

How Necessity Fueled Invention in Boulez's *L'Orestie*

by Joseph Salem

Despite being Pierre Boulez's most ambitious theatrical work, *L'Orestie* (1955) was composed amidst a flurry of other activities. The work was commissioned by the Compagnie Madeleine Renaud – Jean-Louis Barrault, where Boulez held the position of music director. Barrault began sketching the drama in earnest as early as 8 August 1954, just as he, Boulez, and the theater troupe were returning from a long tour abroad. Despite Barrault's enthusiasm, considerable effort was required to produce a translation of the stage work and to generate a rehearsal schedule before the onset of the new season's demands. An "impossibly ambitious schedule" set the first dress rehearsal for 16 December 1954, although the premiere was delayed until May 1955.¹ Meanwhile, Boulez returned from the tour exhausted, with existing commitments in Darmstadt and Cologne, pending deadlines for *Le Marteau sans maître*, and a lack of motivation to begin an ambitious work for the theater.

Nonetheless, Boulez strove to meet Barrault's expectations, even exceeding his colleague's demands in a number of ways. Not only did Boulez compose *L'Orestie* in time for its continual revision in rehearsals, but he composed much more music than was needed. Of the two principal manuscripts, the shorter, performed version extends to over 158 pages, while some individual numbers in the original score run over fifty percent longer, reaching "almost operatic dimensions."² For any serial composer, this rate of production is rapid; for Boulez, it is totally unprecedented.

A single set piece from *L'Orestie* showcases the mélange of compositional aids used by Boulez to speedily complete the work, including a mixture of new and unusual documents such as vocal particelle, borrowed harmonic

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- 1 The phrase and timeline are borrowed from Peter O'Hagan, "Pierre Boulez and the Project of 'L'Orestie,'" *Tempo*, 61 (2007), no. 241, pp. 34–52. See also Martin Zenck, "Pierre Boulez' *Orestie* (1955–1995): Das unveröffentlichte Manuskript der szenischen Musik zu Jean-Louis Barraults Inszenierung der Trilogie im Théâtre Marigny," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 60 (2003), no. 4, pp. 303–32.
- 2 This information is distilled from O'Hagan (see note 1), p. 45.

Example 1

outlines, and melodic incipits. Despite following a rather predictable progression from basic pitch materials to an elaborate pencil draft, *Les Euménides* 19 (Finale) does not feature a predetermined structure, nor a dodecaphonic basis. Instead, Boulez first sketched the vocal parts of the work, then added harmonies, and finally expanded the “Finale” using substantial borrowings from the *Séquence* matrix of *blocs sonores* (a matrix that was first used in *Symphonie mécanique* and later in the *Troisième sonate*, among other works). Significantly, each step in Boulez’s compositional process provided additional opportunities to revise the vocal parts and the large-scale form of the work. Boulez used these opportunities to impart a clear pitch centricity and a sustained musical trajectory to the “Finale”; he also added an instrumental refrain that breathed new life into his conception of the form, with lasting repercussions.

Plate 1 is an early, relatively complete *particella* of the “Finale” verses that provides a number of insights into the gestation of this important number; the facsimile is partially transcribed and annotated in *Example 1*.³ At the top of the sketch, a short introduction comprises a *blocs sonores* sequence (“B”) from the *Séquence* matrix. The vocal line is derived separately, and includes edits and additions to the melodic material throughout. In the facsimile, Boulez ends each vocal line with a different fragment of the introduction, starting with the first chords of the “B” sequence and progressing through to the last fermata as the verses unfold; later, in the final pencil draft, these short references are expanded into substantial instrumental interludes or refrains. Finally, the vocal line is harmonized with more *blocs*

3 This sketch also directly connects the organizational and pitch material of the “Finale” with *Improvisation III*, “Bulles de temps,” as a numerical pattern in the bottom margin of the sketch is used to expand both works.

Handwritten musical score for Pierre Boulez's *Orestie* (1955), sketch (Mappe G, Dossier 1c3, Pierre Boulez Collection). The score consists of multiple staves with complex notation, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings. There are several systems of staves, some with lyrics written below them. The handwriting is dense and includes various annotations and corrections. At the bottom right, there is a rectangular box containing a barcode-like pattern and the text "EDITIONS MAX ESCKA".

Plate 1: Pierre Boulez, *Orestie* (1955), sketch (Mappe G, Dossier 1c3, Pierre Boulez Collection).

sonores from the *Séquence* matrix; these are partially elaborated as musical figures in the first full system, but appear as basic “chords” throughout the rest of the particella. While far from typical for Boulez, the layout of this sketch as a vocal line above a short score is surprisingly familiar to any scholar of opera, theater, or song, perhaps signaling the composer’s own familiarity with such works despite his relative silence about them in his writings from this period.

Although clearly an early conception of the “Finale,” this document was probably not the first sketch of the number. *Examples 2* and *3* represent at least two other versions of this same material in the *L’Orestie* manuscripts;

Example 2 is a musical score consisting of four systems of bass clef staves. Each system contains a single melodic line with complex rhythmic patterns, including many eighth and sixteenth notes, and several triplet markings (indicated by a '3' above a bracketed group of notes). The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Example 2

Example 3 is a musical score showing two systems, labeled A and B. System A consists of two staves: the top staff is a vocal line with a few notes and rests, and the bottom staff is a bass clef accompaniment line with a simple harmonic line. System B consists of three staves: the top staff is a vocal line with a melodic line and rests, the middle staff is a bass clef accompaniment line with a rhythmic pattern, and the bottom staff is another bass clef accompaniment line with a similar rhythmic pattern. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Example 3

the first is transcribed from an incomplete particella that makes space for harmonizations but remains entirely blank in this regard, while the second resembles a small bit of marginalia at the base of a fair copy choral part for

another section of the work.⁴ Surprisingly, the chronologically first sketch is likely an incomplete *particella*, while the second “*marginalia*” sketch is likely a series of edits and changes. Two important elements distinguish the sketches from one another. First, the “*marginalia*” sketch uses small motives at the top to arrange the register and pitch content of the vocal parts (labeled “A” by the present writer) – this creates a motion from B natural to B flat in the first half of the sketch (labeled “B”), and a continual affirmation of B natural in the polyphonic second half (not shown). Second, this sketch also features several resting points – all of which land on B flat or B natural – that not only clarify the phraseology of the verse, but also provide places to insert the instrumental refrains in the final draft.

The differences between *Examples 2* and *3* also clarify the function and chronological placement of *Plate 1*. Boulez almost certainly produced this sketch between the incomplete *particella* (*Example 2*) and the “*marginalia*” sketch (*Example 3*). This is because the sketch revises the vocal parts of the earlier *particella* and adds instrumental interludes at the end of each verse, but it lacks the more precise pitch revisions, polyphonic ending, and periodic sustains of B flat and B natural found in the “*marginalia*” revisions. In effect, it seems that *Example 2* was an early attempt at a *particella* sketch for the movement, and that *Plate 1* followed close behind as a redesigned *particella*. Then, Boulez likely envisioned a pitch centrality in the “*Finale*,” endowing the vocal parts with a strong B-natural centrality and a polyphonic coda in *Example 3*. Subsequently, in preparing the final pencil draft, Boulez combined features of *both* the sketch shown in *Plate 1* and the “*marginalia*” sketch rather than using one or the other. This combination reaffirms the harmonic importance of the instrumental refrains on the one hand, and the pitch centrality and vocal polyphony on the other.

As with the vocal line, revisions to the instrumental refrains also endow the “*Finale*” with a distinct musical and dramatic trajectory. This musical idea first appears in the cadence-like phrase endings of the second *particella* (i.e., *Plate 1*), where fragments of the original introduction and “B” sequence *blocs sonores* round off each vocal phrase. In the pencil draft of the “*Finale*,” Boulez magnifies the role of these interludes, intensifying each refrain from mere harmonic references to the introduction to expanded climaxes on sustained chords. This change in role is evidenced by the first “refrain,” which actually serves as a brief return to stability after the new, extended instrumental introduction of the final pencil draft. Here, the refrain features sustained trills on just three notes in the winds, followed by separate chords from the “B” *blocs sonores* sequence in the harp and vibes. By the third re-

4 The sketch in question shares its staff paper with ink fair copies for the second choir parts from *Les Euménides*. This may serve to indicate the breakneck speed of Boulez’s work, where fair copies of earlier numbers of the last act were being produced before the final number was even drafted.

The image shows a musical score for a chamber ensemble. The instruments listed on the left are Fl, Htb (Flute, Horn), Cl, Trp (Clarinet, Trumpet), Hp (Harp), Vib (Vibraphone), Cloches (Cymbals), Glock (Glockenspiel), and [voices]. The score is written in 7/8 time and consists of several measures. The Fl, Htb part features a complex melodic line with trills and slurs. The Cl, Trp part has a similar melodic line. The Hp part has a rhythmic accompaniment. The Vib part has a melodic line with trills. The Cloches part has a few notes. The Glock part has a melodic line with a trill. The [voices] part has a melodic line with trills. The score is transcribed in a way that shows the relationship between the instruments and the voices.

Example 4

frain of the “Finale” – transcribed here as *Example 4* – this model is greatly expanded as a series of dancing trills bouncing from staff to staff, slowly permeating all registers of the ensemble until they coalesce into resonant columns of sound that recall the original refrain. Significantly, the third refrain is placed in an important structural position between the monophonic vocal parts of the verses and polyphonic ones of the ending. Appropriately, the final verse leads not to another trilling refrain, but to over twenty measures of consecutive chords that elaborate upon the homophonic textures and *blocs sonores* borrowings of the introduction. The progression from chords to polyphonic elaborations and back highlights Boulez’s use of the *blocs sonores* in *L’Orestie* more generally: first as block harmonies, then as polyphonic figuration, and finally as sequences of bell-like resonances,

bringing the work to an end while evoking the ringing conclusion to *Les Noces*.⁵

All of these devices signal an important shift for Boulez, where borrowed material (primary the *blocs sonores*) altered the design of his vocal sketches and provided for the expansion of the refrains in the “Finale.” Of course, the innovations were likely the result of circumstantial pressures: a necessary invention by the composer to meet the rehearsal demands of Barrault’s schedule. That they eventually led to the repetitive harmonic cycles of works like *Dérive* and the recurring, trilling refrains of *Mémoriale* (... *explo-sante-fixe* ... *Originel*) illustrates their lasting relevance as a *musical*, rather than merely practical, tool for the composer.

⁵ I thank Robert Piencikowski for highlighting the aural resonances of *Les Noces* in Boulez’s works.