

Pierre Boulez and a Discursive Twelve-Tone Practice

by Sangtae Chang

In a letter to John Cage, dated January 1950, Pierre Boulez emphasized the need for a new approach to composition while dismissing his early works as insignificant:

Meeting you made me end a “classical” period with my quartet, which is well behind me now. Now we have to tackle *real* “delirium” in sound and experiment with sounds as Joyce does with words. Basically – as I am pleased to discover – I have explored nothing as yet and everything remains to be looked for in fields as varied as sound, rhythm; orchestra, voices; architecture. We have to achieve an “alchemy” in sound (see Rimbaud) to which all I have done so far is merely a prelude and which you have greatly clarified for me.¹

Although Boulez invoked here a historical perspective that implies periodization of his early compositions, it remains unclear whether he actually suggested what may thread together his early compositions, or merely categorized them with a pejorative term. By taking into account important biographical events, personal correspondence, and published essays, however, I propose that Boulez’s reference to a “classical” period serves a chronological frame for his twelve-tone practice from 1945 to 1949, which manifests a deliberate endeavor to come to terms with tenets of twelve-tone compositions by Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and Alban Berg.

Boulez’s interest in twelve-tone composition was stimulated by hearing for the first time Schoenberg’s *Wind Quintet* op. 26 conducted by René Leibowitz in a concert at the house of Claude Halphen in February 1945.² Immediately following the concert, Boulez sought Leibowitz for informal instruction of twelve-tone composition.³ While his association with Leibowitz continued well into 1946, Boulez completed at least five twelve-tone compositions, including the *Thème et variations pour la main gauche*, the *Quatuor* for four Ondes Martenot, *Douze notations*, the *Sonatine* for flute and piano, and the *Première sonate* for piano.⁴

Boulez’s compositional output was momentarily interrupted by his trip to South America to accompany the *Compagnie Madeleine Renaud – Jean-Louis*

Barrault as music director from April to August 1950. His urge to explore a new approach to composition, first expressed in the letter to Cage (January 1950), took nearly a year to materialize. It was only at the end of 1950 that Boulez began to address specific compositional concerns that eventually led to the development of a short-lived phenomenon called “total serialism”; in a letter to Cage, dated December 30, 1950, Boulez suggested ways in which to organize rhythm, transform a pitch-class organization by exploring quarter-tones, and theorize about an organization of the entire audible sound frequencies.⁵

The frame of Boulez’s twelve-tone practice appears sharply articulated by his encounter with a twelve-tone composition in 1945 and by his orientation toward serialism that had gradually materialized since 1950. Although it remains premature to delineate the general outcome of such a practice, two contemporaneous essays – “The Current Impact of Berg” and “Proposals” – suggest what may have conditioned Boulez’s twelve-tone practice. The “Current Impact of Berg” projects Boulez’s antagonism to his contemporaries, especially Leibowitz who, according to Boulez, failed to recognize anachronism in Berg’s compositions.⁶ In contrast, “Proposals” focuses on technical concerns, especially the ways in which to integrate rhythmic developments he inherited from his predecessors, such as Stravinsky and Messiaen, with rigorous contrapuntal textures.⁷

Antagonism to tradition, which surfaces most prominently in the negation of the predecessors and contemporaries who esteemed them, is a common thread between the two essays. Nonetheless, this antagonism appears paradoxically interwoven with adherence to tradition, as manifested in the organicist metaphor of theoretical accounts. The organicist metaphor is not suggested superficially in the mere use of terms like “embryo” or “cell.” Rather, it constitutes an intrinsic part of conceptualization. For example, regarding the *Subitement tempo rapide* section of the *Tempo scherzando* part of the *Sonatine*, Boulez wrote in “Proposals” as follows:

This is part of an athematic passage, where the development [of rhythmic cells] proceeds without the support of characteristic contrapuntal cells. We can see that the rhythmic cells are formed by a ternary rhythm in rational or irrational values (...) an embryonic rhythm suitable for multiple combinations. From different sequences of these cells, I produce three different rhythms (...). Since these rhythms are not of equal length (...) their superpositions do not correspond exactly, and in this way we derive the maximum possible variation from the ternary pattern.⁸

When Boulez addressed the generation of large rhythmic structures by variously combining rhythmic cells, he invoked an organic growth metaphor, suggesting an inherent relationship between the rhythmic cells and the large rhythmic structures generated from them. The particular choice Boulez made to combine rhythmic cells is referable neither to the organic growth potential inherent in the rhythmic cells, nor to an inevitable choice that dictates the generation of extended rhythmic structures. Rather, it articulates the way in

which Boulez conceptualized the generation of large rhythmic structures from an organicist perspective.

The paradoxical fusion of antagonism and adherence to tradition coincides with a compositional anomaly exemplified in early twelve-tone compositions, such as *Douze notations*, the *Sonatine*, and the *Première sonate*, whose individual twelve-tone usage and formal conception disallow the conventional style-distinct, evolutionary perspective for their interpretation.⁹ Such a predicament may very well suggest a discursive compositional practice in which the composer had constantly endeavored to assert himself against the burdensome accomplishments of the predecessors.

- 1 *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, ed. by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, trans. Robert Samuels, Cambridge 1993, p. 45.
- 2 Dominique Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, trans. Susan Bradshaw, Cambridge 1991, p. 15.
- 3 For study purposes, Boulez appears to have copied out published scores of twelve-tone compositions that Leibowitz owned. For a brief description, see *Pierre Boulez: Musikmanuskripte*, Inventare der Paul Sacher Stiftung, Nr. 3, Winterthur 1988, pp. 22–23.
- 4 Boulez participated in a concert directed by Leibowitz at the Paris Conservatoire in December of 1945 and even dedicated the *Première sonate* for piano to Leibowitz. This dedication appears crossed out on a “scrap” paper used to cover the sketches for the first version of *Le Visage nuptial*; I would like to thank Robert Piencikowski for clarifying this matter.
- 5 *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, pp. 80–90.
- 6 Pierre Boulez, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, trans. Stephen Walsh, Oxford 1991, pp. 183–187.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–54.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 52–53.
- 9 For discussion of the twelve-tone usage and formal conception of these pieces, see my dissertation, *Boulez’s Sonatine and the Genesis of His Twelve-Tone Practice*, University of North Texas 1998, and my article, “Row Segments and Their Networks in Pierre Boulez’s First Sonata for Piano, the First Movement,” in *In Theory Only* (forthcoming).