least two sentences). Thus defined, rhetoric demands that semantics be taken into account in detail, and it cannot consist of only one sentence (which is, in a way, possible with the simplest grammar).

Theory of musical form here assumes a position equivalent to the one of rhetoric. It cannot be defined solely by its grammar – the one Boulez started constructing in *Thinking Music Today*. It demands that a new semantic dimension enter into play, the dimension of "musical language". It is precisely on this semantic that Boulez relied in the early 1960s.

He would attempt to return to it towards the end of the 70s, to construct a musical semantic, again advancing the hypothesis of the theme – the musical theme will enrich music more than a semantic surrogate – but failing to reach an appropriate conclusion.

*The obvious presence of Boulez in your writings stems primarily from his critical reflections. However, writing Postlude to your four volumes, Alain Badiou emphasizes your, as he calls it, "having it out" with Boulez, positioning it on*

*two levels: intellectuality and composing (IV, p. 375). Considering that you have included the second book of Boulez's Structures in your "privileged moments" from the history of music (I, pp. 147–198), can you trace the resonances and „reasonances" between your and his compositions?*

Despite my admiration for most of the works of Pierre Boulez, my own music draws little inspiration from them; the chief reason is the decidedly “constructivistic” orientation of his compositions which is poorly suited to my approach.

By “constructivism” I mean his manner of constructing a score starting from basic elements, proceeding to regroupings that rigorously follow from one another, to end up in some kind of demonstrative austerity. Naturally, great composer that he is, he knows how to deal both with “necessity and chance”, with “austerity and freedom;” his music, therefore, does not resemble the mechanical flow of a deductive, cold and inexorable lecture. But, in the end, he sets forth an axiom whereby music is constructed by the strictness of the writing: a writing that traverses a path from the simple to the complex, becoming more intricate and convoluted in the process. The perception of such a writing ought to follow these entanglements little or not at all; by no means could perception follow the writing step by step but it will be directed, taken by the hand as it were, and led along the paths of construction by a dialectic of closure (by a membrane) and signal: a closure that suggests periodizations to the ear, the constructive phrasings in the score and signals that point to bifurcations and events in the score.

This manner of composing is not particularly appealing to me, and this is why I have never been able to find inspiration in Boulez's creative work.

*Do you intend to write a monograph devoted to the collected works of Pierre Boulez?*

No. I believe my previous answers will tell you why: such a monograph would, therefore, have to duplicate the composer's effort that materializes my musical understanding of his work – as I have done with Schoenberg<sup>4</sup> – but Boulez's constructivism, compositional (previous item) rather than intellectual (as it relates to musical language as its central category), does not particularly stimulate me to undertake such a task.

Translated by Miloš Zatkalik

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<sup>4</sup> Idem, *La singularité Schoenberg*. Paris, Cahiers de l'IRCAM – Harmattan, 1998, 224.