

Clang of the Century

CONTEMPORARY CHAMBER PLAYERS

at Northwestern University Law

School Auditorium

February 14, 1986

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

CONTEMPORARY MUSIC ENSEMBLE

at Pick-Staiger Hall, Evanston

February 15, 1986

CHARLES ROSEN

at Mandel Hall

February 16, 1986

L'ENSEMBLE

INTERCONTEMPORAIN

at Patten Gymnasium, Evanston

February 20, 1986

L'ENSEMBLE

INTERCONTEMPORAIN

at Orchestra Hall

February 21, 1986

By Kyle Gann

Where shall I begin?

As it turned out, there were more Boulez performances in Evanston and Chicago, Horatio, than were dreamt of in my calendar article. And I went to *every one*. What would you do without me? Five concerts and a lecture covered four full decades of this 60-year-old composer's career, eight works from

the Flute Sonatine of 1946 to the *Dialogue de l'ombre double* of 1985, plus four more works featuring Pierre Boulez as conductor and several others intended as oblique tributes. Through the immense variety of these concerts—the intentional contrast of his early and late styles, as well as the inadvertent contrast of the expert and inept performances—the very essence of Boulez's work was tellingly revealed, though it is no simple task to put into words what was so clearly grasped by the intuition.

The indisputable climax of the eight-day fest was *Repons*, Boulez's spectacular magnum opus for computer-modified orchestra. In coming to Chicago, the work transcended its own musical significance and made local history. Had a bomb dropped on Patten Gym during the performance, Chicago would have instantly become a new-music vacuum. (No wise-cracks, please.) Of all the pieces that have been written since music was invented, *Repons* seemed to be the one piece that every new-music person in northern Illinois' usually fragmented new-music scene wanted to hear. Musicians were there from Hyde Park, from Northwestern, from DePaul, from the

suburbs, from downstate, and from nowhere. Composers whose divergent aesthetics had kept them from inhabiting the same hall for a decade or more seemed stunned but unembarrassed to be sharing the same thought in common for one night. Did *Repons* live up to the magnitude of the excitement it had created? What could have?...

Well, yes, actually it did.

Boulez's midweek lecture at Northwestern (in his most official persona, elusive and obnoxiously noncontroversial) split the eight-day fest into two equal halves, one containing his early and the other his late music. In moving from Boulez's Piano Sonata no. 3 of 1957 (Sunday) to his clarinet solo *Dialogue de l'ombre double* (Thursday), probably the best works on either half, the solutions Boulez has found to the problems of serialism became very clear, as well as the concessions he has made. Both were edifying. Their very existence demonstrated why Boulez remains a major composer, even increasingly so, at a time when the style he created is in an internationally moribund state.

Every style, out of logical necessity, has its drawbacks. From a Boulezian point of view, Mozart's

music is harmonically impoverish- ed and discouragingly redundant, and Mahler's conceptions of tempo and texture are rigid and unwieldy. Serialism's dilemma is that, in its willingness to absorb all possible musical materials, it must reduce everything to quantitative values (on an even deeper level than is entailed by the technique's ostensibly mathematical roots, which were officially abandoned long ago). Every particular detail of the music,

relative to a scale of increasing intervals. The serialist wants his piece to be remembered not in its particular parts, but *as a whole*; yet, serialists have painfully learned that a whole without parts cannot be remembered. And so, impotent to draw on the personality of its constitutive details, recent serialism (taking Boulez as the quintessential and perhaps most brilliant example) has become a dialectic of types, characters, even caricatures—or, to use the presently more acceptable word, "figures."

Thus *Repons*, like *Rituel*, *Figures*, *Doubles*, *Prismes*, and other late Boulez works, was structured as a series of sections, each with its own characteristic "figure" that was subjected to repeated and quantitative variation. We had the "echoing arpeggios" section, the "repeated note" section, the "glissando up-and-down again" section, as well as an occasional "no predominant figure" section. (Andrew Gerzso, Boulez's assistant, indicated to me that they discuss the piece in just such terms; *Repons* has a "Balinese section" with gong sounds, a "lighthouse section" in which the computer modifies the soloists one by one, etc.) In early serial style, that of the Third

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integrated by ultimatum into the collective whole, loses perforce its own distinctive quality and personality. (That communist countries reject serialism's validity is a telling paradox.) A major third is no longer a distinct and memorable interval with its own associations (opening of Beethoven's Fifth, etc), but an interchangeable quantity



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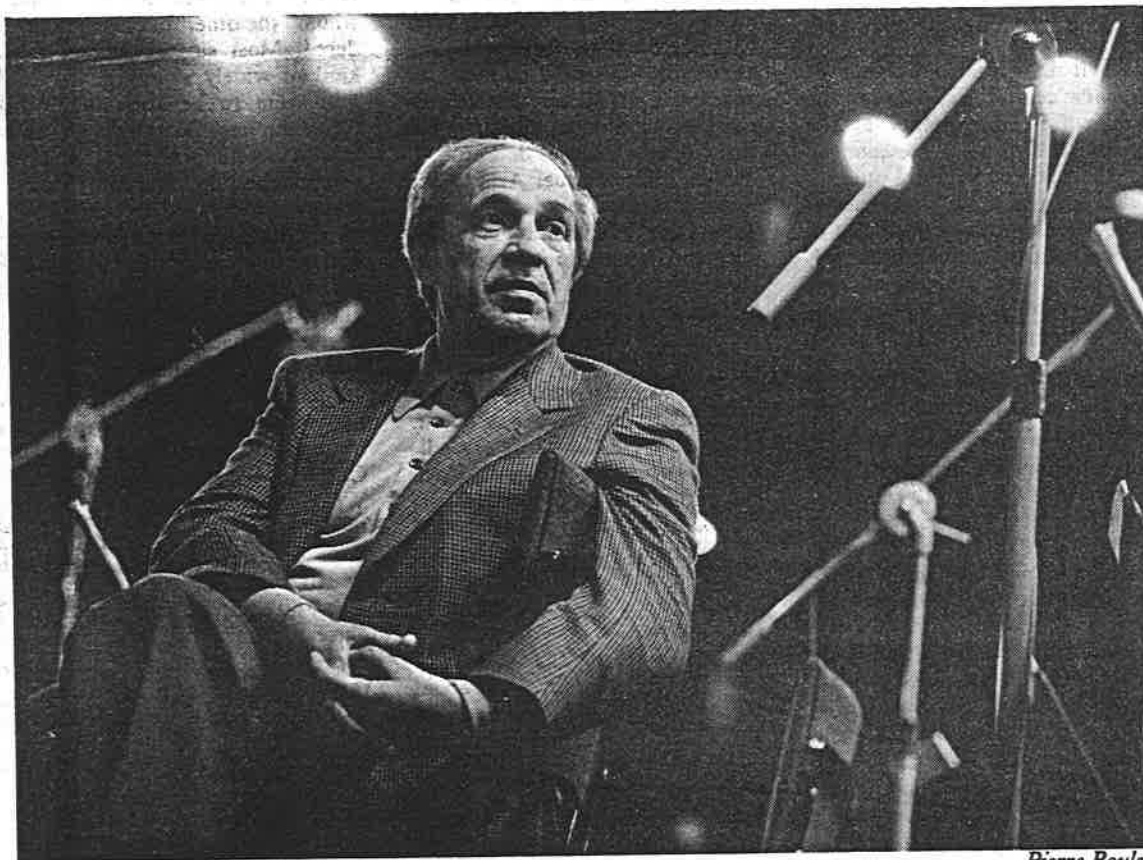
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Pierre Boulez

Sonata, the constant juxtaposition of contrasting figures made them difficult to recognize as figures, and tended toward unintelligibil-

ity. Boulez's grouping of similar figures into definable sections solves that problem and makes it possible to produce coherent, large-

scale serial works. The composer's creative task then consists of making the progression of such sections natural, logical, and com-

PELLING. In the *Dialogue de l'ombre double*, which preceded *Repons*, Boulez achieved that aim with consummate clarity. In the more complex context of *Repons*, such an effect was difficult to bring across to an audience that would only hear the work once, and Boulez resorted to some theatrical tricks that were, in their way, equally compelling.

Dialogue de l'ombre double began, lights out, with a loping (taped) clarinet phrase circling the room through a series of loudspeakers, as clarinetist Alain Damiens made his way up to the stage unseen to take over the phrase live. The first section was devoted to those rather burbling phrases in low register; the second to a series of tremolos by the (live) clarinet; the third to echoes of the clarinet on tape; the fourth to those same tremolos with the key notes quickly repeated, etc. The beautiful flow and exquisite logic of the work came from the manner in which the sections were audibly connected by the key pitches, and in which the clarinet and tape clearly echoed and anticipated each other's previous and successive sections. Not since *Rituel* has Boulez written a work so enchanting and comprehensible on first hearing. A far cry from his primitive clarinet solo *Domaines*,

Dialogue is bound to be the classic work for clarinet of the 20th century, and within 15 years—trust me—every sophomore clarinetist will be working on it. In these pristine technical conditions, and with Damiens' sweet, full tone, it was, save for one moment in *Repons*, the highlight of the week.

One moment in *Repons*? Whatever else Boulez has achieved as a composer, he can now claim credit for perhaps the most exhilarating single moment in 20th-century music, certainly since Bartok. *Repons* began with the 24-piece chamber orchestra, surrounded in the middle of Patten Gym by the audience, playing rushing gestures in rhythmic unison, and lapsing at times into group trills and repeated notes (quintessential figures). Finally, a chord was sustained a little, and it happened: all six soloists—two pianos, xylophone, marimba, harp, and cymbalom, heavily amplified and scattered around the periphery of the gym—entered at once in one tremendous *clang*, as an array of red, yellow, and blue lights suddenly illuminated the half-lit room. Every heart in Patten Gym, I'd estimate, skipped a beat. It was not only a physical surprise, a visceral thrill, but a forced "aha!" of cognitive inspiration, as Boulez

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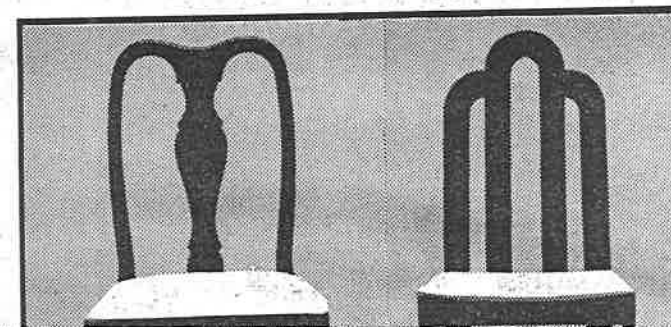
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revealed in one instant the nature of the dialogue between ensemble and soloists that would shape the remainder of the piece. It was the most operatic effect in the last 50 years of concert music, and the most effective entrance for an instrumental soloist since the Busoni Piano Concerto.

The electricity of that *clang* put the audience in the palm of Boulez's hand and "carried" the piece for a good 15 minutes. The varied interplay of repeated notes and arpeggios between the soloists, carried out across the room and over the heads of the audience, kept the senses engaged in a most entertaining manner. There were concessions to clarity Boulez would never have made as a young man: for a long section, the brass punctuated the texture with brief chords every four beats, with a rhythmic regularity that Boulez had once excoriated in *On Music Today* as "the rhythmic equivalent of octave doubling." In addition, to watch Boulez conduct his own music is to see a philosopher at work. *Repons* contains decisions of timing that must be made on the spot by the conductor, and Boulez, deep in concentration as he molded the piece with his chubby hands, was quite visibly weighing, sifting,

judging. Despite these entertainments and concessions, though, the logic of the sectional succession was not always clear on this first audition, and excitement gradually gave way to a feeling that the piece was, for all perceptual purposes, beginning to repeat itself. But crafty Boulez had one more trick up his sleeve: the 4X digital processor.

For the middle three-fifths of *Repons*, this high-tech sound-transformation computer had played a very subtle role, adding a kind of artificial resonance and an echo here and there of the soloists. In the last few minutes, though, the 4X took over, magnifying, echoing, delaying, and multiplying the last few clangs as they gradually dispersed for a surprisingly effective ending. In one dramatic leap, the sound had spread from the ensemble in the middle to the soloists at the periphery; now with equal suddenness it ascended to the speakers in the middle of the ceiling, a glorious and fitting apotheosis. *Repons* has been criticized by American computer composers for not having made more copious use of its technology, but this subtlety in saving its potential for a final epiphany seems compositionally brilliant and thoroughly French. How disappointing it would have eventually been to hear the computer operate at full capacity throughout the work! It's a good showman and an honest artist who

knows what tricks he needs to pull to get a difficult work across on first hearing.

As if in acknowledgment of *Repons*'s central position in this Boulez fest, the quality of the week's performances crescendoed up to that concert and quickly dissipated afterward. Two concerts paired Boulez's music with that of Debussy with the intent, it seemed, of proving once and for all that those two composers have practically nothing in common. Harvey Sollberger had been intended to conduct the U. of C.'s Contemporary Chamber Players, but a lack of funds on the ensemble's part prevented his coming, and Philip Morehead of Chicago Lyric Opera led in his place. The result, at least in the Boulez works, was the most perfunctory and least illuminating performance this reviewer has ever heard from that ensemble.

Admittedly, cellist Barbara Haffner opened with a damned difficult act to follow. Her approach to Debussy's Sonata for Cello and Piano was as musical as it was astoundingly athletic. Expertly accompanied by Allan Dameron, she attacked the instrument from every direction—now with furious vigor, now with pianissimo delicacy—yet every detail of every strum, martellato, and ricochet counted toward expressive effect. In less committed hands, the sonata can seem little more than pretty, but her breathtaking variety of tone projected it

in vivid technicolor. This was no ad hoc demonstration: it is clear that Haffner has been thinking about the Debussy sonata for years, and put all her considerable musicianship into an interpretation that could be taken as definitive.

After this, Shmuel Ashkenasi's reading of the same composer's Sonata for Violin and Piano was stiff and monochromatic. Worse, the trio who played the enchanting Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp lacked the slightest intensity, ambling their way through the notes with little seeming concern as to what the piece was about. (Admittedly, the Law School Auditorium's acoustics are hardly ideal; could they not hear themselves?) This attitude, embarrassing enough in Debussy, was fatal to the less linear music of Boulez. Some music, played with nothing more than accuracy, is capable of getting its own point across, but not Boulez's. Serial music is not about the relationships between notes, as was earlier music, but about the *relationships between relationships*. Unless the performer has given some thought (either analytical or intuitive) to what global concerns connect those isolated notes and effects, the result will be perceptual chaos: John Cage's randomness without his freedom and variety.

God knows soprano Elsa Charlston, brought in from New York, did her part. In excellent voice for Boulez's *Deux improvisations sur*

Mallarme, she was the rock around whom the other musicians floundered. Most singers singing this kind of widely skipping, angular line seem to be shrieking, but Charlston can float through this kind of material with the utter calm of a Schubert lied. But Morehead's wimpy, understated approach gave no rhythmic definition to the percussion, harp, and piano, and provided her only with a bland, amorphous background. There was no attempt to balance dynamics: one player's *ff* was another's *mp*, despite the fact that no music ever written has depended so much on dynamics for its shaping as early serial music. Carole M. Morgan and Eric Weimer had little better luck with the Sonatine for flute and piano, as Weimer overpedaled (anathema! Boulez writes *sec*, *percute*, and *sans pedale* all over the score), and both players glossed over the copious expression markings, leaning toward a polite monochrome. Boulez was hardly in a polite mood when he concocted this epitome of European savagery. These were theoretically uncommitted performances. No philosophy of sonority went into their production, unless it was to mellow these works out into the paler, more businessman-like style of American academic music. Let's hope this isn't a fair sampling of the post-Shapey CCP.

The concert by Don Owens conducting Northwestern's Contemporary Music Ensemble was adver-

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tised as being "Music by Boulez and others." One might have been excused, then, for expecting to hear a Boulez ensemble work as the highlight of the concert. Instead, along with four other ensemble works, we heard *not* the ensemble version but the *solo* clarinet version of Boulez's *Domaines*. In either version, this is a difficult work to make exciting. In the solo version it's less a serial piece than the blueprint for a serial piece, and can sound unintelligible in the best of performances. Clarinetist Paul Votapek made a manly and intelligent effort, cognizant of the work's superhuman dynamic requirements, and keeping a smooth enough flow to give a semblance of unity to which the piece does not lend itself. It would require the theatricality of a Houdini, though, to make Boulez's weakest piece hold the attention, and young Votapek can hardly be blamed that he is not both magician *and* clarinetist. Dubious advertising aside, the concert's primary advantage was to introduce to a Chicago public an intriguing work by a recently-appointed NU faculty member, Gary Greenberg.

Charles Rosen's performance showed what was lacking in that of the CCP, just as the Boulez Third Sonata he played showed what was conceptually lacking in *Domaines*. When I interviewed

Boulez he mentioned that young composers today were "more interested in the structure of sound than in pitches." I suspected that he was really speaking of his own compositional concerns, and Rosen confirmed that notion. Whatever faults he may possess, Rosen is possibly the most intelligent pianist of our time, and he knew precisely what, as far as he was concerned, the Third Sonata was all about: timbre, or more, specifically, "the structure of sound." This was no postimpressionist reading, or a mere exploitation of coloristic possibilities. Rosen's steel-hard sonorities and spontaneous yet exact pacing gave a clear rhythmic and timbral definition that brought the relationships between the relationships between the notes into clear focus.

When, as so often in the sonata's "Constellation/Miroir" movement, Boulez directs that the individual notes of a chord should be released one at a time, Rosen achieved that effect with a highly sculpted, tactile definition that drew attention to the *shape*—the envelope—of that sound aggregate, making it clear that Boulez was trying in 1957 to transfer that concept from electronic music to the piano. Similarly, the great noise that Rosen made with the bass trills in the "Commentaire" section of the "Trope" movement posited a noise/tone

continuum that came from the same theoretical source. The Third Sonata is possibly Boulez's most difficult work to aurally comprehend, but if ever a performance provided the keys to understanding it was this one. The worshipers of tone color and lyricism, lacking any idea of the structure of music, sadly underrate this phenomenal pianist. In the Debussy etudes Rosen also played (enigmatically sandwiching some of them between the two Boulez movements), technical passage work was not always pristine, and the rhythmic flow faltered a time or two; but the composer's often whimsical intentions were as clear as if Debussy had been standing there to explain them.

No one expected the Orchestra Hall concert of Boulez's Ensemble InterContemporain to outdo the spectacle of *Repons* the evening before, and yet its programming made it seem even more anticlimactic than was necessary. Too, Orchestra Hall's acoustics were not kind to the fragile pieces Boulez had chosen, and much was lost in the way of articulation. He conducted Varese's *Octandre* as though he were not very committed to it, softening its edges and failing to maintain tension through its steely sonorities. Boulez's own 1984 sextet *Derive* was a pretty, gentle little thing, each instrument reflecting the others' tremolos in shadowy

images. Brief and rather fluffy, it was a little disappointing coming from the composer of *Repons* and *Dialogue*. The *Antiphysis* of French composer Hugues Dufourt, while better than its horrendous program notes appeared to promise, seemed programmed more for political than musical reasons. Gently ambient at first, it began with a rumbling, indistinct background over which soloist Sophie Cherrier played a series of piccolo trills (more "figures"). Soon enough, the piece erupted into clichés: first the obligatory key clicking and blowing into the flute, then unusually ugly, crescendoing brass chords with bass-drum punctuation, ending with an overlong series of piccolo and flute cadenzas with little expressive effect. An instrumental showpiece rather than a major work, it seemed to suggest that the generation after Boulez's has not found serialism as powerful an impetus.

Though its shape meandered vaguely, Elliott Carter's *Penthode* was actually among that composer's more accessible works. Its subdued, never-ending, never-cadencing polyphony reminded one at times of an atonal 15th-century mass, but the percussive outbursts and climaxes that grew from no audible impetus eventually wore down this listener's patience. Luckily, the concert ended as the week had

begun, with an exquisite and definitive performance. Hearing Boulez conduct the Schönberg *Kammersymphonie* is like hearing Bruno Walter conduct Mahler's Ninth: an interpretation closely in touch with the work's source. Associated with this work for decades, Boulez must by now know its every problem and every possible solution. With characteristically brisk approach, he conducted the work much as he has on recordings, dwelling little on its sentimental moments, but with a little more expansiveness, a more flowing sense of tempo than earlier in his career. Instrumental balance is frightfully difficult to achieve in this symphony, and this was the first performance I'd heard of it (the fourth in Chicago within 25 months) in which I heard not only the melody in every measure, but some secondary lines of which I hadn't previously been aware. Like *Repons*, it was an audible moment of history.

You need not wait for my year-end wrap-up to know that the Boulez U.S. Tour '86 (why didn't they sell T-shirts?), and in particular *Repons*, was the most exciting and significant musical event of 1986, for many reasons. Repeating a phrase I heard many times this week, though, I'm Boulezed out. And so, if you've read this far, are you.

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