

Etty Mulder: The Fertile Land Pierre Boulez Paul Klee. Identifications

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English: Eva Pelgrom

Who or what is Pierre Boulez? Is he a composer, conductor, essayist, poet, thinker, or even philosopher? Well, at least this is clear: he is not just one of the foregoing. A unique and in fact indivisible combination of all these roles is present in him, as a kind of 'homo universalis' that is almost unprecedented in our times. However, he has one goal only: the sustained and uncompromising effort to produce a Work of Art *sui generis*. The Work of Art indeed written with capital letters, of which all compositions or other forms of expression, whether represented in sounds or in words, are parts of a larger whole, or must be seen as fascinating bypasses, if you like. In alchemist terms, we are then talking about a Grandoeuvre or Opus Magnum, in which everything, but everything, including all seemingly nondescript parts, is strongly interrelated and in which any element whatsoever – this also on various, and not uncommonly simultaneously manifest levels – refers to some other detail. The late German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus once noted the following:

“Die Boulezsche Proza ist differenziert analytisch, aber auch rhetorisch. Sie ist ebenso präzise und direkt wie sie andererseits voller Andeutungen und Indirekter Mitteilungen steckt, die sich erst aus der Konfiguration verschiedener Texte oder Textpartien ergeben, aber zweifellos von Boulez, der auch als Schriftsteller strategisch verfährt, kalkuliert sind...”

'Calculated' or not – and it is advised to use the term 'calculation' in connection with Boulez with some care, because even in 2015 the master is still, completely undeservedly, too often referred to as a barren tone engineer and a detached conjurer of rows – one of the most important characteristics of Boulez' unique and layered prose style (which also because of these qualities passes for a striking verbal counterpart of his music), whether it has a direct or indirect effect, is its outstanding allusiveness. In other words: each time one re-reads texts of Boulez, new and deeper secrets are unveiled, in a way that justifies that they can without reservation be considered works of arts in themselves, also bearing in mind Boulez' idea that the Great Work of Art is great especially because of this aspect, because it will never divulge all its secrets. Neither the first, second or third time, nor the hundredth or thousandth time.

### **Multi-Disciplinary Nature**

All of this passed my mind while reading the book 'The Fertile Land' by Ety Mulder, which was published under the auspices of Stichting Pierre Boulez on the occasion of Boulez' 90th birthday. Mulder is emeritus professor of Musicology and Comparative Cultural Sciences at the Radboud University of Nijmegen, and has been the chairperson of the Stichting Pierre Boulez for years. The work expressly focuses on the multi-disciplinary nature of Boulez' artistry and especially concentrates on the affinity between him and plastic artist and – distinguished – educator Paul Klee. Mulder is especially interested in the two aquarelles with almost the same titles that Paul Klee painted after a trip through Egypt in 1929, 'Monument an der Grenze des Fruchtlandes' and 'Monument im Fruchtland' respectively, to which Pierre Boulez dedicated the essays that Mulder focuses on in her book, and from which he also borrowed their titles.

Speaking of affinity: there is no doubt that affinity also exists between the author and Boulez. An affinity that, as is obvious from this book, flamed up intensely during a series of lectures on Boulez' monumental pentaptych 'Pli selon Pli', which he had dedicated to one of the poets he most loved, Stephane Mallarmé. The lectures were taught by composer Rudolf Escher at the Institute for Musicology at Utrecht University, where Mulder was a student at the time. It is not without reason that 'The Fertile Land', apart from several beautiful reproductions of works by Klee, also contains a copy from a page in Mulder's lecture notes on the first 'Improvisation sur Mallarmé' from the aforementioned piece. The poem used there is about a swan that is trapped in the ice, and it is included in the book in an excellent translation by Mulder herself, together with several other poems that Boulez used in his compositions.

### **Destruction and Creative Power**

As a matter of fact, the construction of this publication can best be characterized as a composition itself. For 'to compose' literally means 'to put together'. And that is exactly what is done here, in a sophisticated manner and with high taste. The introduction, titled 'Thinking on music in the age of Boulez', is followed by the first chapter 'Broken images', which centres on the above-mentioned confrontation with Boulez' 'Pli selon pli', which left such strong marks, and subsequently by 'Flowering straw', containing two translations of texts written by Boulez on another favourite poet of his: René Char. In 'Unchaining', Mulder writes especially about Boulez' relationship with the plastic arts, but also about the archetypal meaning of the creative process in the broadest sense, and that of Boulez in particular. In this context, all aspects of Egyptian mythology of life and death – and especially the myth of Osiris – serve as a metaphor for the problems inevitably encountered in the

creation of the Work of Art. I would like to share the next quote with you, because it so perfectly applies to Boulez' own exposition on that Work of Art:

“The collection of Divine remains as a necessary act for reintegration after dreadful destruction is referred to by Anton Ehrenzweig by the term *poemagogic*, indicating that the artwork addresses its own existence. There is a simultaneity in destruction and creative power. In ‘The Hidden order of art, A study in the psychology of artistic imagination’ he argues: ‘Poemagogic images, in their enormous variety, reflect the various phases and aspects of creativity in a very direct manner, though the central theme of death and rebirth, of trapping and liberation seems to overshadow the others. Death and rebirth mirror the ego’s phases and de-differentiation. This double rhythm can be seen an interaction between basic life and death instincts active within the creative ego.’ ”

### **Restriction and Liberation**

Whoever buries himself in, for example, the genesis and contents of ‘Pli selon pli’ will find numerous links to the foregoing quote. A bit further, Mulder writes:

“The torn body of Osiris that is scattered over the fields is an analogy for the sacred image of the seed that is offered to the earth for the sake of new growth in the coming Spring. Poemagogic works of art, in all their variations, reflect various stages of creativity. They are about universally appealing mythical themes of death and resurrection, *restriction and liberation* [italics by me, MB] as part of the ritual necessity of the sacrifice.”

It is no coincidence that Boulez' ‘Werdegang’ as a composer was constructed around the twin poles ‘restriction’ and ‘liberation’, in a very impressive manner. Restriction and liberation must in this context therefore not be understood as opposites, but as two phases that ultimately merge seamlessly. Take pieces such as ‘Répons’ and ‘...explosante-fixe...’, which expose undeniable sensuality and exuberance; two characteristics that, however, were not captured all too easily. In this respect, Boulez himself once spoke of the ‘regained liberation of exuberance’ after having spent moments as a ‘prisoner of his own experiments’. It is precisely this ‘captivity’ that forms an essential precondition to achieving that liberty. This explains Boulez’ return all the way to the ‘Stunde null’ during the Darmstadt era of the 1950s; this ultimate exposition with stubbornly and most rigidly applied structures. The laws of prescribed serialism were obeyed strictly, during a very short period only, but it has been – and is still being – blown well out of proportion by opponents of Boulez, who did or did not have opportunistic motives.

But this phase of far-reaching fragmentation - which is metaphorically similar to the initial or Black Phase in alchemy or, more in line with the terminology related to the painting by Klee that is printed in the book, comparable to approaching an area ‘at the limit of the fertile land’ which, figuratively speaking, also shows an analogy with Christ’s days in the desert - is a phase all artists who take their mission seriously will have to pass through. And that is one of the most vital themes in Mulder’s (and Boulez’) discussion.

### **Limitlessness - Limitation**

The next chapter, ‘Unheard music’, is a discussion by Boulez on electronic music. And again, the theme of liberation plays a role here. To quote Boulez himself in the descriptive translation by Mulder:

“In the early days of electronic music, there were great, but naive expectations: freedom, precision, boundlessness – these were thought to be the gifts of a truly modern civilization, simply falling into the composer’s lap. (...) However, the freedom the composer had so longed for soon became

unlimited and had to be confined in order to avoid experimental caprice. The stronger the search for more precision, the more that precision is lost. It even becomes unattainable. Limitlessness and search for limitation are constantly seeking to be balanced.”

Needless to say that this is not valid for electronic music only, but at the same time, and particularly, for Boulez' sounding legacy, which after all is typical for its equilibrium between limitlessness and limitation, in a manner that very emphatically appeals to the imagination. One could also put it thus: precisely because of the limitation and the absolute grip on regardless which media – electronic or not – an intriguing, if not almost transcending sensation of limitlessness is evoked when one is submerged in Boulez' music ('Répons'), which is the opposite of all Boulez wished to avoid, namely – as he once called it - 'libertinage' or 'lawlessness'.

### **Interaction and Enrichment**

'The Fertile Land' – the core of this publication as regards Mulder's Boulez-translations - is one of the greatest essays Boulez ever produced, and it centres especially on his admiration for the work and more particularly the teachings of Paul Klee. Not only in connection to his own music, but also to composers deeply admired by him, such as Wagner, Berg, Debussy, Schönberg, Mahler, Stravinsky and Webern. Volumes could be written on these fascinating outpourings, which do not only appeal to our textual skills, but also to our imaginative abilities. Simplicity and complexity are only yards away in this magnificent essay. One of the messages it conveys is that in order to produce a complex, i.e. rich (and enriching to the listener/viewer) work of art, it is vital to choose clear and in principle simple starting points. In this context, and following Klee, Boulez discusses two elements that can easily be visualized, namely (1) a circle and (2) a straight line. If these two are equal in strength or weakness, there is no tension between them. If the circle is stronger than the straight line, the straight line will be distorted. If however the straight line is dominant, the circle will be distorted. But of course, the most fertile situation is where both elements relate to each other in such a way that they both change. Only then will there be question of true interaction and therefore of enrichment of the material, which obviously was the crux to Boulez. This is the principle which he recognizes and greatly admires in Wagner, but which is also in its own manner typical of specific approaches within Serialist thought. When applied to music, the message is that there are various elements that can be manipulated by connecting them through cross-fertilization, such as a rhythmic or non-rhythmic motives, a chord or group of chords, a melodic phrase, and so on. And this can subsequently be applied in various simultaneous or non-simultaneous layers. In this respect, serialism is much more than counting from 1 to 12, and must especially be considered as dealing with materials in various arrays, where the ultimate goal is not so much to create rows, but to create a multi-coloured sound universe, in terms of both density, transparency and movement; a universe which leaves the listener spellbound by its enchantment.

This passage is followed by several closing text fragments, including a translation of part of an interview with Boulez by Michel Baumgartner, which was originally published in a catalogue on the occasion of the exhibition 'La leçon de Paul Klee', held in both Bern and Brussels. In this interview Boulez mentions several topics that he also discussed in his bulky essay on Klee, but now in a manner that is also very comprehensible and clear to readers who are less familiar with the world of Boulez. It is therefore strongly advisable to first read this interview before diving into the elaborate essay.

### **Poetic Laws**

A few remarks on Mulder's translations to conclude with, which she refers to as 'descriptive translations'. They are not literal translations in a formal sense. This can be explained by Boulez' very unique style of writing, which cannot simply be classified as everyday French. It is mostly governed

by exclusive poetic laws, which is even more the case in the writings of linguistic innovator and poet Mallarmé, who was so strongly admired by Boulez. No; these are translations in a Boulezian vein, which bring the reader much closer to the author's essential messages than would have been the case if a purely 'cosmetic' strategy had been applied, following the rules of a standard work on French translation science. Mulder's translation is musical, artistic and poetic, and it therefore introduces the interested reader in an exemplary way to the fascinating and pioneering erudite thoughts of a 20th and 21st century composer and polymath, who unlike any of his contemporaries can be compared to the greatest artists and composers of all times – in purity, profundity, quality, versatility – not excluding Da Vinci, Bach, Goethe, Beethoven, Wagner or Debussy. The reproductions of paintings by Paul Klee are printed in colour and of a fine quality, and a thorough bibliography closes this very recommendable Boulez monography (showing a gem of a black and white picture from 1955 on the back cover, of the still very young Boulez), which in the briefest way possible evokes a very complete image of the immense and substantive meaning of this great and modern Renaissance man.

It only remains for me to mention that the book has been translated into English in an excellent manner by Eva Pelgrom (ISBN / EAN 978-90-74241-35-9), and that the clean and clear design, and the layout and typesetting were in the hands of Reynoud Homan and Koen van der Weide respectively.