

# Conductor and avant-garde composer Pierre Boulez (1925–2016)

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On Tuesday, French conductor and composer Pierre Boulez died at his home in Baden-Baden, Germany, at age 90, after several years of illness. The Philharmonie of Paris, which he founded, issued a statement from his family declaring, “For all those who met him and had the chance to enjoy his creative energy, his artistic integrity, his availability and his generosity, his presence will remain alive and intense.”

Boulez was for decades a leading figure in European classical music. As a conductor who worked and recorded extensively with leading orchestras and opera companies, he elicited powerful, precise, unpretentious and always tasteful performances, though they sometimes had a touch of coldness. He had a reputation for being approachable by students and young artists he met, to whom he often gave generously of his time.

As a composer and founder of musical institutions, particularly for avant-garde music, he worked with rigor and was ruthless in polemics with musical rivals and French officials who got in his way. A man who was both analytical and strong-willed but not burdened by excess modesty, Boulez acted based on carefully weighed and calculated judgments, of whose correctness he was absolutely convinced. He had a firmly developed conception of the historical development of music, of which his own compositions, Boulez firmly believed, were the necessary and unavoidable end result.

Boulez taught himself to play the piano as a child in a bourgeois family in the small city of Montbrison. He studied advanced mathematics in 1940 in St Etienne and then Lyon. In 1943, he traveled to occupied Paris to study at the National Conservatory, failing the entrance exam in piano but being admitted to study harmony under composer Olivier Messiaen.

In 1945, he broke with Messiaen, whom Boulez later

offended by calling his 1948 *Turangalila Symphonie* “brothel music,” to study with René Leibowitz, who introduced him to the “twelve-tone” style of composition of Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern. This style, designed to destroy traditional tonality in music, made a deep impression on Boulez, who characteristically embraced it and then denounced it, drafting a 1952 article in *The Score* that scandalized American academia by declaring that Schoenberg was “dead.”

In Paris, Boulez worked various jobs to pay the bills, as a math tutor, musician at the *Folies Bergères* nightclub, and finally director of stage music for the newly-founded theatrical company of renowned actor Jean-Louis Barrault.

Boulez, Barrault recalled in 1995, “arrived to us aged 20. We liked him immediately. On edge and charming like a young cat, he could not hide a wild temperament that was very amusing... But behind this anarchist savagery, we felt in Boulez the extreme delicacy of an unusual temperament, an extraordinary sensibility, even a hidden sentimentality.”

Starting in the 1950s, Boulez organized an avant-garde music series that Barrault backed at the Théâtre Marigny. Boulez both composed *Le Marteau sans maître*, an avant-garde piece based on works of the famous Resistance poet René Char, and began conducting, initially substituting for German conductors Hermann Scherchen and Hans Rosbaud.

Though politically unaffiliated, Boulez in 1960 signed the Manifesto of the 121 opposing France’s war against Algerian independence and denouncing “the colonial system.” He was in Germany when the manifesto was published, and for a time he was barred from returning to France. However, he increasingly won world acclaim, with invitations to conduct the

BBC Symphony, the Bayreuth Opera Festival, the Cleveland Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic.

He had conflicts with French authorities in the 1960s, and once called the Paris Opera a “ghetto full of shit and dust.” After Culture Minister André Malraux passed over his suggestions for a reform of the French musical system, he exiled himself to Germany, and in 1967 gave an interview in *Der Spiegel* in which he called for “blowing up opera houses.” Based on this statement, he would be briefly detained on terrorism charges by Swiss police 34 years later, after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.

Boulez directed the New York Philharmonic from 1971 to 1977, provoking some hostility by programming a great deal of difficult avant-garde music, but also giving popular performances of music by Mozart and Ravel.

He subsequently returned to France, where he launched avant-garde groups including the *Ensemble intercontemporain* (EIC) and the *Institut de recherche et de coordination acoustique-musique* (IRCAM), which had been founded with the support of French President Georges Pompidou. In 1981, he wrote *Repons*, which is often cited as his masterwork.

Throughout the latter decades of his life, Boulez continued to conduct major orchestras, compose, and found new music festivals and venues, including the *Cité de la Musique* in Paris in 1995 and the Lucerne Festival Academy for orchestral players in 2004. He met with and gave master classes for many conducting and composing students.

Boulez also leaves behind a vast collection of recordings, focused to a large extent on late 19th and 20th century composers including Debussy, Mahler, Bartók, the twelve-tone school, Stravinsky, and Messiaen, as well as performances of the operas of Richard Wagner and of his own works.

Boulez’s other main legacy was his relentless search for a new musical vocabulary to replace both traditional tonality and the twelve-tone system invented by Schoenberg.

This author confesses to considerable skepticism regarding some of Boulez’s compositions and also the aesthetic conceptions underlying them. There is strong reason to doubt that the conceptions of art and musical composition that underlay Boulez’s innovations—such as those he developed while writing in French

structuralist circles such as the *Tel Quel* group—will stand the test of time. The theoretical-philosophical underpinnings of his aesthetic judgments are especially questionable.

“Music is an art that has no ‘meaning,’” Boulez declared in a 1961 lecture titled *Aesthetics and the Fetishists*, “hence the primary importance of structures that are, properly speaking, linguistic, given the impossibility of musical vocabulary assuming a simply communicative function.”

Paradoxically, Boulez’s best work shows the profound meaning and emotional and communicative power of music, be it vocal or instrumental, with words or no.

Ultimately, however, whether one agrees with Boulez’s conceptions and his preoccupation with forms and linguistic systems, his research and his striving for a new musical language was an honest and integral part of the musical life of his era. In his research, there was nothing of the charlatanry and posing that characterizes much of public life today.



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