

Pierre Boulez, when I spoke with him last October, conceded, "Pure serialism is dead, but it has pervaded a way of thinking. We went from this [classical] world to another world. [Now] I can work in a very free way, and at the same time control things. And that is what I am always looking for, to be free at any moment to accept new ideas and inspirations, and at the same time to have them fit into the language. In the strict serial language, you were *obliged* to write a note. And that was something I didn't think could fit every situation."

For Boulez, the Webernesque strictures of early serialism were a tunnel through which music had to pass to emerge as a new, cleansed language. Yet, in the works Boulez brought to New York with his Ensemble InterContemporain June 15 to 18, as part of the first annual Arts Festival That Ate New York, I heard a serialism reconciled to an unaccountably modest destiny. The movement's early propaganda (still scripture in Babbitt's America) was that the subordination of each note to a collective structure made the individual note hypermeaningful. Currently, even in Boulez's recent music, serialism has faded into a method for generating interesting *textures*, and the idea of notes efficiently functioning on multiple levels has been quietly dropped. What once promised us a musical analogue to *Finnegans Wake* now merely tickles the ear. Trained by Cage and Adorno to read political meaning into musical structures, I'm always disappointed (though hardly surprised) that the clear-cut analogy between serialism and communism is never acknowledged by the practitioners of either. Both give great parades, neither likes to grant importance to the individual.

Boulez, once prepared to consign non-12-tone composers to history's ashbin, has mellowed from serialism's Lenin into its Gorbachev, though signs of (Philip?) *glasnost* remain subtle. Heidegger out-

Pierre Boulez

Without a Hammer

BY KYLE GANN

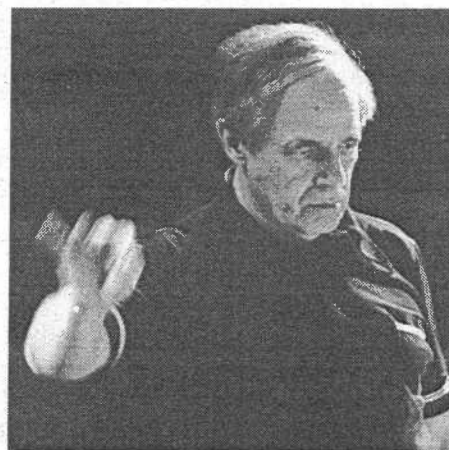
lined serialism's course when he said "Great things begin great and then decline." What proved it was the classic *Le marteau sans maître* June 15 at the Museum of Modern Art, which exerted the most powerful presence of the week's concerts. (I would have excepted Messiaen's *Oiseaux Exotiques* had not Boulez conducted it so coldly.) Tossed off by Phyllis Bryn-Julson and the Ensemble

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almost without glancing at the score, *Le marteau's* opaque, polyphonic panels radiated chutzpah, the brilliant arrogance of 1955 that cared not whether its new language was translatable. (Not until 1977 was L. Kobyakov able to determine that the piece is, indeed, serial.)

By contrast, the other Boulez works performed were small and timid: partially, I suspect, because in America he seems loathe to throw pearls before swine. At BAM's Majestic Theater June 17, *Dérive* was a pretty flurry of similar gestures, *Memoriale* a lithe, virtuoso flute cadenza with soft string chords as background. On June 18 Boulez conducted the New York Philharmonic in *Notations*, the 1978 orchestration of a 1945, preserial piano piece that he likes to tour with apparently because it offers maximum fireworks for minimum rehearsal. Other works—Edison Denisov's *Hommage à Pierre* and Franco Donatoni's reactionary *Cadeau*—were hardly more substantial.

Technology seems a more rewarding route at the moment, and Tristan Mur-



ROBERT BOYD

Boulez: pearls before swine?

ail's *Désintégrations*, also conducted by Boulez at BAM, was the most successful electroacoustic illusion I'd heard. Murail's secret was that, rather than alternate computer and orchestral sonorities, he blended them, lending body to string and brass effects with loud, synthesized chords. When a cymballike computer tone merged seamlessly with a flute harmonic, when hardly audible electronic drones made the strings sound twice as numerous as they were, the *trompe d'oreille* Davidovsky has so long sought was finally achieved.

The youngest generation to embrace serialism, however, seems lacking in conviction. The week's most telling moment came in (b. 1961) Marc-André Dalbavie's *Diadèmes*, a messy mélange of violent textures. Chaotic brass blasts eventually gave way to quiet woodwind timbres like

those in Schoenberg's *Summer Morning by a Lake*. Like so many recent American serial works by Wuorinen and others, *Diadèmes* lapsed briefly into a tonal section of four-note repetitions, as though minimalism were a commodity that could be stuck in a few measures at a time without affecting the overall fabric. A Burger King in Red Square could have made no more obvious a point. The Boulez-happy crowd, who would have braved to hear *le maître* cough, let alone conduct, gave *Diadèmes's* composer seven curtain calls, but the piece was cluttered and unfocused.

These were beautiful performances of old works and of new works reminiscent of old works, but one listened in vain for any sign that the philosophy of *On Music Today* has gotten a second wind. Hemmed in by an ideology being deserted by Europe's best young composers, insistent that every new inspiration must "fit the language," Boulez has inevitably lost touch. His snipe at minimalism as "an appeal to people who are not musically cultivated" strikes a painful note of truth, but continental composers he seems unaware of have managed to avoid Scylla as well as Charybdis: Giancarlo Cardini (Europe's most fascinating new composer, judging from his American tour last December), Gerhard Stäbler, Walter Zimmermann, Chris Newman, Nicolaus Huber, Luca Lombardi, Laszlo Sary. It's unreasonable to ask even a brilliant composer to look beyond his generation's prejudices; but one hates to realize that even Boulez has finally become—dare one say it?—*Le maître sans marteau*.

It's been a long time since the Arditti Quartet played Oliver Lake's fabulous *Input* at Merkin Hall. In the meantime I reviewed Leroy Jenkins, and since the first time I ever heard either Lake or Jenkins was in a duet together, I transposed their names two weeks ago and attributed the quartet to Jenkins. My apologies.

Laser
Genesis

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—THIS WEEKEND!—
THE RUSSIANS ARE COMING!