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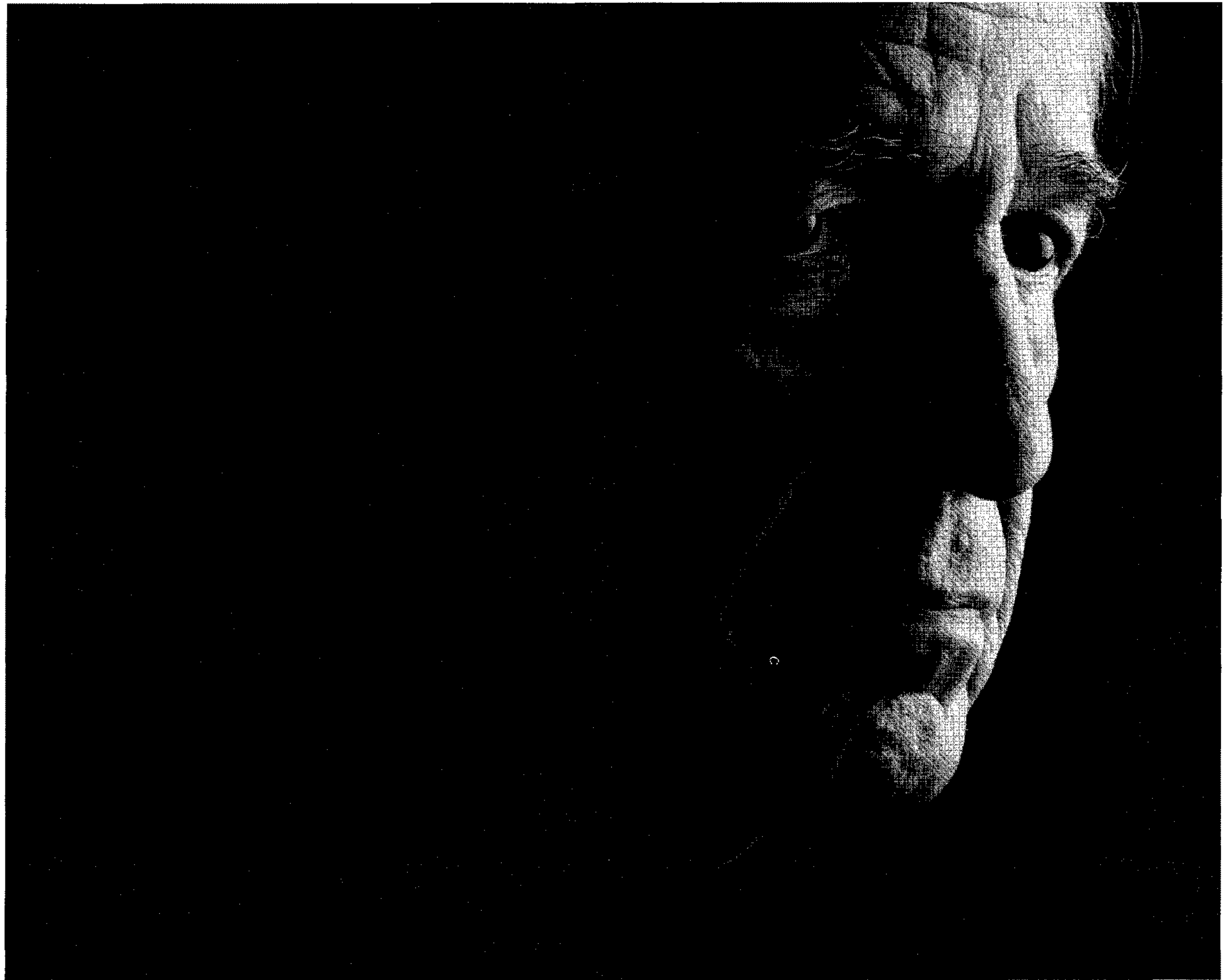
Music's vibrant lion in winter



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LUCERNE, SWITZERLAND

Shunning safe sounds, Pierre Boulez still strives for order in the complex

BY MICHAEL KIMMELMAN

In a maroon turtleneck and loose-fitting gray suit, eyes on his score, Pierre Boulez took turns one late August morning here rehearsing the soloists for "Répons."

Written in 1981 for six soloists, chamber orchestra and live electronics, it is the first major work he wrote using the electronic-music institute in Paris, Ircam. But it has rarely been performed, just a few dozen times.

Now Mr. Boulez had young musicians from the Lucerne Festival Academy on hand. Intimations of jazz, Balinese gamelan, African drumming and Japanese music floated from welters of rapid passage work.

"You are freer there, so to speak," he reminded the harpist where the score mandated improvisation.

"No, no, no, no," he gently chided one of the pianists, adding, consolingly, "It's difficult also for the conductor, believe me."

It sounded nearly impossible, not least when the six soloists finally played together before the rehearsal broke. In-

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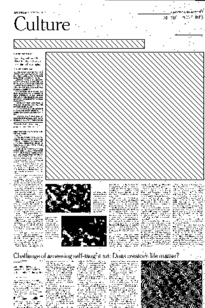

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people are not more creative."

tense complexity created waves of impenetrable sound.

And yet.

It was still somehow clear that what sounded impenetrable would gradually yield up its shape, order and sense. There was a metaphor in this for the whole of Mr. Boulez's career-long embrace of new music.

On Jan. 16, he conducts the Vienna Philharmonic in works by Schoenberg, Webern and Mahler at Carnegie Hall in New York. Daniel Barenboim, who will conduct two other concerts with the orchestra (including music by Mr. Boulez on Jan. 17), is Mr. Boulez's soloist for Schoenberg's Piano Concerto.

It will be a homecoming of sorts for Mr. Boulez, who as Leonard Bernstein's unlikely successor, directed the New York Philharmonic. He has been proving to New Yorkers ever since what they gave up.

He is the last great exponent of European modernism from the generation that emerged after the war. Born in Montbrison, in the Loire, the charmed and charming son of a wealthy factory engineer, a mathematics student turned musician, he attended the Paris Conservatory, where Olivier Messiaen helped introduce him to serialism. An agent provocateur for serial music before graduating and a master of hardball polemics, he caused even anxious luminaries like the aging Igor Stravinsky to feel the need to earn his approval.

"I like virtuosity, although not for the sake of virtuosity but because it's dangerous," was Mr. Boulez's description of "Répons" when we sat down to talk for a few hours after the rehearsal in Lucerne. By danger he meant that music, to be worth anything — which is to say to be new — can't stick to safe ground but must entail some risk and effort.

"If you want to have a more interesting life, you will make some effort," is how he put it. "It's about the organization of one's life. I am still shocked that so many people are not more creative, by which I mean more demanding of themselves.

"The main question we need to ask ourselves is: Do I try to be necessary to the evolution of language? Do I try to be original? And being original means using the tools necessary to be original, not just having the desire to be original."

He was thinking then of John Cage, with whom he had been friendly until they fell out, painfully for Cage. Mr. Boulez, having an entirely more rarefied (some might say angrier or more mandarin or richer or more academic) notion of avant-gardism, decided that the bohemian Cage didn't have the necessary tools.

"Tools are important," Mr. Boulez repeated. "Mallarmé chastised Degas for writing poems. He said, 'You can't just have an idea that you want to write poems. Poems are made out of words.'"

New Yorkers of a certain vintage will recall how, back in the 1970s, Mr. Boulez exasperated some Philharmonic subscribers, old-line critics and not a few of the orchestra players content with the standard fare, by stressing new music, making clear that he wanted to shake up the whole symphony orchestra routine and, in many ways, simply by not being Bernstein. He staged new music performances in various corners of the city to take music to young people where they lived ("guerrilla actions," he now calls them).

In retrospect these were breakthrough events, but Mr. Boulez was fighting an uphill struggle. He arrived already burdened (or burnished, depending on one's perspective) by a reputation as a fierce champion of the most complex postwar scores, which to him clearly held no challenge. His candor and openness disarmed skeptics.

Even so, predisposed against his agenda, detractors insisted on finding him cold and effete, notwithstanding his endless efforts to talk about and make more accessible the music he was advocating, and even though, whether performing Mahler, Messiaen or Mozart, he could conduct with sumptuousness and brilliance and an elegant, almost moral clarity.

More than 30 years later the American symphony orchestra subscription system is still pretty much ossified, if not dying. In retrospect, hiring him was a major gamble by the Philharmonic. His leaving was a historic opportunity squandered.

But that was then. He is 84 now, an elder statesman and globe-trotting maestro of the world's leading ensembles who, despite a tireless energy, says he plans to cut back on conducting soon to spend more time in Paris and at his house in Baden-Baden, Germany, composing. "An affable, even mellow presence," is how Alex Ross described Mr. Boulez in The New Yorker when he came to town for some performances a decade ago, although by affable and mellow Mr. Ross meant "like Brando's Don Corleone."

This was funny, except not quite fair. These days Mr. Boulez is reserved but approachable, forthcoming, reflective and, to a remarkable degree, without vanity. For him it's about the music, only the music. The rest is noise.

"I don't apologize for being on the barricades," he said, recollecting his early days during the late 1940s and early 1950s, when he wrote a notoriously pitiless obituary of Schoenberg, conspicuously booed Stravinsky's music in Paris in 1945 and declared that any musician who had not experienced, as he infamously put it, "the necessity of dodecaphonic music" was "useless" because he is "irrelevant to the needs of his epoch."

"Like a lion that had been flayed alive," was Messiaen's description of the young Mr. Boulez.

"You never get results if you aren't fighting," Mr. Boulez now says. "I understand better other points of view, although I still may fight against them."

Mr. Barenboim phrased it another way when we talked one recent afternoon: "What makes Pierre a towering modernistic figure is that he has managed in his life to move between revolutionary moments and evolutionary moments. When revolution was necessary, he was there, courageously, to lead it.

"But he is a great strategist. And he doesn't overestimate himself. He is too intelligent to stick to beliefs or opinions when they are no longer necessary. I remember him coming to my concert in Paris once and being very disparaging about Bruckner. But then, 15 years later, there he was conducting Bruckner himself, not out of weakness but because his thinking evolved."

Mr. Barenboim recalled observing Mr. Boulez lead Schoenberg's "Pelleas und Melisande" with the BBC Symphony in the early 1960s.

"I sat with the score during the rehearsal," he said. "At the beginning there is quite a lot of chromaticism, and at a certain point there was a chord out of tune and Pierre said, 'No, no, this is sharp, this is flat.' I was amazed.

"As a pianist I had no idea how he heard all that. I mean, when I thought my piano was out of tune, I just called the tuner. So I asked Pierre how he did it. I was starting to conduct, and I

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wanted to know if this was something I could learn.

"Pierre said: 'You have to have the courage to say what you hear and think when you conduct. Either the player will correct you and say it's not me out of tune, it's the second oboe, or you will be right. But in any case you will learn. Don't put your ego above the music. Do what you have to do for the sake of the music, and only in that way will you make progress.'"

"It was the remark of a man without ego," Mr. Barenboim added. "And a great lesson for me on musical terms and human terms."

One evening Katharina Rengger, project director of the Lucerne Festival Academy, made a similar point. Mr. Boulez was about to conduct Janacek, the sort of composer he disdained years ago. Ms. Rengger talked about his open mind, how the young musicians at the academy loved working with him, how he was planning a kind of 24-hour center, where anybody could come to hear music, hang out, make music, an alternative to the formal confines of the usual concert hall.

"Maybe part of the revolution for Pierre has been to find his own way," she said. "For him making music is a process that never stops. It's always focusing on the future."

Back in the 1950s and 1960s, Mr. Boulez was a key figure at the summer school at Darmstadt, Germany, where young modern composers, stifled during the war, pressed for a new international style. Nationalism and populism rankled after the Nazi regime. Serialism's obdurate, abstract, quasi-mathematics implied a semblance of cultural rationalism, unattached to nationalist ideas, a fresh start, musically speaking. But it soon came to represent the new orthodoxy. And Mr. Boulez was among its principal ideologues.

That said, no single serial technique emerged from Darmstadt. Mr. Boulez's own music moved from serial rhythms, durations, attacks and dynamics to improvisation, chance, electronics, world music. "Serialism is long dead," he said. "It was killed by the same people who wrote it."

All of which is true. That said, the composer Hans Werner Henze remembered in his memoirs that the Darmstadt School saw music as "a glass-bead game, a fossil of life," and "any encounter with the listeners that was not catastrophic and scandalous would defile the artist."

But Mr. Boulez prefers now to stress how Darmstadt, and by extension the whole postwar European milieu with which it was connected, "was about young people who wanted to meet one another from France, England, Poland, Germany," he said. "Everything seemed more urgent after the war. People who had lived discreetly under Hitler, sustaining new music behind closed doors, finally had a chance to make music, so there was also a new freedom. Discussions were almost frantic. There were many different opinions."

About how times have changed, Mr. Barenboim said:

"Pierre doesn't need to be an ideologue anymore. Once something is achieved, there is no need to insist on it. He said opera houses should be burned, but basically he was trying to turn the musical world into something more progressive than what it was. It was the same as Debussy writing on his visiting card, 'French Musician.' Debussy was looking for an alternative to Central European music. So he had to be radical at a certain moment."

Not that the flayed lion is now a lamb.

"Performers aren't audacious enough today," Mr. Boulez also told me. "They think audiences won't respond to what's unfamiliar. But to provoke — in the good sense — is the performer's role. It's not just to give one more concert."

"That's not culture," he said. "That's marketing."

Left, Pierre Boulez conducting the New York Philharmonic in the 1970s. His tenure frustrated some patrons, critics and orchestra members. But "his leaving was a historic opportunity squandered."

Right, Mr. Boulez leading the Lucerne Festival Orchestra in 2007. Known for his radical stances and remarks, he is now, at 84, an elder statesman and globe-trotting maestro of the world's leading ensembles.