

REMEMBERING PIERRE BOULEZ

1925-2016

Pierre Boulez loomed large in twentieth-century music—as composer, conductor, *philosophe*, champion of the new, and all-around cultural force. The French-born artist worked on a global scale, but a huge part of his career was in the U.S. Here, people who worked with Boulez over many years consider his influence on American orchestras.



Below: Pierre Boulez with Cleveland Orchestra Music Director Franz Welser-Möst backstage during the orchestra's celebration of Boulez's 85th birthday in 2010



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Roger Mastroianni

While music director of the New York Philharmonic, Pierre Boulez experimented with performance formats including “rug concerts” in the mid 1970s, at which seats on the orchestra level were removed and replaced with carpets and cushions.



New York Philharmonic Archives



Below: An undated photo of Cleveland Orchestra Music Director George Szell with Pierre Boulez in front of Severance Hall, home of the Cleveland Orchestra

In 2014, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra saluted Pierre Boulez, its conductor emeritus, with “A Pierre Dream,” a multimedia concert. In addition to music by members of the CSO and others, “A Pierre Dream” featured stage elements by Frank Gehry, video projections by Mike Tutaj, and artistic supervision by Gerard McBurney, creative director of the CSO’s “Beyond the Score” series.

Todd Rosenberg Photography

by Martha Gilmer

Illuminating the Music

Pierre Boulez worked with many American orchestras. Of course notably he was the music director of the New York Philharmonic from 1971 to 1977, and during that time he not only put his familiar stamp on the programming but worked to change the concert experience itself. His “rug concerts” there, with audience members seated casually on the floor of Philharmonic Hall, broke ground by eliminating the formality of the concert and making the entire experience a moment of deep engagement.

His relationship with the Cleveland Orchestra—as principal guest conductor, musical advisor, and frequent conductor—was long and productive, and we have many wonderful recordings that memorialize his work there in key works of the twentieth century.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic was his West Coast home, and his professional relationship with longtime Los Angeles Philharmonic Executive Director Ernest Fleischmann was a turning point for both men. Their abiding respect and friendship was the subject of many of my conversations with Pierre. It was through those trips to Los Angeles, and his many friendships in California, that he became a regular artistic



Don Hunstein



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presence at the Ojai Festival. The work that continues at Ojai to this day is a result of many people, but Pierre Boulez infused it with his ideas about progressive, egalitarian programming.

His work with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra was the last addition to his American orchestra relationships, and it had a lasting impact on the history of the CSO and on Pierre himself. It all began when Ensemble Intercontemporain, the Paris-based contemporary-music group he founded in 1972, came to Chicago for two concerts in February 1986 as part of their U.S. tour. Following those performances, Pierre agreed to come to the CSO as a guest conductor, and he came virtually every year beginning in 1987 through his last performances with the orchestra in 2010. Even after he was unable to conduct the orchestra, he spent long periods of time in Chicago,

and attended every possible performance of the orchestra, of theater, and the opera.

Each of Boulez's early concerts at the CSO was preceded by a lecture. Prior to that time, the only information shared with audiences about a concert was in the form of traditional program notes, which usually included scored musical excerpts. It was assumed that as a member of the audience, you came into the hall with a fair amount of knowledge about what you were going to hear, and a passion for the art form that arose from years of listening.

Boulez did not have that as his first requirement. His stated goal when presenting a concert was to create an atmosphere "that does not intimidate people nor make them feel like imbeciles."

I still remember those very first Boulez concerts with the CSO in the late 1980s—there were lines across the lobby of young people who came to hear his provocative programs and were eager to learn about this new or unfamiliar repertoire, some of which had been written in the earliest days of the twentieth century. I credit Pierre Boulez for instilling in us the desire to communicate in new ways with audiences to make the music come alive, to provide the context in which it was composed, and to illuminate the music in a way that is engaging and ever-changing.

Pierre's music itself showed his curiosity for the new, and for new ways of looking at the world and at a wide range of music. Whether it was Noh drama, Expressionist poet-

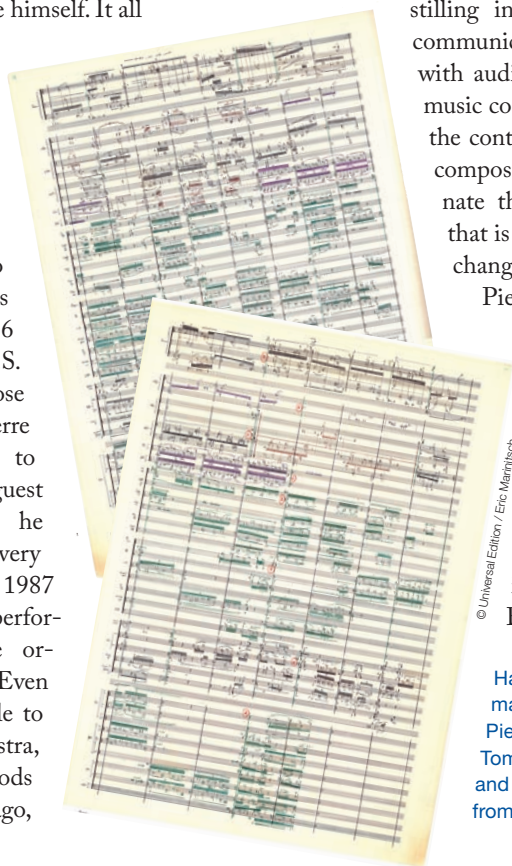


Todd Rosenberg

In 2010, Martha Gilmer, then the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's vice president for artistic planning and audience development, spoke onstage at Symphony Center with CSO Principal Guest Conductor Laureate Pierre Boulez during a musical celebration of his 85th birthday.

ry, or the Japanese court *gagaku* ensemble, he found inspiration in and connection to what he experienced. He was open to such a rich variety of music, while certainly having an opinion on all of it. His work with French theater director and actor Jean-Louis Barrault defined his understanding of the drama of music. His friendship with rock musician Frank Zappa influenced his view on the American musical voice. Wherever he went he was open to being shaped—although his strong aesthetic always prevailed.

Pierre was brilliant in creating provocative and engaging programs. To spend an afternoon watching him shape and create a series of programs for Chicago was so enlightening, and I feel privileged to have been able to work with him in my capacity as the CSO's vice president for artistic planning and audience development for all of his Chicago concerts from 1986 onward. Pierre taught me many things, but two overarching principles stay with me: the first is his perspective on the texture of a concert and of a season. Pierre was always interested in contrast. Whether a single program or an entire season, he was focused on interplay and the tension of one piece to another.



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Handwritten manuscript score by Pierre Boulez for his *Tombeau for soprano and orchestra, No. 5* from "*Pli selon pli*."

The last concert programs that we made together were a perfect example. From the full orchestra score of Debussy's *Jeux* to the solo clarinet of Stravinsky's Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo, he constructed two weeks of musical miniatures juxtaposed with full orchestral works. He was very specific about the groupings, and also about how the players should be seated, and the choreography of moving without applause from one piece to the next. Unfortunately he was unable to conduct these programs, or to come to Chicago to hear them. They were such a tribute to his genius, and I have the original piece of paper with these programs in his handwriting to remind me of his immense creative force.

The other thing that remains for me about Pierre is his insistence that we keep trying new things and taking risks. When I first went to him about the idea that would become the CSO's multimedia *Beyond the Score* productions, he read the concept piece and gave it his blessing. Later, he would conduct one of the very first *Beyond the Score* projects, focusing on Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin*. He was completely engaged in the process, insisting on adding several new dimensions to Gerard McBurney's already complex script in order to bring in additional influences on Bartók. He believed in our work, and was present for an additional two *Beyond the Score* productions in Chicago.

If Pierre were still with us he would be encouraging us to never stop trying to connect the power of music, its mystery and its history, to the audience and to the performers. He believed deeply in the importance of how music is placed in context, in space, and in time. Although Pierre is no longer physically with us, his wisdom and his spirit will always guide those of us who were lucky enough to know and learn from him. I will always feel his presence and his encouragement to keep evolving, to take risks, to imagine what comes next. About our work together, Pierre once said to me, "You must be faithful." To you, Pierre, I could be nothing but.

MARTHA GILMER is chief executive officer of the San Diego Symphony Orchestra. She worked at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for over three decades, where she served as the Richard and Mary L. Gray vice president for artistic planning and audience development.



American composers gathered at Avery Fisher Hall for the farewell performance of Pierre Boulez (far right foreground) as music director of the New York Philharmonic in 1977. Top row (standing): Charles Wuorinen, Carman Moore, Sidney Hodkinson, David Del Tredici, Earle Brown, Steve Reich, Stanley Silverman, John Cage, Elliott Carter. Second row from back: Donald Martino, Donald Harris, Daniel Plante, Morton Gould, Vincent Persichetti, Roy Harris. Third row from back: Assistant Conductor David Gilbert, Stephen Jablonski, Jacob Druckman, Roger Sessions, William Schuman, Aaron Copland. Front row: Milton Babbitt, Lucia Dlugoszewski, Ulysses Kay, George Rochberg, Mario Davidovsky.

COMMENTS FROM OTHERS

JON DEAK

Pierre Boulez came to us as music director in 1971. I had been in the New York Philharmonic less than two years at that time, and he wanted all the probationary members to re-audition for him. Rather than a scary experience, it turned out rather well. He discovered that I was a professional composer as well as a bassist, and it started a relationship where he mentored me in my compositions, even premiering one of my works, and helped me so much as a performer of new music. (There were not many men in the orchestra who liked contemporary music at all in those days!)

Pierre was a conducting protégé of George Szell, who immediately preceded him at the NY Phil. So I think the Philharmonic men—there were only two women then—expected him to be technically severe, as Szell had been. In rehearsals Pierre could be quite relentless and had high standards, often rehearsing one measure eight, nine, ten times until he was



Michael D'Vito

satisfied. But he was a consummate gentleman, never insulting. The results were often crystalline in their effect.

I remember a recording we did of the famous *Daphnis and Chloe* Second Suite. The opening scene, describing the dawn, where the upper woodwinds have a shimmering cloud of 32nd-notes, is usually regarded as an "effect" and passed over in

rehearsal as if the exact notes did not matter. Well! Boulez proceeded to Tune. Each. Note. Precisely. Jaws dropped. Columbia Records held their breath—how much was this going to cost in recording time? But the result was revelatory. It was as if you could envision each ray of the sun coming up over the ocean as the light dawned. If only Ravel could have heard this!

He took his musical directorship seriously. As a measure of his character, he—a leading composer of his generation—refused to program a single work of his own on any subscription concert during his tenure.

Pierre's two great innovations at the Phil were the Rug Concerts and the Prospective Encounters. These were both daring departures from the traditional concert format and both series took down that awful wall dividing the stage and the people of New York City. For the Rug Concerts, the immediate results were twofold: the audience was more intimately involved in the performance (you could see it in their faces) and the acoustic was marvelous, airy, clear!

The other innovative series, the Prospective Encounters, was held at Cooper Union. And here we had Pierre Boulez at his best, and most open. His reputation as a bad boy and rebel of new music in the early post-War era was certainly deserved. But here we saw a different side of the *enfant terrible*: a Boulez relaxed, charming, willing to try anything once—and still with the highest standards of precision, balance, and clarity. He was truly in his element, and we were with him.

JON DEAK was a member of the New York Philharmonic's bass section from 1973 to 2009, and currently holds the position of Young Composers Advocate at the orchestra.

JOELA JONES

I first knew Pierre Boulez in 1969, when he was the Cleveland Orchestra's principal guest conductor. I had just graduated from the Cleveland Institute of Music, and I remember being frightened of him, because he was sort of the bad boy of music, very outspoken. As a conductor, he was extremely demanding—he wanted everything exact, precise. And yet he was always so respectful to everyone when making his demands. He never ever talked down to you. We gave the first



Roger Mastroianni

performances in Cleveland of many, many pieces with him, and those are pieces that we play all the time now. He greatly expanded our repertoire. Yet the precision and simplicity of his beat, his minimal gestures, helped you as a performer to play these difficult works for the first time without any hysteria. I learned so much from him over the years.

His brain and musicianship were phenomenal. Sometimes in rehearsal, we would have a seemingly cacophonous chord in the orchestra, because there were maybe eleven out of the twelve notes being played. And he would be able to say, "Third bassoon, or fourth French horn—it's an E-flat, not an E-natural." We all looked at each other, like, how can he hear that with everything that's going on? He was just incredible. When we did the Elliott Carter Concerto for Orchestra, which is fiendishly difficult, he would have sectional rehearsals—one rehearsal for strings, another for winds, and so on. Everyone practiced like mad, because you would be very exposed in these rehearsals. But Pierre was calm and patient. He would just keep on until you got it. And he was so reliable. If he told you with these difficult meters that he was going to beat it a certain way, you knew that he would.

Preparing the Concerto for Orchestra, I remember saying to him, "I'm not sure how I can do this one section." He was conducting in five, and I had to play thirteen notes in the measure in my right hand, and eleven or nine in my left hand. And he said, "No, Joela, it is simple. See, like this." And with his right hand he did thirteen beats, with his left hand he did nine beats, and he was counting five. It blew my mind. He did it a couple of times with me playing, and I had it. He was right, it was simple if you really put your mind to it. Boulez was so detailed, both

rhythmically and with sound, pitch, articulation. I learned a tremendous amount being in the orchestra with him.

I think he's the only conductor who, when he would return to the Cleveland Orchestra every year, when he walked onstage for the first rehearsal, the orchestra would burst into applause. He was all about the music, there was no ego, no show. He was the most genuine, honest person that I think I have ever met.

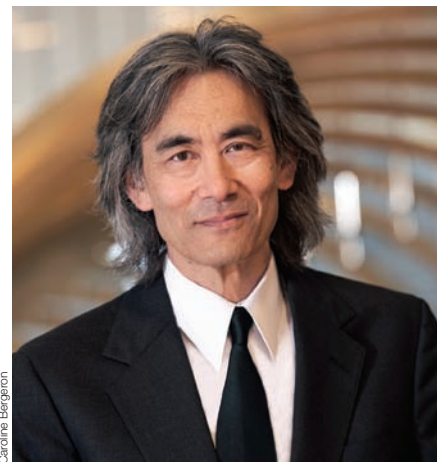
JOELA JONES is principal keyboard of the Cleveland Orchestra.

KENT NAGANO

I was greatly inspired by Pierre Boulez as a composition major in school, and I would go to his concerts when he came to California. We got to know each other when I won a conductor's award that allowed the recipients to choose people with whom to work. I was able to have a very unusual situation, where I worked with Pierre Boulez and Leonard Bernstein simultaneously. That corresponded with the time when I was working intensively with Boulez at his Ensemble Intercontemporain. We became quite close.

He was absolutely brilliant in terms of his abilities as a visionary and his skills as a communicator. He was very courageous in terms of his pioneering concepts of what our musical institutions were and what they could be—they should be oriented towards the future. He was a great inventor, a great composer.

He influenced me immensely. And the list of his influences on the music world is far too much to even think about. He thoroughly influenced the ways that we think about music and especially the roles



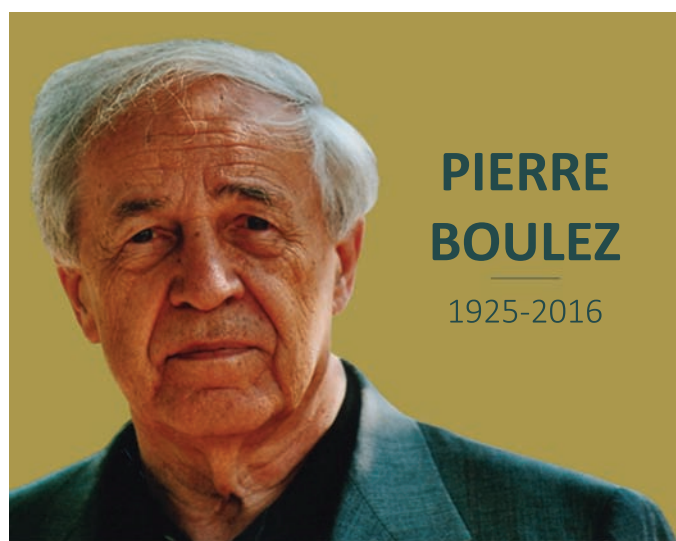
Caroline Bergeson

that music should play today—its social role, its community role, its inspirational role, and, of course, its purely musical role.

Working with Pierre Boulez, one was obliged to become fluent in great literature, great poetry, and the visual arts. For Maestro Boulez, there wasn't a simple categorization of these art forms. One of the funniest things for me was when I conducted his *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*—wonderful masterpieces—with the Ensemble Intercontemporain. Boulez visited me backstage after the performance and said, "Yes, well, that was very good. Of course you've read the works of Stéphane Mallarmé." I hesitated and said, "Well, a little bit, in the English translation." And Maestro Boulez said, "You've never read them in French?" And I said, "No, I've never had the chance." He didn't respond. At the second concert, he came backstage and said, "Yes, very good. I'd like to give you a present." He took out an enormous, very heavy box and presented it to me. It was the complete works of Stéphane Mallarmé. His expectation was that I would not only read it but would be able to converse about it with him. This was a profound learning experience: if you're conducting a work based on the aesthetics, the rhythms, the structures of Mallarmé, then you should pursue in-depth study of Mallarmé. His real lesson was that you must ask yourself the right questions before you dare to step onto the podium.

I feel very strongly that Boulez will go on like other great conductor-composers—Gustav Mahler, Mozart—and that his music will far outlast those of us who remember him personally.

KENT NAGANO is music director of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.



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Pierre Boulez



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DAVID ROBERTSON

I held Pierre Boulez in incredibly high esteem, and when I studied in London during my college years, I not only got to hear concerts that he conducted, I was able to watch him rehearse over several days. And it was just magnificent. What was funny is to fast-forward eight years, when I was conducting a piece in Paris by one of the composers whose work he supported, Philippe Manoury. There is a part in the piece where the only way you can make it happen is to put down your baton, which I tend to use, and do a Boulez imitation, where each hand is completely independent and making very definite gestures to different parts of the orchestra that are playing at slightly different speeds. I did my Boulez impersonation, and everybody thought that it was good. Imagine my surprise when, after the concert, he shows up in my dressing room. And I thought, *oh, no, now I've done it.* But he was very complimentary, and that was the beginning of the relationship that led, six months later, to him asking me if I would be music director of the Ensemble Intercontemporain. I expected he would try to steer me in specific aesthetic directions, but he left me completely independent. I was able to change the repertoire the ensemble played and open it to a larger group of composers. He was entirely supportive in this.

His whole being was animated by the idea of very high quality. There was consummate preparation on his part. And he very rarely, if ever, made a mistake—it was almost beyond what we think of as human. And yet, it's precisely what you might like in a surgeon or a NASA engineer. That is the kind of standard that Pierre set for himself, and by extension you rose to it. It seemed a natural thing, and that's why he commanded such respect with musicians. What people don't often get is that he was extremely charming, extremely witty, and had a marvelous sense of culture and art.

Pierre came of age as a young musician at a time in which expectations with regard to art music were set in stone. He tried to take the music out of a particular socioeconomic context, and allow it to express the many different things that a complex piece of music can express, whether it's Mozart or Maderna. He was fighting the trappings of what we think of as classical art, rather than the music itself. Pierre was a visionary in almost every regard.

To have the package that Pierre had, you would need Robert Schumann with regard to his abilities as an educator and disseminator of musical prose. You would need Wagner in terms of his ability to recast musical ideas in a radical new form. You would need Mahler in terms of his knowledge of the orchestra and his abilities as a conductor. And you would still need a few others to get the skill set that Pierre Boulez brought to the table. **S**

DAVID ROBERTSON is music director of the St. Louis Symphony.



Jay Fram