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# Poetry and Music: A Roundtable Discussion with Pierre Boulez

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Recorded by Paul Merrill. Transcribed by David Eadington, Laura Leavitt, Leakthina Ollier, Amy Pitsker and Alicia Tolbert.

In the fall of 1992, the French Department of UCLA was privileged to host a roundtable discussion on the complex relationship between poetry and music as experienced through the work of Pierre Boulez. What follows are excerpts from the discussion, featuring the words of three of the participants: Pierre Boulez, Mary Ann Caws and Nancy Perloff. Andrea Loselle, Assistant Professor of French at UCLA, moderated the roundtable and introduced the participants.

*Introduction by Andrea Loselle*

Pierre Boulez is generally acknowledged as one of the most important figures in music since the Second World War. He is active not only as a composer but also as a conductor and as founder, director and now honorary director of the famous Paris-based music research institute IRCAM (*Institut de Recherches et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique*). In addition to his instrumental works, Mr. Boulez composed, earlier in his career, several major vocal works with poems by René Char, Stéphane Mallarmé, e. e. cummings and Henri Michaux. Composed mainly in the late 1940s, 50s and early 60s, these works' titles are: *Le visage nuptial*, *Soleil des eaux*, *Le marteau sans maître*, *Poésie pour pouvoir*, *Pli selon pli*, and finally *Cummings ist der Dichter*. Of these works *Visage nuptial*, *Soleil des eaux*, *Le marteau sans maître* and *Pli selon pli* have undergone numerous revisions. They represent instead works in progress and, in a couple of cases, a long span of years spent reworking, reinterrogating music, its organization, structure... and music's relationship to poetry (notably *Soleil des eaux*, which was revised four times between 1948 and 1965). As was the case with some of the instrumental pieces, *Poésie pour pouvoir* (1958) for five-track tape and orchestra with a poem by Michaux was withdrawn and abandoned by the composer. *Cummings ist der Dichter* (1970) for chamber chorus and orchestra is one of the rare cases of a piece that Mr. Boulez has neither revised nor withdrawn.<sup>1</sup> If revisions serve as any guideline, those works composed with poems by Char and Mallarmé

appear to have involved more "work," a fact which may be accounted for by the consideration that the poems by these two poets in particular are known to be "difficult" and hermetic.

Given the importance of his vocal works, it is not surprising that Mr. Boulez has also written a number of essays on poetry and music. To name those most pertinent to the subject of today's roundtable: "Constructing an Improvisation, *Deuxième Improvisation sur Mallarmé*" (1961), "Sound, Word, Synthesis" (1958), "Son et verbe" (1958), and "Poetry—Centre and Absence—Music" (1963). To this list may be included "Sonate, que me veux-tu?" (1960), an essay on the *Third Piano Sonata*. The *Third Piano Sonata* is an instrumental piece, which does not include a literary text or reference but which is based on poetic and literary concepts from the work of Mallarmé and Joyce. These essays testify not only to Mr. Boulez's fascination with the interpretive complications involved in setting a poem to music but also to the influence literature has on his work.

The conventional expression, "to set a poem to music," pejoratively implies that music is but the ornamental frame around a center, say a portrait. But in light of Mr. Boulez's music and writings, this expression jars. It goes without saying that we are not talking about composing just songs, just as, for example, the subtitle of *Pli selon pli, Portrait de Mallarmé* is not literal but double, reflecting critically as it must on the composer's use of the poem in a musical context. It is thus to certain writers and poets that Mr. Boulez says he owes a degree of his musical thinking and development, stating that "some writers at the present time have gone much further than composers in the organization, the actual mental structure, of their works" ("Sonate, que me veux-tu?" *Orientations* 143).

If, as Mr. Boulez has written, "[m]usic is an art that has no 'meaning': hence the primary importance of structures that are properly speaking linguistic, given the impossibility of the musical vocabulary assuming a simply communicative function" ("Aesthetics and Fetishists," *Orientations* 32), we, in the literary field, may be confused by the communicative function of expressions such as "musical vocabulary," "musical grammar," and "musical language" in our effort to discuss poetry and music together. If poetry is both meaning and sound, sound in the analysis of a poem is often subordinated to meaning, or, as Mallarmé writes in "La Musique et

les lettres": "vain, si le langage, par la retrempe et l'essor purifiants du chant, n'y confère un sens" (648 [in vain, if language, by the song's purifying retempering and flight, does not confer a meaning], my translation). In music this situation is perhaps reversed because: 1) we do not read a poem but listen to it in a musical context, and 2) spoken or recited poetry differs fundamentally from sung poetry. Here we come upon a disjunction: it isn't always possible to read and listen at the same time, particularly when the music and the poetry are those of Pierre Boulez, René Char and Stéphane Mallarmé. Poetry and music can be seen to form two opposing sides. But with, I believe, this difference: whereas a poem can serve mediums other than its own as a meaningful text, a musical piece cannot do so without being irreversibly turned into a reading, that is, without being silenced.

Poetry and music are nevertheless historically linked mediums, poetry itself having originally been, not recited, but sung, and from whose linguistic exigencies music broke off to become an autonomous medium. Today, they may appear to many to have only a rhetorical relationship if only because their conjunction may be complicated by the tendency to convert the historical conjunction into a purely natural one, a tendency which we can trace back, at least in the literary domain, to certain romanticist notions. In 1957, Pierre Boulez reflected on the use of this word, "conjunction," in another context: "La flexibilité de ce mot: 'conjonction' permettra, en outre, de cultiver quelques fleurs de rhétorique ou de nouer un joli bouquet d'épines" ("D'une conjonction — en trois éclats," *Relèves d'apprenti...* 275 [The flexibility of this word: 'conjunction' moreover will permit the cultivation of some rhetorical flowers or the knotting of a lovely bouquet of thorns], my translation). Today we will, perhaps, knot an attractive bouquet of thorns instead of cultivate "naturally" more rhetorical flowers.

I should now like to introduce our other roundtable participants. Mary Ann Caws is Distinguished Professor of French, Comparative Literature and English at the Graduate Center, of the City University of New York. She is author of a great many books on poetry and art, particularly of the twentieth century and around the Dada and surrealist movements. She has published widely both here and in France on such writers as André Breton, Edmond Jabès, Blaise Cendrars, Tristan Tzara, Pierre Reverdy, Antonin Artaud, and Yves Bonnefoy. She edited and translated selected poetry and

prose of Mallarmé with *New Directions* in 1982. She is also a leading specialist of René Char, having written three books on his work and translated a book of his poems; her last critical work on Char is entitled *L'œuvre filante de René Char*, published by Nizet in 1981, and *New Directions* has just published *Selected Poems of René Char*, which Professor Caws edited. Professor Caws' interests are not limited to poetry alone; she has published books on the subject of perception, and the relationship of visual art to literature. Professor Caws brings to this roundtable her expertise in poetry and an interdisciplinary approach.

Nancy Perloff is a specialist of French music of the first half of the 20th century, as well as of ethnomusicology and 18th and 19th century music. She earned her Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and is currently Research Associate in the Department of Photography at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Her book, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie*, appeared just last year with the Oxford University Press. She has also published an article in *The Musical Quarterly* entitled "Klee and Webern: Speculations on Modernist Theories of Composition." Dr. Perloff is currently conducting cross-disciplinary research on music and the visual arts. I would like to thank Dr. Perloff for accepting on short notice to appear here in place of Professor Marjorie Perloff, who was unable to come due to a scheduling conflict.

Mr. Boulez has agreed to begin this roundtable discussion with his own reflections and comments on music and poetry. Afterwards we will then move on to comments and questions from Professor Caws and Dr. Perloff.

### Notes

1. For a comprehensive list of publications, performances and revisions, see Peter F. Stacey, *Boulez and the Modern Concept* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P) 144-48.

### Works Cited

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*Pierre Boulez*

I have no statement to make per se, I just want to explain what the relationship of poetry and music has been in my life.

I suppose that you heard all these titles of works which I have done on the poems of René Char, Michaud, Mallarmé, of course, and of Cummings. All these works were composed practically 30 years ago; the most recent date to the early sixties, and after that I composed almost exclusively instrumental music. You might wonder why all these works were composed in the early stage of my life. I suppose it's because when you discover literature, as well as music, and it's not the first time it happens, you rely on the forces of other people. Poets are a very strong force and I was always attracted to poetry—although I never wrote poems myself, I should say that immediately. I am not gifted for that and I never will be, I suppose.

I was attracted to poetry because I think that especially French poets at the end of the 19th century were far ahead of musicians and poets from other countries. The evolution of the French poetry in the mid-19th century from Baudelaire, but particularly from Rimbaud and Mallarmé, is a really amazing history. I think that poetry has never, neither in expression nor in structure, gone so far. So far, that after that even the surrealist movement, while it could find other paths, could never go further than Mallarmé in restructuring the French language. Therefore Mallarmé remains a kind of a satiric poet because the form of his poems, the structure of his poems, is not easy to crack; it's very condensed and the syntax of the French language is completely reformed. Reformed in the literal sense of re-formed: formed again. I think that was what interested me at the outset; these poets' radical view of the French language which brought to me a radical view of musical language.

My experience was not an isolated example: musicians in need of some inspiration often go to poetry. Of course they go to poetry for poetic inspiration—we have always had a lot of vocal literature, and the 19th century developed the form of vocal settings of poems

known as *lieds*. Certainly, during the Romantic Movement especially, for some Romantic composers, it was a kind of expression of a moment which had never existed to such an extent before the 19th century. Further on, the *lied* became a sort of salon music: less and less necessary, less and less expressive, and less and less meaningful—at least I find it that way. Progressively the voice was asking for a different setting and the kind of *lied* for voice and piano gradually disappeared altogether from the literature at the beginning of this century. More and more the vocal music was mixed with, for example, the chamber group of instruments, as in the Viennese school of Schoenberg especially, just as Webern did, and Berg afterwards with the *Sieben frühe Lieder*, the *Altenberglieder* or *Der Wein*. These were certainly always *lieds* but with an amplified texture that at a certain point—and the case is very specific with Webern—the musicians were lost in search of a musical language and especially of a musical form. Every aspect of the spoken language was so renovated, so radically renovated, that they practically needed a guideline, and the poem gave this guideline, gave this inspiration. Thus the musical form was totally influenced by the poetic form. You can see that in the case of Mahler, particularly in the first half of his life, even as the ideas that were treated symphonically later were first found in the setting of poems—that's especially the case with the 1st symphony and the 4th symphony as well. So you see that there was a mixture between the pure musical form; it goes back to Beethoven's 9th symphony, and you can find it in the 2nd string quartet of Schoenberg in f# minor as well. You always find a mixture of voice and instrument, but before the beginning of the 20th century this mixture was never so necessary; it changed the relationship of music and poetry.

This was also my position at the beginning, when I was composing, especially the first version of *Visage nuptial* in 1946. Between the first version in 1946 and the last version which was 1990/91, a lot of water has gone under the bridge. Certainly my view of the relationship of music and poetry has changed quite a lot. But it has changed also—I had no specific attitude before; I have not said I will mix music and poetry in this way or this way or this way—it depends very much on the poet you take. With Char, for instance, I began with "Visage nuptial" which is perhaps the longest poem ever written by Char, the "Visage nuptial" itself. *Visage nuptial* is a collection of five poems: two short, one long in the middle, then two

short poems. Then there is a kind of narration, a very abstract narration, but a narration, which is simply a love which begins, has a climax in the third piece, then dies and is regretted. So the narrative in itself is very simple. And I think when you have a narrative poem like that you have to follow the narration, you cannot escape it. Certainly in *Visage nuptial*, even in all the versions I did, which were more and more refined, richer and richer, I followed the narration, a kind of episodic thing: I mean an involvement with love, then a break of everything—the world doesn't exist anymore—and then prophecy of dying. The pieces shrink progressively and then the expression follows that at the end of this love—for the regret—you need a slow tempo. On the contrary, in the middle with the outburst of love you have to have a quick tempo, a very strong contrast.

So the music is dictated, practically, by the meaning of the poem. Then you have to follow a narration, to develop a narration. For me that was the interesting side in the beginning, which was the normal thing. It was like a theatrical work: in following the narration, you follow the drama of the poem. When, nine years later, I took *Marteau sans maître*, which is quite a different piece, at that point my intention was not at all the same. I was already thinking of a different kind of mixture because the poems I chose were extremely short each time: four lines, five lines, that's all. Therefore there is absolutely no narration you can follow. So you have to think of another way of doing it. I chose three poems in order to have a cycle. It was interesting to me that the poems don't appear in all pieces. You have the poems themselves, set into music, but you also have the resonance of these poems into the music. So you take the themes or the thematic of the poem and you develop it without the poem. I call that, after Henri Michaux's definition, center and absence of the poem in the music. You have certainly seen that in some museums or if you have visited Pompeii, for instance. You see some objects of the Roman time which have been burnt and you open the ashes or the volcanic stone and you see the exact mold—the shape of the object which has been burned. That's exactly what I think of the poem with music in this case; the music burns the poem, and then as you open the music, the poem remains as a shape—no longer as the poem, only as the shape of the poem. And that for me was the idea I had on this junction of poetry and music.



Therefore, in *Marteau sans maître* you have three different steps of involving the poem with the music—or maybe four steps, let's say. One, you speak the poem, and that's a piece which is written just for voice and flute. So you have two lines—twin lines—and the poem is said very obviously, and it is there in the foreground. The second step is when the poem is just the articulation of the music. You have development of the music, and then at some very important turning points the poem is there, to make you feel that the music is turning and going to another section. These are the interjections of the poem. And then the third step is when the poem is completely immersed in the music. There the vocal aspect approximates only one instrument, but with sonorities. And personally, as I've seen many works before and after me which use, for instance, a nonexistent language, I like a kind of abstract language created just for the sonority. But I am always embarrassed by that because even if I distort the poem, there remains the structure of language which is richer than any kind of invented language. Because the relationship is ambiguous, you have meaning and you have no meaning, and I will explain that later with what I did in my Mallarmé setting. But I began with this in *Marteau sans maître*—to have the text completely immersed, and it remains there, but it is like a secret buried into the music. Then there is the fourth step: the poem is said very rapidly, as it would be read, in the time of reading a poem. Thereafter, all the musical developments no longer have anything to do with the syllables of the poem, with the sonorities, but the voice is completely without any syllables. This suggests a vocal line which mixes with the instruments, where the word has disappeared completely from the music, but the spirit of the poem remains.

I did these four steps this way because the structure of the poems by Char was not a very strict kind of structure. It was on the contrary four lines, five lines—just very quick interjections; there was no traditional structure. When I came to Mallarmé it was quite a different story, because Mallarmé in French is precisely organized. First, he used the sonnet as a form, so you have two times four, two times three: the precise structure of a sonnet. And not only do you have the strophic organization, but also you have the rhymes, which are organized in a specific way. I don't want to go into that in detail, but the rhymes are organized two by two, and correspond between the four verses and the three verses. Then I

thought, "that's very nice to have a kind of poetic correspondence with Mallarmé," but what I think is more interesting is to develop the relationship with the structure of the poem. Then, if you go to the structure of the poem, you also have the meaning of the poem, because in the Mallarmé poetic, the structure and the meaning are so welded together that you have a unity of things that you cannot destroy. So to merely set the poem into music will not be enough and will not do justice to the poem itself.

Therefore I will give you an example of how this relationship can be related to style. For instance, in this poem you have the first group of four verses; to keep them in memory I used what is called a mathematic style, meaning a syllable can give birth to a flourish, a melodic flourish. So each syllable can have a very independent development. The meaning of the verse is very difficult to grasp because the music is, in a way, stronger than the words. So in this sense the music takes the words. And the accompaniment of the instrument was a kind of chords, just chords from time to time to sustain this melodic line, but it was a very flourishing melodic line, and you recognize the four verses because they are done precisely like that.

Then after that, the second group of four verses I say should have a complete contrast. I did the syllabic treatment. The syllabic treatment is when one note corresponds to one syllable, and, of course, the number of notes corresponds exactly to the number of syllables in the verse. Then you must take into consideration not only the verse itself but also the number of syllables. In this sonnet especially I am specific—in my second improvisation the number is eight. You have these eight syllables, very audible, and the figure eight will be always at the beginning of every musical thought; you will always have remembrance of this number eight, in the vocal line and in the corresponding music where everything is an echo of this structure of the verse. But also, you know, in the melismatic style I can have longer or shorter melismas and then the text will be understood very precisely or not understood very clearly. And I can do the same also with the syllabic division. Because if the syllables are close to each other, then I grasp everything. If I just stretch the syllables far from one another, further and further, I isolate one syllable and lose the sense—as much as the word was supporting the music at first then you have progressively a change and the music becomes more important than the words. So you

have always this kind of ambiguous relationship: I want to understand the text; I don't want to understand the text. In some parts the character is more important and in some other parts the meaning is more important. So you play when you are dealing with the relationship of poetry and music: you deal with this kind of relationship between understanding and not understanding. What you don't understand precisely, you compensate for by the feeling of the meaning. And that's what this kind of very interesting relationship is.

But let's finish with the structure of this sonnet. After that, for the two strophes of three, I could not reproduce four and four like I did. So then I go into the rhyme, and the verses which have the same rhyme will have the same musical translation. For instance, for a feminine rhyme there will be a melismatic line and for the masculine rhyme there will be, on the contrary, a syllabic organization. So then for the two groups of three you are going into the detail and just showing the structure of the rhymes. Of course you are not aware of all of that, but it's a kind of translation of the structure of the poem exactly in the music. After that, even if you don't know the structure of the poem—people who have never read the poem will understand the structure intuitively because I have given them the ways of grasping the music, and grasping the poem directly through the music. That was my relationship with the Mallarmé poems because it was very important for me to get to the point of the structure. And with Cummings it was maybe more utopian, let's say, a kind of translation but not that literal, especially to find equivalence. You know in Cummings' speech, the words have parenthesis and special punctuation. I tried to find, not of course a literal equivalent, but an equivalent. For instance, if you have parentheses, then a group of instruments will be specific. And when you finish these parentheses, the group of instruments disappears and you have another group of instruments or another vocal treatment, and so on and so forth. So it's much more flexible, much more supple, but at the same time, it's a translation where I use a kind of symbolic treatment of the writing. And this symbolic treatment gives me a form which has its roots in the poem but

which, of course, can also be grasped completely independently from the poem.

So that was the history of my development of the relationship between poetry and music as I conceived them at the time. I think now of composing some vocal music again, but cannot tell you about it because I will discover it when I compose it.

*Mary Ann Caws*

I'll follow up what Pierre Boulez has been saying by telling you a little bit about the way I conceive of poetry and translation, which I see as possessing an equal excitement of structure to that of music. I don't see a translation as a simple rendering or setting, far from it. I do see it as part of a reciprocal enlightenment. Let me say a word about René Char's poem "Visage nuptial" and then the Mallarmé texts Boulez uses. It seems to me that the correspondence the translator has to set up is again a changing one, multiple and shifting, rather than a static relationship  $A=B$ . Reading some of Pierre Boulez's writings about music, I am convinced that his shortcuts—you can get from A to C—also work against the static.

The kinds of complexities of understanding that are brought about by the musical renderings of people like Char and Mallarmé are intensely useful to us as translators and as critics. As I was telling Pierre Boulez before I started writing on Char at all and before I translated him, I looked at Pierre Boulez's score for the *Visage nuptial* to figure out whether I wanted to say the "nuptial visage" or the "nuptial countenance." Having looked at the score I realized that "countenance" was the only possibility, for it was the only word that had the same complexity and dignity as the score. The development of my translations of that very long and epic poem—which took me two years to translate, with Char's help—was another sort of score. I retranslated it last year for the BBC when Pierre Boulez went over to England to conduct the *Visage nuptial*. The repeated retranslations gave me the feeling of a dynamic setting. I longed, in my New Directions anthology of Mallarmé's writings, to put a sonnet and the alternative translations circling around it in a constellation, instead of having eternally this AB feeling that makes you feel that the translator has tried to give—as is, of course, impossible—the "full" sense of the poem. This interchange of complexity, this correspondence, works very much the

same way between translating and poetry as it does between music and poetry. I thought you might be interested in hearing one or two examples, which are the pressure points in these two poems we've just been discussing.

Then I will end by quoting Mallarmé on music because I think he's often been very misinterpreted along the musical line. In fact, I think that Mallarmé's "Un Coup de dés" is another piece that Pierre Boulez should set to music. I think of the "whites" in it—the *blancs*—these "blanks" that come up all over the place and the ways that Mallarmé analyzes them as the prismatic reflections. That's exactly the complexity that would be wonderful to hear in music.

Let me give then just two or three examples of the pressure points in René Char which might interest you. I'll take them in the order in which Pierre Boulez mentioned them. First, in the "Visage nuptial," the poem in French is non-puritanical, whereas the English language, as you may have heard and as you know, is incredibly more puritanical than the French. René Char over and over would raise his provençal hands to the sky and say "what can you do with English?" The problem was the word at the center of the poem, which is the French word *plaisir*. It doesn't exist in English, of course, because in English "pleasure" is just nowhere, having no proximity to what Char means. The word in French is both erotic and spiritual and everything central to the poem, whose real center it is. This poem is about love-making and about nuptial rites. Ok, so what were we to do? Week after week, we would have this problem, and then finally, one day, René Char, whose perception was better than his English, said to me "joy!" And I said "excuse me?" and he said "if I were doing this poem again now, I would think of the 'Visage nuptial' as rewritten around the word 'joy.'" So I used the word "joy" in my translation for "pleasure," without any footnote that says "René Char said, 'pleasure,' you know you can translate it as the English 'joy.'" In any case, these nodal points—the word that Pierre Boulez uses in some of his writings—these nodal points are the central pressure points of the poem, radiating out into a kind of vibrating resonance, making it possible for us all to retranslate what matters.

Another example I would like to give you is one of the sonnets that Pierre Boulez set to music, the one called "Une dentelle s'abolit" ("a lace annuls itself"). I won't tell you the solution, because I'm less wild about it than about the problem, as often

happens. In the sonnet, the following problem occurs: let me read you the beginning in French:

Une dentelle s'abolit  
 Dans le doute du Jeu suprême  
 (literally: A lace annuls itself  
 In the doubt of the supreme game)

The problem is the central word there, the word *Jeu*, which you hear, if you have a French ear, immediately as both "game" or "gamble" and as "I." It is really the doubt of the self, the doubt of the "I." There's no way to translate both things at once; you have to make a choice. But the choice then means that the complexity, ideally, gets carried over to another point in the poem, and that's what I think is exciting about resetting the poem.

Then I'll read you one more problem which is determined by the central word of this whole poem: the word *lit*—like "bed," but it's also the verb for reading. So that this whole poem, which really means "a lace passes into nothingness," is also about reading, how reading passes into nothingness and complexity; it's about this clear absence of the center of the poem; it's about the flower absent from all the bouquets, which is why the bouquet gets to exist.

The last problem I bring you comes up in the very next stanza, and it goes:

Cet unanime blanc conflit  
 D'une guirlande avec la même,  
 (This unanimous white conflict  
 of a wreath with itself)

The problem there is the first line which goes:

Cet unanime blanc conflit

which you can either read as:

This unanimous white conflict

which still has to do with the bed, of course, and with the struggle and everything else. But you could interpret it as:

This unanimous or one-voiced blank conflict

and that's how, I think, you get from that to "Un coup de dés"—with all its blow of dice which will never abolish chance—to that incredibly complex prismatic use of the white, the blank of the poem on the page. That's the extraordinary typographical, visual, peculiar, magnificent, untranslatable, wonderful poem, of which in closing, I just want to read you two lines, from its preface, which go

exactly along with what Boulez is trying to do in this wonderfully exciting structural theater of the mind as I see it. It seems to me to be exactly what we're talking about. Mallarmé says of the blanks in this poem: "These are prismatic subdivisions of the idea. This instant when they appear and during which their cooperation lasts in some exact mental setting." I imagine how the exactitudes of Boulez's renderings of Char and of Mallarmé are mental in another space—those are mental exactitudes, and mentally exciting. They are also, of course, in every other way, exciting, but Mallarmé gives us a clue to his own excitement right in this preface.

Mallarmé's speaking here of shortcuts: we are talking about getting from A to C, not via B. "Everything that happens in poetry, happens by shortcut hypothetically, storytelling is avoided. Add to that, that from this naked use of thought, retreating, prolonging, fleeing, or from its very design, there results for the person reading it aloud a musical score." A musical score.

And, I'll read you one last thing: he's talking now about the prose poem which he loves. He is, in fact, talking about this peculiar poem that I've just shown you, this peculiar never-to-be repeated experiment in poetry. You couldn't go, as Pierre Boulez says, farther than Mallarmé—impossible, you can only repeat. Of this poem, which is supposed to start poetry over, he says: "the free verse in the prose poem takes place under an influence I know to be odd, that of music as it is heard at a concert." Then he ends: "this is the empire of passion and dream, it is the time to treat, preferably as it follows naturally, subjects of pure and complex imagination or intellect, and not to exclude them from poetry, the unique source." Mallarmé is the great ancestor in this. We haven't gone farther, nor can we.

I want to end with one word, which comes from the first of the "Visage nuptial" poems, right before the long poem itself. The text is called "Conduit" or "Convey," and in it, the first word that René Char says about the notion of encounter, about love-making and about music and poetry, understanding everything else, is the word *passé*, just meaning "pass," "let's go on." So let's go on...

*Nancy Perloff*

Mr. Boulez began by citing the importance of modern French poetry in challenging, motivating, and inspiring his own poetic

settings. I want to take the adjective “French” and examine it, and raise some questions. I’m very interested in the kinds of sources, the kind of tradition that Mr. Boulez is speaking about. In other words, if we look at the twentieth-century tradition of French text setting, if we think of composers like Francis Poulenc or Erik Satie as well as Claude Debussy, do these composers provide a source or point of departure for the kind of setting that Mr. Boulez experiments with? I find it very interesting that the word he emphasizes strongly, the word that seems so important to him, both in the talk he gave now and in his writings, is the word “structure.” I don’t think this is a word that Poulenc or Satie would have given such emphasis. In their vocal work we would think more of “style” and of “genre.” Debussy becomes the interesting question, but let me stay with Poulenc and Satie for a moment.

The important questions regarding both Poulenc and Satie are: Did they stay with a literal transcription, an aesthetic imitation of the poetic text, or did they move from a rendering of prosody, of atmosphere and associations that the text conveys (Poulenc’s *Le Bestiaire* or *Toréador*, for example) to some larger internal structure? In the early twentieth century, didn’t Poulenc and Satie have a greater interest in creating a song style, a *mélodie*, a style in the vein of cabaret, *café-concert*, *valse chantée*, so that what defines their vocal music is as much style as the setting of individual words? Poulenc tried to create an atmosphere of Paris, a nostalgic bittersweet tone full of memories of the specific locale evoked in the poetry he was setting. As part of his direct expression of the text and his interest in style, Poulenc also sometimes imitated the performance style of certain French popular singers, especially Maurice Chevalier. This imitation could take the form of parody: Poulenc split up syllables in unusual ways, called for rubato, created passages with free rhythms and speech-like declamations.

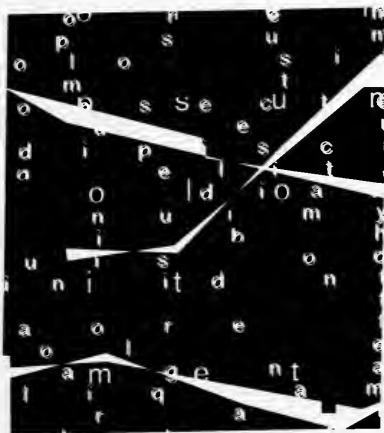
With Debussy, we begin to move away from this imitation of poetry, this “direct imitation action,” as Mr. Boulez calls it, to poetic reflection. And very important is the notion that the text starts to be absent from the musical setting—Mr. Boulez’s idea of “center and absence”—so that as listeners we internalize the text and then hear its structure resonating in the sound structures and in formal relations in the musical setting.

In his important essay on Debussy’s *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Mr. Boulez describes how the vocal line in the opera detaches itself and



the instrumentation detaches itself and creates its own commentary, internalized from the specific text. Did this practice provide a tradition which Mr. Boulez amplifies, and did the Poulenc/Satie period form an early French tradition of clarity, of emphasis on style and direct setting of words, which Mr. Boulez is responding against? Is there a French tradition in which we would place Mr. Boulez, or is he moving away from such national definitions, such notions of a French spirit *per se*, towards a larger supranational style, a style that transcends the specific national definitions to which I've referred. These are questions that I find interesting. They may prompt us to discuss the music of Mr. Boulez in relation to German composers as well. But I think it would be interesting to define the context in which Mr. Boulez has pursued his remarkable explorations, and to clarify the role of France in this context.

UCLA FRENCH STUDIES



*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici  
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

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PAROLES  

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GELÉES

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# PAROLES GELEES

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