

Both Challenging and Cool Boulez's technologically daunting 'Répons'

By BARBARA JEPSON

Pierre Boulez is best known as a perceptive conductor of 20th-century music, a pioneering composer of thorny modernist works, and the powerful founder of the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (Ircam), one of the world's leading music research laboratories. But he was also a boy soprano who sang in the choir of the Catholic school he attended in his native France.

These experiences intertwined in the writing of "Répons," a 45-minute work that brilliantly combines traditional acoustic instruments with electronic sonorities. Scored for six instrumental soloists, chamber ensemble, computer-generated sounds and live electronics, "Répons" (1981-84) is considered a landmark achievement in the composer's output and was the first major work to emerge out of his affiliation with Ircam, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The piece was also among the first to use digital rather than analog-based computer technology to transform sounds made by the soloists in "real time"—on the spot during the concert. And it has stood the test of time better than many purely electronic compositions on tape from the 1960s and 1970s, whose burbles, whistles and radio noises now evoke Grade B sci-fi movie scores.

Yet for all its complexity, "Répons" pays homage to one of the oldest, simplest musical forms—the call-and-response pattern. The title, which means "response" in French, refers to the alternation between spatially separated solo vocalist and choir in the responsorial portions of Gregorian chant. In the hands of Mr. Boulez, this dialogue becomes multilayered: between the instrumental soloists themselves, between musical passages that are digitally transformed and musical passages that are not, between acoustic and electronic sound sources, and more.

"Répons" will be performed Sept. 5 in a 1985 iteration under the direction of the 85-year-old Mr. Boulez at Switzerland's prestigious Lucerne Festival. In a significant departure for the composer, it will be played not by the Ensemble Intercontemporain, the crack new-music group he founded more than three decades ago, but by 30 of the 120 elite young musicians selected for the 2009 Lucerne Festival Academy. Founded in 2004 by Mr. Boulez and festival director Michael Haefliger to equip future generations in the performance of 20th- and 21st-century music, the academy's three-week educational and concert program this summer includes music with live electronics of past and present. "Répons" is its centerpiece. Three rising conductors also studied the work with Mr. Boulez in a one-week academy master class.

This "passing of the baton" is timely. Despite its status as a cult favorite in new-music circles, the work has been recorded only once. And according to its publisher, Universal Editions, "Répons" has been performed fewer than 70 times since its premiere in 1981 at Germany's Donaueschingen Festival. (Compare that to another work with a cult following, Steve Reich's

admittedly more populist "Drumming," which has been recorded three times and given more than 340 performances since its completion in 1971.)

The instrumentation is fairly standard. In addition to the 24-member chamber ensemble, there are six soloists—two pianists, a harpist and three percussion players, except that one of the latter must be a virtuoso on the cimbalom, a Hungarian dulcimer struck with mallets. But the unusual spatial layout requested is a potential drawback. The chamber ensemble sits on a platform in the center of the auditorium, surrounded by the audience. The six soloists are at the fringes of the performing space, stationed equidistantly on pedestals. This set-up often necessitates the removal of considerable first-floor seating in halls with traditional proscenium stages. (The 500-seat Luzerner Saal has no traditional proscenium, making the suggested arrangement easier to achieve.)

The technological specifications are even more daunting, including 38 loudspeakers, eight stereo equalizers, 24 audio lines linking the soloists with mixers, and a barrage of digital equipment—computers, synthesizer, MIDI Interfaces and microphone splitters—which must be obtained from Ircam. Mr. Haefliger estimates that the technological requirements alone make the presentation of "Répons" eight to 10 times more costly than a standard concert by 30 musicians and a conductor.

"Répons" can be enjoyed as a pure sonic experience, or it can be grappled with on a deeper level. It manages to be challenging and "cool" at the same time. The opening is not particularly compelling—one feels as if one has intruded on a conversation, without any sense of the prior discourse. But it serves to introduce the distinctive tone colors of the chamber ensemble's three major instrument groupings: strings, woodwinds and brass. Then the fun begins.

As the soloists enter, the music they play is transmitted, via microphones, to a digital-signal processor that alters the timbre of the instruments or the rhythmic sequences of their parts in preprogrammed ways, and beams the results through loudspeakers. (The sweep of sound in space is a key element of the piece, and the sound engineer is as much a performer as the musicians.) Computer-generated sounds on prerecorded tape, which the composer refers to as aural "wallpaper," are added periodically to the rich instrumental mix.

Mr. Boulez has aptly likened the musical effect of all this to viewing an exhibit at the Guggenheim Museum: As visitors ascend or descend its spiraled interior, they can see the art in front of them as well as the work they have just viewed and that which is already farther away.

Certain interactive elements—for example, the degree of loudness with which a soloist plays his or her part—influence which preprogrammed musical information, stored in the computer, is delivered in "real time." Therefore, no two performances of "Répons" are precisely the same.

The music for harp, vibraphone, xylophone, bell-like glockenspiel and cimbalom often possesses the textural delicacy and sound color associated with the music of Mr. Boulez since the premiere in 1955 of "Le Marteau sans Maître" ("The Hammer Without a Master"), which brought him to public attention. The piano writing in the middle of the piece is particularly engaging, at times channeling the atonal alter-egos of Ravel and Debussy. About two-thirds of the way through, the tempo quickens to a frenetic pace. Broken chords skittering up and down the scale lead to a series of instrumental meltdowns. Then the turmoil diminishes very gradually, ultimately devolving into quiet, otherworldly solo utterances, like stars that twinkle just before dawn. In "Répons," despite its formidably high-tech, modernist density, Mr. Boulez has given us a glimpse of his heart.

Tune In

Listen to clips from "Répons" by Pierre Boulez, performed with Andrew Gerzso and Ensemble InterContemporain

Introduction

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Section 1

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