

Saturday, 18 March 2017

## **Michel-Donsac/Boulez Ensemble/Roth - Mozart, Boulez, and Schoenberg:, 17 March 2017**

Pierre Boulez Saal

Mozart – Oboe Quartet in F major, KV 370/368b

Boulez – *Le Marteau sans maître*

Schoenberg – Chamber Symphony no.1 in E major, op.9

Donatienne Michel-Dansac (contralto)

Boulez Ensemble

François-Xavier Roth (conductor)

At last: a hall that programmes the concerts I should love to programme – or, perhaps more to the point, not so distant from the concerts Boulez might have programmed. The Pierre Boulez Saal is not Boulez's hall in name only. His vision of a 'salle modulable' extended beyond its dimensions, its physical adaptability. Take a look at Boulez's orchestral programmes for any given year, any given month, and you will be swept away by their mouthwatering promise. For instance, in June 1974, six concerts on six consecutive evenings (!) in New York with its notoriously reactionary Philharmonic Orchestra: (1) Brahms: Symphony no.4; Debussy, *Ibéria*; Bartok, *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta*; (2) Handel, *Music for the Royal Fireworks*; Mozart, Flute Concerto in G major, KV 313/285c; Webern, Concerto, op.24; Varèse, *Octandre*; Ligeti, *Aventures, Nouvelles aventures*; (3) Schumann, Symphony no.2 in C major, op.61; Berg, *Three Movements from the 'Lyric Suite*; Ravel, *Daphnis et Chloé*, Suites 1 and 2; (4) Bach, Brandenburg Concerto no.3; Schubert, Symphony no.2 in B-flat major, D 125; Webern, Symphony, op.21; Boulez, *Improvisations sur Mallarmé* 1 and 2; Stravinsky, *L'Histoire du Soldat*: Suite; (5) Schoenberg, Serenade, op.24; *Ode to Napoleon*, op.41; *Pierrot lunaire*, op.21; (6) Schoenberg, *Verklärte Nacht*, op.4; Berg, *Three Fragments from 'Wozzeck'*; Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*. Bliss it must have been in that dawn to have been alive.

Such, however, is increasingly the case here too. Moreover, with the 'thinking ear' that is the hallmark of this new hall, each and every audience member can and should draw his or her own connections and contrasts, continuities and dialectics, essentially becoming a programmer in his or her own right: 'in real time', as the performance progresses. The doldrums of subscription concerts and their bored subscribers – why would one attend a two-hour performance, irrespective of what was being performed and who was performing it, simply because it was 'on'? – have long deserved to be banished. More than once, they frustrated Boulez, not least in his desire to perform Busoni's *Doktor Faust* in New York. Perhaps now, at long last, we are beginning to make another start.

That will not happen, of course, without excellent performances; indeed, Boulez would recall that one of the banes of his earlier musical life had been well-meaning, yet technically insufficient, performances of new(ish) music, above all that of the Second Viennese School, which did more harm than good. It was one of the reasons he set up the Domaine musical, a forerunner, we might think, of the Ensemble Intercontemporain (on this same evening celebrating its fortieth anniversary in Paris), and of Daniel Barenboim's own Boulez Ensemble, drawn from both the Staatskapelle Berlin and the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, as well as from those teaching at the Barenboim-Said Akademie and guest artists.

Here, this flexible ensemble, under the direction of François-Xavier Roth for the latter two items in the programme, and playing 'simply' as a chamber group for the first, justified the hopes placed in it as an ambassador for this musical mission. In Mozart's Oboe Quartet, the players (Cristina Gómez Godoy (oboe), Yuki Manuela Janke (violin), Volker Sprenger (viola), and Kian Soltani (cello)) drew one in, made one listen, even seduced one into doing so. The acoustic, with its near-ideal blend of clarity and warmth helped, but again, that will come to naught if the performance is not also up to scratch. The difficult path between chamber and concertante work was carefully, or better confidently, trodden, so that the ear's natural inclination to treat the oboe as separate from the strings was neither entirely denied nor indulged. Indeed, subtly shifting balances, always musically justified, were a hallmark of the performance – looking forward, perhaps, to the worlds of Schoenberg and Boulez. Phrasing was always impeccable, but never 'in itself'; one always had a keen sense of response and its necessity, generating form rather than being moulded by a prior formula. The difference between an aria-like slow movement and an actual aria was clear; we heard the oboe (and not just the oboe) as soloist, but we heard what only it could do, rather than an imitation of a singer, however close the kinship. The warmth and, on occasion, involved quality of the so-called 'accompaniment' again looked forward to works later in the programme. Above all, perhaps, each movement, whilst contributing to the whole, had its own 'character', the *Rondeau* finale – a favourite gambit for Mozart – an especial joy in that respect, just so long as one listened.

Donatienne Michel-Dansac joined Roth and his players (Yulia Deyneka (viola), Claudia Stein (alto flute), Lev Loftus (percussion), Pedro Torrejón González (vibraphone), Adrian Salloum (xyloimba), and Seth Josel (guitar)) for that landmark in post-war modernism: Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*. Roth and Michel-Dansac have performed the work together before; their close partnership showed. But first, of course, the ensemble had its say, the 'soloist' not entering until the third of the nine movements. There was nowhere for the players to hide – just like in Mozart – but they had no need of anywhere to hide, their performances duly confident, even commanding. The occasional minor slip or insecurity will trouble almost any ensemble in this fearsomely difficult work, and will in no sense detract from the overall performance. What struck me here was the kinship to Boulez's earlier performances: not so much those 'pointillistic' 1950s readings, although there was perhaps an element of that too, as those of the 1960s and '70s. There was less of a tendency towards what we might broadly, perhaps too broadly, call Romanticism, and more of an emphasis upon the cellular. (It will always, I think, be a matter of degree, but degree matters.) Sometimes one needed to listen especially carefully to make the connections between lines, especially those of different instruments; it was not that the connection was not 'there', or that the listener had to do all the work, but that (s)he was, perhaps by way of contrast rather than connection with Mozart, less of an object of seduction. There was, indeed, a good deal of the shock of the new, or at least the classically new. 'Period' Boulez? I am not sure, but, as the composer's grip over his works recedes into history, the possibility and likelihood of alternative performative strategies seems likely to grow – even, to use an appropriately Boulezian idea, to expand. Silences, intriguingly, seemed to tell as strongly as they might in Bruckner.

Michel-Dansac's performance earlier on, for instance in 'L'artisanat furieux' seemed – and I do not mean this as a value judgement – almost conventionally vocal, as if she were the soloist in a Baroque cantata whose language might be French, but whose inventiveness was that of Bach. If anything, intriguingly, her line seemed simpler, more 'vocal', than one of Bach's might have been, perhaps suggestive of another French tradition: an updated Ramellian, or Ravelian, air? Art conceals art, though, and the complexity of her part revealed itself over time: development of a sort, if not quite how Mozart would have understood it. By the time of the closing double to 'Bel edifice et les pressentiments', she and her part were fully-fledged members of the ensemble. Hierarchy had been questioned and transformed with the means of that time-honoured mode of vocal experimentation: 'tempo libre de récit'. Percussion seemed almost to acquire a voice, just as the voice shed its words. And yet, there was finality too, to a performance well-shaped.

Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony was long a favourite work of Boulez's. Listen to him performing it with his Domaine musical musicians and you will find a bracing reading indeed, almost spoiling for a fight. I heard him conduct the [Scharoun Ensemble](#) (drawn from members of the Berlin Philharmonic) in 2008 in as close to an all-encompassing performance as one could imagine, far more at ease with itself, yet never wanting excitement. Roth likewise seemed to approach the work as a classic – which surely by now it has long been. That is not to imply lazy familiarity, but rather an appreciation of its formal and expressive (the two are inextricably intertwined) greatness, which no longer needed to plead a cause. Every member of the ensemble contributed an incalculable amount; each part proved as crucial as any other. Balance was never an issue – or rather, when it was, it was musically an issue, part of the performance, rather than something detracting from an 'ideal' version thereof. For, just as in Mozart's Oboe Quartet, balances shifted; we looked, or listened, into a future of *Klangfarbenmelodie*, even of Boulez. It was, though, above all the inventiveness of Schoenberg's post-Lisztian transformation of sonata form that provided the drama. Straussian, Wagnerian, Brahmsian harmonies might come and go, refracted by the new uses to which they were put, but the formal propulsion of work and performance were, quite rightly, the principal narrative. This might, to return to that first cited New York performance from Boulez in 1974, have been a Brahms symphony in itself – and in many ways, that is just what it was. Shorn of the accoutrements of the symphony orchestra, work and performance reminded us what the real point of that orchestra and its continuing great tradition might yet be.

Posted by [Mark Berry](#) at 12:41 pm

<http://boulezian.blogspot.de/2017/03/michel-donsacboulez-ensembleroth-mozart.html>