Composer Pierre Boulez victim of Swiss police raid

Richard Tyler
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The world-renowned modern composer and conductor Pierre Boulez was detained in the early hours of November 2 as an alleged "terrorist" suspect. Swiss police called at his hotel in Basle at 6.30 in the morning, where according to a police spokesman, "three officers entered Mr Boulez' room and confiscated his passport, despite the fact that he was due to fly to Chicago later that morning. He was not very pleased."

The city's chief of police has since written a letter apologising to the conductor "for the force's excessively zealous behaviour."

In the radical atmosphere of the late 1960s, Boulez, who had taught at the Basle Conservatory, made a comment to the effect that opera houses should be blown up. This was sufficient for the Swiss security services to open a file on him. Then some six years ago, a music critic, who was responsible for a particularly derisive review of one of his performances, claimed Boulez (or someone) had rung, threatening to blow him up.

The composer had already left the country when the critic filed his complaint with the police and no further inquiries were ever made. So Boulez' name remained on a list of "terrorist suspects" maintained by the Swiss authorities.

That a security file was ever opened on Boulez, and was retained for so long, indicates the massive level of state surveillance of ordinary citizens in Switzerland, and in many other countries. A man with no criminal record whatsoever, who is an internationally respected artist, can suddenly find himself facing a police raid in the early hours of the morning. This gives an indication of the vast and indiscriminate scope of the alleged "war on terrorism." How many others, less well-known, will face similar raids? And this took place in "neutral," "peaceful" Switzeland.

Boulez was in the country in November as part of European Music Month, where he conducted the Ensemble InterContemporain on the opening night of this four-week festival of contemporary music, which featured 40 world premieres.

In the aftermath of the September 11 events, the Swiss police routinely check the guest lists at all hotels. It was when they made such an inspection at the five-star *Drei Koenige* hotel that the composer's name was spotted. After being detained for two hours, the composer's passport was returned and he was allowed to continue on his journey to the US.

Boulez was born in 1925 in Montbrison, France and studied at the Paris Conservatoire where he attended Messiaen's harmony classes. He and his fellow pupils were called "The Arrows" because of their anti-establishment views and their move towards serialism, the music associated with composers such as Schoenberg and Webern. He has composed several works, including *Le Marteau sans maître* (1954), for voice and chamber ensemble. In 1977 he founded the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM), part of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, serving as director of this research institute until 1992.

In his distinguished career as a conductor, he has worked with orchestras throughout Europe and internationally including in London, Berlin, Amsterdam, and Rome. He was music director of the New York Philharmonic (1971-1977), and chief conductor of the BBC Symphony Orchestra (1971-1975). He now leads his own Ensemble InterContemporain, in Paris, and is a guest conductor with the Chicago Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra and the Vienna Philharmonic.

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In May 2001, he was named conductor of the year at Britain's Royal Philharmonic Society awards. The prize was given for his concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra and the work he has undertaken with young musicians and conductors.

Such is the atmosphere created since the attacks in New York and Washington that the arrest of such an eminent artist as Pierre Boulez, on the pretext of being a suspected "terrorist," has received scant attention in the media. Apart from a small piece in the *Basler Zeitung*, news of the arrest hardly featured in the Swiss press, let alone the international media.

In Switzerland, under the guise of fighting terrorism and strengthening domestic security, the Christian Democratic Peoples Party (CVP) is proposing a series of measures to restrict democratic rights. CVP President Philipp Staehelin said the balance between freedom and security "should be tipped in favour of security". The CVP is proposing to combine the country's security services into one organisation, extending their powers of surveillance. Staehelin claimed it was not a matter of creating a "Federal Security Police" but of "bundling the existing forces". In addition, immigration regulations are to be tightened to prevent Switzerland becoming a "refuge" for foreigners that have been expelled or refused entry to other states on grounds of security.

Had Boulez not been such a prominent figure, he could have suffered a far more sinister fate.

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