

strange, so oddly out of time they seem more like puppets enacting ideas than real people. “There must always have been Van Vechten and they won’t suddenly stop existing,” says de Vere, “because the nature of the characters never changes.”

Recently I stood with a Spanish friend looking out across the Andalusian village where he lives from a vantage point high above the houses. “I can tell you which side every family was on in the war,” he said, pointing out the rooftops, “though we never talk about it now.”

That silence, a breeding ground for villainy in *Thus Bad Begins*, is the product of an agreement made in 1970s Spain to prevent any prosecutions for abuses carried out after the Civil War. The consequences of the

“Pact of Forgetting” are a source of unease in modern Spain though Mariás—who writes a weekly newspaper column—believes it enabled Spain to operate “like a normal country.” The accompanying silence has been more dangerous, allowing too many people to hush up their Fascist pasts and reinvent themselves as socialists. Never was there such a “mass display of turncoater” as in the decades following the war, says de Vere.

There’s a palpable anger about the iniquity of those “turncoats” in *Thus Bad Begins* that seems to come directly from the author, and sometimes sits awkwardly with the thriller-like tone of the novel. That space in which Mariás carries out his experiments in human behaviour so rarely admits the intrusion of real historical

events. Then again, those “real-life” examples of deception, villainy and intrigue perfectly fit the author’s thesis—that history is untrustworthy, that “the past has a future we never expect.”

It’s a rare trick to pull off, this combination of suspense, analysis and metaphysics that aims both high at the brow and low at the gut—and a gift to his publishers. They get to market this literary, Nobel-mooted, translated fiction under the tagline “SEX, SECRETS AND LIES IN MODERN MADRID” without the merest suspicion of duplicity—if such a thing is ever really possible.

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## The path to total purity

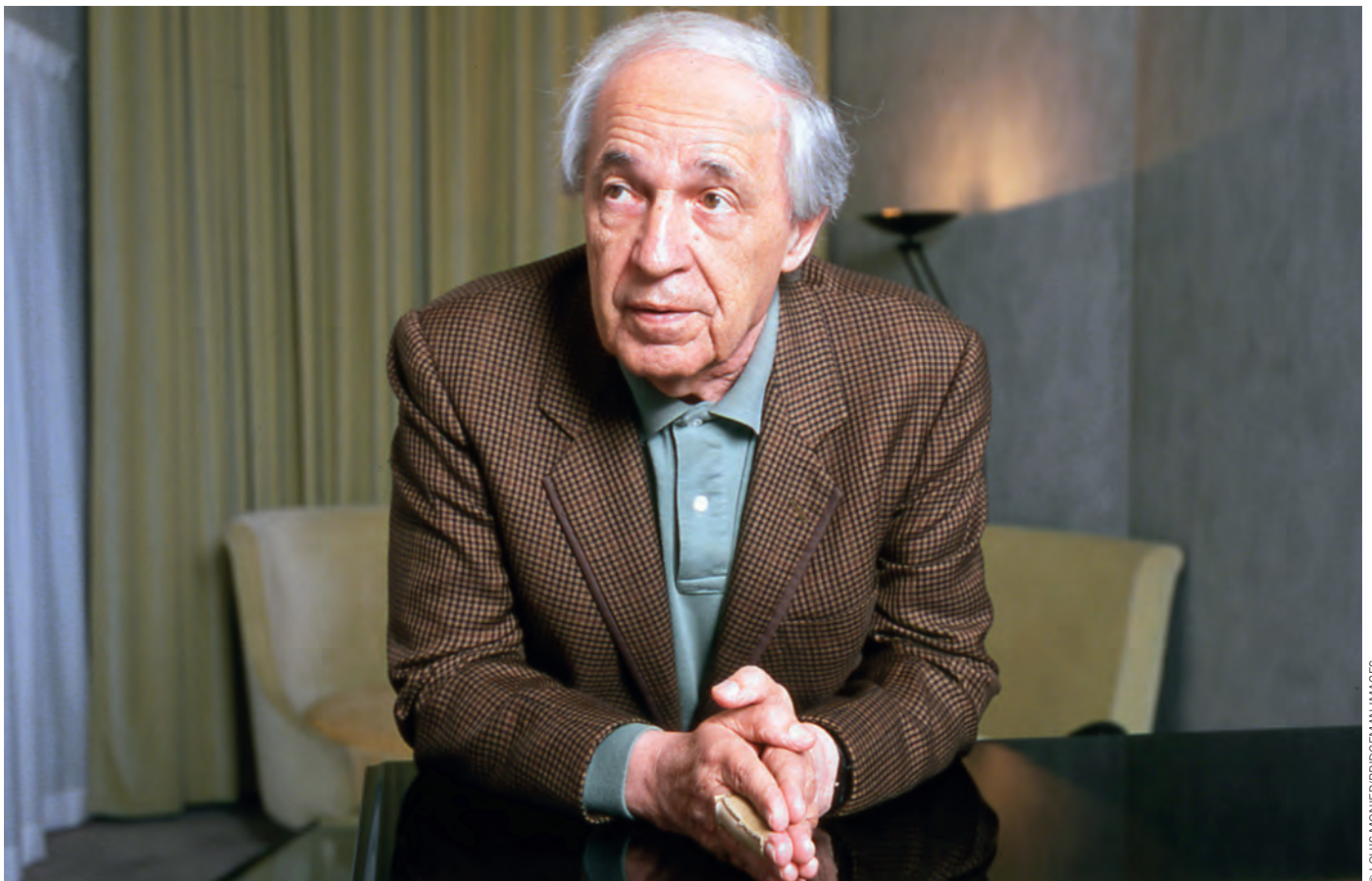
Pierre Boulez’s musical works were a beautifully decorated cul-de-sac, says *Ivan Hewett*

The death in January of Pierre Boulez at the age of 90 robbed the musical world of a great conductor, a brilliant polemicist and an agitator for musical modernism. He was also a charismatic and intransigent human being—charming and generous to

those who shared his vision, but prepared to thwart those who did not.

That much is certain about Boulez. But there is also his other role, the one he would surely like to be remembered by: as a composer. Here the situation is less cer-

tain. His music was a part of his grand project to yoke all of contemporary music to the modernist ethos. He would lead the way, through his activities as conductor of major orchestras, head of a research institute and as a composer—and he fully ▶



Charismatic and intransigent: Pierre Boulez in 2004



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Boulez's compositions were "sinuous and glittery"

expected the other Young Turks of post-war modernism like Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luciano Berio to march in step with him. Certainty had dissolved, the old hierarchies had crumbled and everyone had to work out their own salvation. According to Boulez, to adopt the musical grammar and manners of the past was reprehensible escapism.

If Boulez was right, then reprehensible escapism is now the condition of both classical and pop music. The past has never been more in vogue. "Will pop eat itself?" is a question often asked, as old pop albums haunt the charts and younger bands echo their elders. The outpouring of grief over David Bowie's death is surely bound up with this sense that pop's great days are behind it. The question could be asked about film music too, where the gestures of the genre's golden age come round again and again. And it could be asked about classical music, where to be obsessed with the past, and to weave references to it into one's own music, is almost *de rigueur*.

Some of this could justly be described as escapism. But not every reference to the past is reprehensible. On the contrary, it could be said that without some coherent connection to the past, artistic expression becomes impossible. The great exemplars of modernism, from TS Eliot to James Joyce to Arnold Schoenberg, were in love with the traditions they rebelled against. They proved time and again that a work of art can only join the tradition by reworking it from within. Simply mimicking the surface gestures of a great work leads to stale pastiche.

This would seem to make Boulez's stance a simple misunderstanding. And yet no one understood better than he that novelty and genuine originality are two different things. In one of his shrewder essays, he points out that the numerous imitators of Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle* have vanished into irrelevance. Not even our necrophiliac culture, which would like to drag every forgotten work to light, can revive duds like Emmanuel Chabrier's *Grændoline* or Ernest Chausson's *Le roi Arthur*. Wagner's true heir is actually Claude Debussy, even though his operas reject so much that makes Wagner distinctive. Similarly, the real heir of Johannes Brahms is not the turgid neo-classicism of Max Reger (in some ways closer to Brahms): it's the many-layered, saturated intensity of that scary modernist Schoenberg.

Boulez wanted to be the heir of Schoenberg in the same way—not by imitating the surface of his music, but by divining the tendencies latent within it and bringing them to light. When Schoenberg died in 1951, Boulez wrote a pugnacious article entitled "Schoenberg est mort" in which he pointed out with cruel clarity how the composer had bottled out of his own revolution. Schoen-

berg had thrown out the old tonal grammar, which, as he himself rightly said, produced harmonies that were now irretrievably banal. To replace it, Schoenberg created a new democratic universe, where no key centres held sway. Instead, all 12 semitones were kept in continual play, arranged in a unique order or “row” for each piece. The constant presence of this row, piled up in contrapuntal layers, stacked vertically in chords, and varied by inversion and retrograde presentation, ensured coherence.

Boulez saluted all this as a necessary first step. Where Schoenberg went wrong was clinging to the romantic phraseology of Brahms, and the stale classical forms of Viennese classicism. The result, says Boulez, is a music divided against itself: modern in some parts, old-fashioned in others. It was the responsibility of Boulez’s generation to complete the revolution. “We take up our duties, with intransigence” he declared.

Intransigence in defence of a difficult and unfashionable stance is a wonderful thing, especially when combined with a shrewd instinct about when to give way tactically, keeping the larger strategic goal in view. Boulez had both. When he set up his pioneering concert series *Domaine Musicale* in Paris in 1954, he proved adept at persuading well-heeled Parisians to support it. Later, he proved to be an effective and charismatic leader of institutions, including the BBC Symphony and New York Philharmonic Orchestras, and from 1976 the research institute IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique) created for him in Paris by President Georges Pompidou.

To a degree one finds a similar flexibility of approach in Boulez’s music. His long experience as a conductor made him aware that clever conceptual schemes have to be tailored to what human fingers can play, and human ears perceive. And at the conceptual level, he relaxed the rigid automatism of his 1950s work to allow for what he called “local indiscipline.” The series or row still ruled, but at one or two steps removed from the actual notes.

The increasing flexibility in handling the “rows” was manifested in the sound of the music, which became ever more sinuous and glittery. Boulez once described Debussy’s music as cat-like, and his own music often has that deceiving stillness of a cat outside a mouse hole, ready to pounce at any moment. This tension between a trembling stasis and sudden violent movement is typical of the way Boulez’s music tends towards extremes.

That immediately puts it at odds with the vast majority of the world’s music (including classical music), which lives for the most part in the middle ground. Such things as the tempos, governed by human

measures such as running and ambling, and the range of feeling, which foreswears madness and ecstasy in favour of more familiar emotional states, tell us that a piece of music falls within the range of the normal, however original it may be in many ways.

One might have hoped that, as Boulez foreswore the rigidity of his early music, something of this human richness would enter his music. But it was not to be. His 1974 piece entitled *Rituel*, a stark elegy in memory of his friend Bruno Maderna, was seized on by commentators as a hopeful sign that just such a widening was about to take place. But it was a false dawn. The later pieces reverted to Boulez’s closed world of sudden explosions and sinister stillnesses. They had to, because Boulez’s music remained prisoner to the conviction

**“Boulez pays an enormous price for the much-vaunted coherence of his music. Since everything is obedient to a controlling idea, the messy reality of music is excluded”**

that possessed him in his youth; that every note be obedient to a controlling shape. The serial method, as Schoenberg’s method came to be known, is essentially mechanical; the flexibility Boulez injected into it is no more real than the flexibility of a sophisticated mechanical toy. The multiplicity of pulleys and wheels-within-wheels yields a movement which might at a glance seem as soft and fluid as a living being. But look a little closer and you see it’s still a mechanism.

This is the enormous price Boulez pays for the much-vaunted coherence of his music. Since everything is obedient to a controlling idea the messy reality of music is excluded. Allusion and quotation are ruled out in Boulez’s closed world; he cannot call on anything for support. This is why his one-time comrades in the post-war modernist vanguard turned apostate. They relaxed the rigour of their language, so they could welcome in the world. In the music of Luciano Berio, folk song and the entire history of classical music find a home. Stockhausen declared in the 1970s that “ultimately, one wants to embrace everything.” So their music became open and generous, while Boulez continued, monk-like, along his path of total purity.

This led where it could only lead: a cul-de-sac, though a beautifully decorated and well-appointed one. So much of Boulez’s music appears rapidly decorative: one’s ear,

tickled at first by the darting shimmer of harp and vibraphone and endlessly trilling strings, is soon sated.

And yet, here and there, something deeper emerges. In the early works there’s an annihilating fury which can be invigorating, and in later works we often find the opposite: a gradual withdrawal into extinction at the end of pieces.

There’s a deep relationship between these two things, whose nature is hinted at in an obscure sentence in Boulez’s 1977 essay “Technology and the Composer.” Having argued for the necessity of reinventing musical instruments, whose evolution he says has come to a “disastrous” halt (the essay was basically PR for his new research centre IRCAM), Boulez presents his vision of what composition might be like when revived by new technology. “One can imagine possible works,” he says, “where material and idea are brought to coincide by the final, instantaneous operation that gives them a true, provisional existence.” It’s the blinding flash Boulez is after, the moment of creative “delirium” (one of his favourite words) validated by the clever rationalism underpinning it. It’s the old romantic dream of an art of pure inspiration, expressed in a modernist guise.

It’s an intoxicating prospect. But Boulez’s music shows that the dream is actually an illusion, or a nightmare. It leads to a hollowed-out world, devoid of human substance, where the most primitive impulses of our nature battle it out: angry self-assertion and the desire for oblivion. At its best, Boulez’s music reveals that world with a beautiful, icy lucidity. Whether that’s enough to ensure his music’s survival is doubtful. **■**

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*Mordor, he wrote*