

Michael Hicks

Notes from Boulez Workshop on *Le Marteau sans Maître*—May 9-14 2001, Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall (transcribed from my handwritten notes)

note: all phrases in quotation marks are Boulez's words

Wed. May 9

4:20 PM

Registered, got badge, found seat in second row 4 seats in from left. Several dozen people there, betw. 45-50 at this moment, many Asians, assorted ages (mostly young) and ethnicities. Mostly quiet, solemn, a few muffled conversations about the subway, places to eat or . . . couldn't tell—talking not in English.

Got out my old, splayed mini-score of LM, keeping my fresh new one (complimentary copy with workshop) for an autograph from the maestro.

Stage with stool in middle front, water bottle and plastic cup set on little table beside it. A chair and stand to left, piano bench and stand to right, xylorimba back left, unpitched perc. Back middle, vibraphone back right.

Waiting continues, scattered whispered conversation, raise in volume, seats fill in. Occasionally players, or classical roadies, wander in, putting music on stands, arranging chairs, then players all enter casually along with mentors (from Ensemble Intercontemporain), tuning, conversing quietly, all street clothes, guys in denim.

Boulez enters, removes stool, invites questions during rehearsal, then removes water table. Very affable. Says "First thing you have to learn is 'maneuver stands.'"

Takes **MVT 6** first. What to do first is a run of the easiest thing and "judge what is proposed to me," then you shape until you get what you want. Just see what happens first.

"Tune: first lesson." (Players tune)

Conducts very slowly. Guitarist gets lost. B explains: he will subdivide first measure in a slow tempo, then not after. Wants viola a very strong signal at opening. "Instantly" changes tempo into 5/16 (m. 5). Spends long time on first 12 mm.

Re rhythm/duration: "The beginning of sound is important but also the end of sound." Give

upbeat for next bar strongly when changing beat value (e.g. into 5/16). (1st m. okay to change bow at F#)

Subdivision should help the players, but in slow mvt. don't do so except in difficult parts—otherwise it is really chopping up the time, not giving the real feeling of the gesture.

“You have got to be very demonstrative” with the players. You must be with each other—you must be “acting together.”

Violist: it is good to start with this mvt. because of need to find the right sounds.

“Speed erases quite a lot of sins.” Slow tempi very hard, so exposed. (B was also very exacting w/ intonation.)

Wants to meet with guitarist, who gets lost often. Doesn't want the guitarist to write cues from the voice in his part. “Rely on your part—and on me.”

At ca. 6:00: break until 6:10, tune again, then through whole mvt., telling everyone to “remember all of these things.”

Re changing to a slower tempo: make gestures bigger; changing to faster tempo, shorten the gestures.

Re ensemble: “They should listen to each other but not rely on each other.” Even if everyone knows the piece they should know that a mistake can still happen. It's easy to go on “automatic pilot.”

Maracas in this mvt. “are just measuring time,” like “a sophisticated clock,” but are “not participating” with the others.

MVT 2

B conducts all eighth notes. Tells violist (all pizzicato in this mvt.) to play softly now, loudly only in the last rehearsals, “otherwise there will be no skin left.” Lack of balance between the xylorimba and viola is “part of the intention of this piece.” Tells xylorimbist his mallets are too hard. Drum: play on the edge for a “very light sound.”

Three points in this movement:

1. Balance betw. va and xylo
2. What drum does must fill the gaps
3. Flute: no slurs, but should feel continuous—rearticulate notes as closely as possible

xylo & va: one shouldn't know which one is playing which note.

Make it "very liquid, and the flute float above." (B works to keep this mvt very soft and sweet, gentle, precious)

Different parts: do one instr at a time to get that player to react exactly—but cond must have "geometry of the gesture always the same" so that the player may react correctly at any given moment.

To xylo: readjust always on 2/4 bar—5/8 and 6/8 are the hardest here.

May 10

1 PM

MVT 8

More talk on when to subdivide beats

Very important to first clarify the relationship betw music & beat (and players & cond).

Play with the hand what the player must play. "Need is to achieve flexibility and accuracy at the same time." "You must use both hands very creatively."

After fermata on beat 1, beat 1 again (to give the division of that beat)

Important that the musical phrase is shaped correctly. Don't rush the difficulty but "try to swallow it."

Re lines w/ grace notes: do line without grace notes, then add them in. Make real differences betw grace and principal notes.

Very important that you (conductor) can do the rhythm yourself. B says he knows this is very difficult, though easy for him now, remembers how much he "sweat" over conducting this in 1956.

Use a rest as the preparation for the next note.

Make all difficulties sound intentional—make a gesture out of each difficulty—"not because it is difficult, but because it is a gesture."

Be firm in giving beat, but follow what individual players are doing.

MVT 5

Next in order of difficulty to conduct—almost never a fixed tempo.

[much difficulty piecing together the first two pp.]

Changes often—very difficult, “but I like it.”

4 PM

More on how he will conduct various mm., working through the constant changes of tempo & meter

--Use left hand for very quick gestures

—You have to be able to demonstrate that you can change tempo & beat properly at same time

MVT 9

sim. to mvt. 6, bar 21, same as 1st half of m. 1

Gtr had one rhythm printed wrong in his part

B lets gtr play one note as a harmonic (at gtr’s request), saying: “Instrumentalists have their own tricks and I’m not against it.”

Make difference betw the recitative & the quotes of other mvts.

Precision & flexibility most ably achieved by proper choice of when to divide vs. subdivide.

“I conduct all what you play.”

“Fifty years ago I was more theoretical than now.”

Re” balance: Has a dynamic grid in mind, understanding that the instruments will modify the sound.

[some disc of values vs. tempo]

Q: Do you find new things in your music, if so, what do you do?

B: “I modify”—does not want to be limited by conducting. Wants to be adventurous, will find a way to realize it—but if it doesn’t work after several tries, will change.

Will not use the harpsichord in his music because it is contrary to his notion of dynamics, which is for them to be “always on the move.”

Discussion with Ensemble Intercontemporain players (Boulez not present):

Sophie Cherrier (flute): has played LM for 20 yrs. Piece used to be stricter & faster, now more relaxed.

Garth Knox (viola): “The more [Boulez] does this piece the more it relaxes.”

Marie-Threse Ghirardi (gtr): B always had the same idea, but now more supple and flexible

Daniel Ciampolini (perc): Some later pieces are more built around the conductor—Repons is “a concerto for conductor.”

M-T: Rare to find music like B’s that can function pictorially or as absolute.

G: This piece a paradox because it is chamber music but requires conductor

M-T: “only one square centimeter” of B’s music can be played w/o conductor

Reversal of Baroque, where no conductor really needed now even for large ensemble pieces

G: B very professional—always makes excellent use of time and will expand the workload to fill whatever time is given

Ara (host): Never seen B raise the tension level in a rehearsal

G: No power struggle, no agenda but to play the music

B says “libre, mais avec mois.”

[short discussion by student performers about preparing this piece—some had only 1 or 2 weeks]

G: Inevitable that musical difficulties will be overcome over time. The question is, what is worth doing, and that is the direction you go.

Always has been the same stage seating for LM

M-T: certain passages in LM remind her of Debussy

Ara: B often programs the Debussy fl/va/hp trio

Friday May 11

1 PM

MVT 4 (fermata mvt)

B says problem of how to begin–beat one again after fermata
Wants all fermatas irregular, “otherwise, what would be the point?” So performers have to be prepared for any duration on each fermata

[note: yesterday we had baby crying in the hall for awhile, today, some kind of rapidly thinking motor in the background–very distracting]

B says he is always “very deliberate” with his gestures. “If I want to surprise, I surprise, but I do so very deliberately.”

MVT 3

B very particular about the “feel” of the flute solo at opening. Sang along with soprano much of the time. [Throughout all rehearsals, B could sing–on pitch and in time–all parts.]

At beginning of LM fl & voice “are at the same level.” But when voice “goes further” she is “more and more engulfed” in the ensemble. In VI she is mixed in with the group. In mvt 9 she has recitative, then becomes an instrument. “The flute is the real singer” at the end–she stands in 9 to show visually the change of roles.

MVT 2

Avoid tendency for flute to shorten notes in end of group. Play xylo “extremely soft.” At beginning “calm down–the moment of aggressive is not still there.”

MVT 1

“Seems as if I am nitpicking, but if the rhythm is not correct . . . you have no grasp of what is going on.”

“This kind of writing implies that you are constantly shifting the speed of the beat.”

MVT 7

“Shorter and exactly as difficult” as mvt. I

MVT 9

correcting various technical problems throughout

6:00 PM

Q & A w/ Boulez

Q: How important to conduct own work?

A: LM—first perf in Baden, very difficult to find good enough percussionists, very repertoire for them. They knew no Messiaen or Stockhausen. Rosbaud had 3 mos to prepare, had over 60 rehearsals

1956 B began to conduct the work w/ French musicians. Now perc (xylo & vib) technique easier because of jazz influence, using 4 mallets instead of 2. Then had to find a new way of handling music. “We were always on the verge of danger.” Now, 46 yrs later, we have 20-yr old percussionists “doing amazing things.”

Composing and conducting are “two different professions.” But conductor cannot always convey the intentions of the composer. Compared Strauss and Stravinsky as composer-conductors. Very few composer-conductors of B’s generation

Gave analogy of learning to swim on a stool.

Q: Do performers need to know the compositional technique of the work?

A: No, “a performance is not a composition lesson.” You explain the technique only by giving practical advice, usually only after the real rehearsal. You must transmit in the score in very practical terms the compositional intent.

See in Memoriale how he broke it down in the score; that performance was “a little composition lesson.”

“I never tell something in the abstract, although I have the reputation of being abstract.” Always tries to convey in very practical, even trivial terms.

Q re: his ongoing works

A: Gives example of Proust expansions. “I am like that exactly. I don’t consider that anything is purely finished.”

Q: Would he notate LM differently now?

A: Yes, would find simpler ways of notating to give same results with easier means

Q re: conducting orchestra vs. chamber

A: You never reach w/ orchestra the level you do w/ a chamber group. But orchestras “like to be challenged . . . and they want to do exactly what can be done.”

[misc. Q & A]

New recording of LM planned in Paris 2002.

Explained why he wanted the placement of players in LM as they are.

1st perf of LM everyone was struck by the grouping of these instruments. [B then gave standard explanation of choice of these instruments]

Does not want to write for solo voice again, but for choir—wants the mixture of the choral sound

Problem of processing voice in the studio—apt to sound like “a bad telephone line.” Some sounds in the studio allude to other more common ones, the connotations cannot be escaped.

[discussed processing and transformation of acoustic instruments—B doesn't like the noise element in acoustic sound]

LM—B did not use 12-tone very much in this piece. “To have a kind of order all the time was unbearable to me. It's like writing canons your whole life.” Wrote mvt. 3 first. 12-tone “neither terribly attractive or exciting to me.” He is more interested, compositionally, in “multiplication of objects, different musical objects.” Each object can be “described” in many different ways. “The more I go, the more I use local things.” Gives ex. of chords changing like “columns”—always the same top, but different placement underneath.

“The dialectic between freedom and restriction is very attractive to me.”

In Schoenberg “harmony is controlled very artificially.” B wanted to find “harmonic language that could be controlled and heard.” Webern did so. Gave analogy of Baroque counterpoint, vertical/horizontal coordination. The diagonal dimension [?] very important to him.

Two gtr. pieces impressed him before LM: Serenade of Schoenberg, Webern op. 19. Took these as ex. of chamber music w/ gtr. He knew a woman in Paris who would be willing to play LM, then perf in Germany had to be postponed because could not find an able guitarist. In Freiburg one appeared.

Re: text in music: “You have to take care of the poem . . . the poem indicates what you can do in the music.” In LM chose a very short text, to facilitate the changing prominence of text in the work.

Saturday May 12

10 AM

Continued w/ **MVT 9**

after run-through of one portion, Edmundo (violinist) asks: "Was it better?"

B: "I didn't say anything, so it was better."

B takes sections but w/ each repetition often starts a few bars later. Eventually a full take.

MVT 6

B: "Number 6: child's play. A generation not yet born."

"I can say that & that & that, but the main thing is that the musicians listen to each other and they can balance by themselves."

"All this piece should be very calm."

1 PM

MVT 5

twice through, 2d time "much better"

MVT 8

MVT 4

[I dozed during this one, after a heavy lunch at the Brooklyn Diner]

MVT 2

3:15 PM

Watched "Tele-marteau" 1968 BBC film of speaking commentary by Boulez and perf of LM

B explains the basic structure of piece [see diagram on separate page]

mvt. 3 "l'artisanat": both instruments are in "melismatic style"

mvt. 5 : each vs. begins or ends a section of music, voice is "the main phenomenon of the music"

mvt. 4 & "bourreux" versions: music is "articulation" of the text; all versions are equal

Explanation of chain of timbres: voice to flute to viola to guitar to vibraphone to xyloimba to unpitched perc

Unpitched instruments are only in the "bourreux" cycle: skins, maracas, metal. They "mark the time . . . like a clock in this cycle"; "they fill the gaps . . . betw the pitches given by other instruments."

The instrumentation contains “exotic remembrances.” He rejects exoticism per se as colonialism at heart [explains non-western influences on the choice of these instruments]—wants not a reference to other cultures but “an evolution of our tradition.”

[mentions evolving instrumentation in LM, like Pierrot]

Freedom of speed is a completely new concept of rhythm in this work—“tempo is more important than line” in mvt. 5

[filmed performance followed]

Live commentary by Boulez after viewing film:

Perf has changed: “I am more relaxed now . . . less compact.” But the filmed one was a very good performance. 1960-61 “there was a ‘Marteau’ team” that played the work together a lot. (Guitarist in this perf was only one still from 1st perf) This was an “extremely lively” group playing the work. (Motor on vibraphone and also 2 mallets only.)

This movie “like an expressionist film,” especially with the big lips in closeup during last mvt.

B: they used the motor of vibraphone till ‘57-‘58 [but the film was ‘68!]

B has since modified the tempo to make the rhythms clear: if you go beyond a certain limit of performability the material of the piece is destroyed. Schoenberg said a metronome marking was valid only for one bar, the first bar. With Schoenberg and Berg one must use a flexible tempo, because the gestures demand modifications of tempo. With Webern and Stravinsky one should be “chronometric.” B needs “a couple of performances” of his own music to determine the correct speed. Then he can say a M.M.

B has always had a strong feeling for pitch—“never had to work for it.” In his 3-hour classes, Messiaen had dictation for one hour, then students harmonize for two hours (by imagination), with all the other classes sounding around to distract. Thus gave strong emphasis on pitch.

1st Piano Sonata (1946), some places where harmony is “carefully managed.”

LM came at end of a “very didactic period.” B learned that one cannot use duration like pitch. Durations not analogous to 12-tone. But sometimes still uses “statistical” durations in order to give a “floating feeling.”

In Mozart durations are almost the same in slow mvts as fast ones—it is only the harmonic rhythm

that is slower.

Sunday May 13

10 AM

run through of all the vocal movements (9,6,5,3), then singer leaves, rehearsed 8,4,2

Evening

MVT 1

run through—B says “good”—then work on specific sections (as on all previous occasions)

Then full run through of LM

(After break:)

“Give an ‘A’ first—it’s always useful.”

Review of trouble spots in each mvt.

MVT 1: m. 11

MVT 2: B: this mvt has tendency to speed up in each section—avoid that. From m. 75 va & xylo are almost always together, same as from m. 99—keep in synch,

MVT 3: (some parts not together)

MVT 4: must do beginning again

MVT 5: beginning

MVT 6: B: okay, but players request practice at m. 85

MVT 7: keep vibraphone down to balance guitar; problems making the hocket quintuplet; worked from m. 39 (ending), then through whole mvt. [this was the mvt least rehearsed earlier]

MVT 8: okay (no repeats of anything)

MVT 9: from m. 42, etc. Much work on various sections [it is clear from the rehearsals that this mvt is most dear and consequential to B]

Monday May 14

1 PM Dress Rehearsal

“We will have just a general rehearsal. Whatever happens I will accommodate. But I hope everything will go right.”

[straight run through, then comments]

MVT 9: 176-78 take a little more time—tendency to go too quick @ m. 140.

MVT 8: ending got off “I don’t understand why, exactly.” Some trouble on counting in unpitched perc

MVT 7: entirely repeated

MVT 6, 5, 4, 3 all okay

MVT 2: repeat of middle section

MVT 1: entirely repeated

Q & A Session with Boulez:

B: conducts LM strictly, tries to follow dominant instrument, then keep the others in line

Q: Are you ever concerned about a performance being over-rehearsed?

A: Sometimes “enough is enough” and he “would rather take a risk than be risking boredom.”

In 1955-56 this piece very hard, but has been “progressively absorbed” since.

Re: the poems. B not interested much in surrealistic technique, “not terribly interesting”–but these poems are good–short (necessary) and with “very strong imagery.” Wanted short “because I wanted the music too be longer than the poetry,” but these short poems also “forced me to conceive another way of using poetry in music.”

Q re: musical education

“My opinion on that is not based really on experience with that.”

He would teach rhythm first, then progressively develop other sides–tone color, then “vocabulary” [i.e. harmony and form] last. Have first experiences be with things “most appealing” first. It is like Chinese writing–you start with the beauty of the characters, then gradually acquire a sense of meaning. Best “to be attractive first”–don’t begin at the highest level. Start with the instruments–say a drum. Discover the sonorities it can make. Give thus experience with “the material of music.” Again, begin w/ sonorities, kinds of sound, color.

Q re: instrumentation of LM

A: Wanted middle register only (guitar low E is lowest pitch). “Simplest reason is, because I like it.” Tam tam appears for first time in last mvmt., giving the new lowest and longest resonance.

Q re: future of new music

A: In ‘46 would have been “totally unable to foresee the music of today.” Cites Proust: one speaks of the future only as a slightly modified present. But one can never really see the future. “I am very careful about making predictions about the future, because it would only be my phantasms about the present.”

Q re: interpretation by conductors

A: “I have to define my position with respect to the score. [If the composer’s dead] I have to determine the composer’s intention.” “I don’t believe at all in tradition.” Won’t go to a composer’s disciples for interpretation because they always “see the composer in a particular corner.” Better to go back to the document, the score. Some “literal tradition is really against the score.” Recently conducted pieces by young French composers, asked them what they

wanted in places, generally “they don’t object” to what he wants to do.

Q re: tonal/triadic references in LM

A: Yes, for moments of musical rest, esp. the allusion to C minor.

In LM 1st mvt. musical object is two notes, shared betw instruments (2 or 3). Various treatments of that is what he means by “description” of an object.

Q re: polarizing pitches

A: In mvt 7, m. 25 to end Bb is to polarize the pitch. In mvt 9 Eb is everywhere, to give polarity a stronger sense: “constantly all the harmony is around this Eb in various octaves.” During the time of LM, B worked more and more with polarities.

“I never write for an audience when I compose. I do not write for myself, because I know I need to communicate. But I write for an audience that doesn’t exist.”

[Misc. Q & A]

B: Orchestra made of individuals, you have to react to each one as such.

All intervals are used statistically the same amount in LM–B doesn’t polarize on an interval.

In Schoenberg and Berg gesture more important than pulse–M.M. not important. B always cuts his own M.M. by a fourth or a third when actually performing his own music. Re: M.M. in Beethoven–Schindler badgered Beethoven about tempo, tried to get metronome markings out of him–“out of irritation Beethoven would say anything.”

Re: music business today: “Some of the repertoire has disappeared.” Others have become more common (Berg Violin Concerto, especially). Bartok’s Third Piano Concerto more common, 1st and 3rd not. Performers have a “lack of curiosity, intellectual laziness.” But to discover new work is the job of the performer. It would be absurd to read the same 6 books over and over.

Re: conducting, getting authority with a group: “You do it, and you do it convincingly, and the orchestra will follow.”

Final comment: “I prefer rebellion to boredom.”

8:00 PM

Concert

opening remarks by Boulez

Re: earlier works of his: some early pieces not happy with, but “Notations” he rediscovered, wanted to make “totally different.” Others, like “Le Soleil,” were not so much transformed.

For piano sonata, he relied on his experience as a pianist. Still, “I like the spontaneity” of Pno Son. No. 1. Some portions he likes, finds “some features of my personality”; the piece is “interesting” and “charming.”

“I am not the kind of person that can transform himself and not be recognized. . . . I am . . . maybe limited but I am always in the same direction. . . . I have transformed myself but with a certain constant in the way I want to project myself. Maybe I am a simple man. . . . If you don’t want that I call myself simple, I will call myself slow.” Wrote *Anthemes I* quickly for a competition, later realized that material was interesting.

Re: revision: “For me what is interesting is to look and then deduce.” The orchestral versions of the old “Notations” (for solo piano) found inspiration when B was conducting *The Ring* in Bayreuth. (Ex.: magic helmet motif in *Rheingold* to *Götterdämmerung*.) Likes to develop ideas “in a direction you had never thought of before.”

Re: LM: for the Ensemble Intercontemporain players the difficulty “does not exist anymore.” One rehearsal only needed for them now. Cf. Early difficulties for *Pierrot*. Gtr. has had least development of technique during lifespan of LM.

The bar is now set higher for this generation of percussionists, especially—classical music benefitted from jazz (2 to 4 mallets). But one has to have experience “playing regularly contemporary music.” Used himself as an example, 1st time performing this piece compared to now.