

The fertile land

Pierre Boulez Paul Klee
Identifications

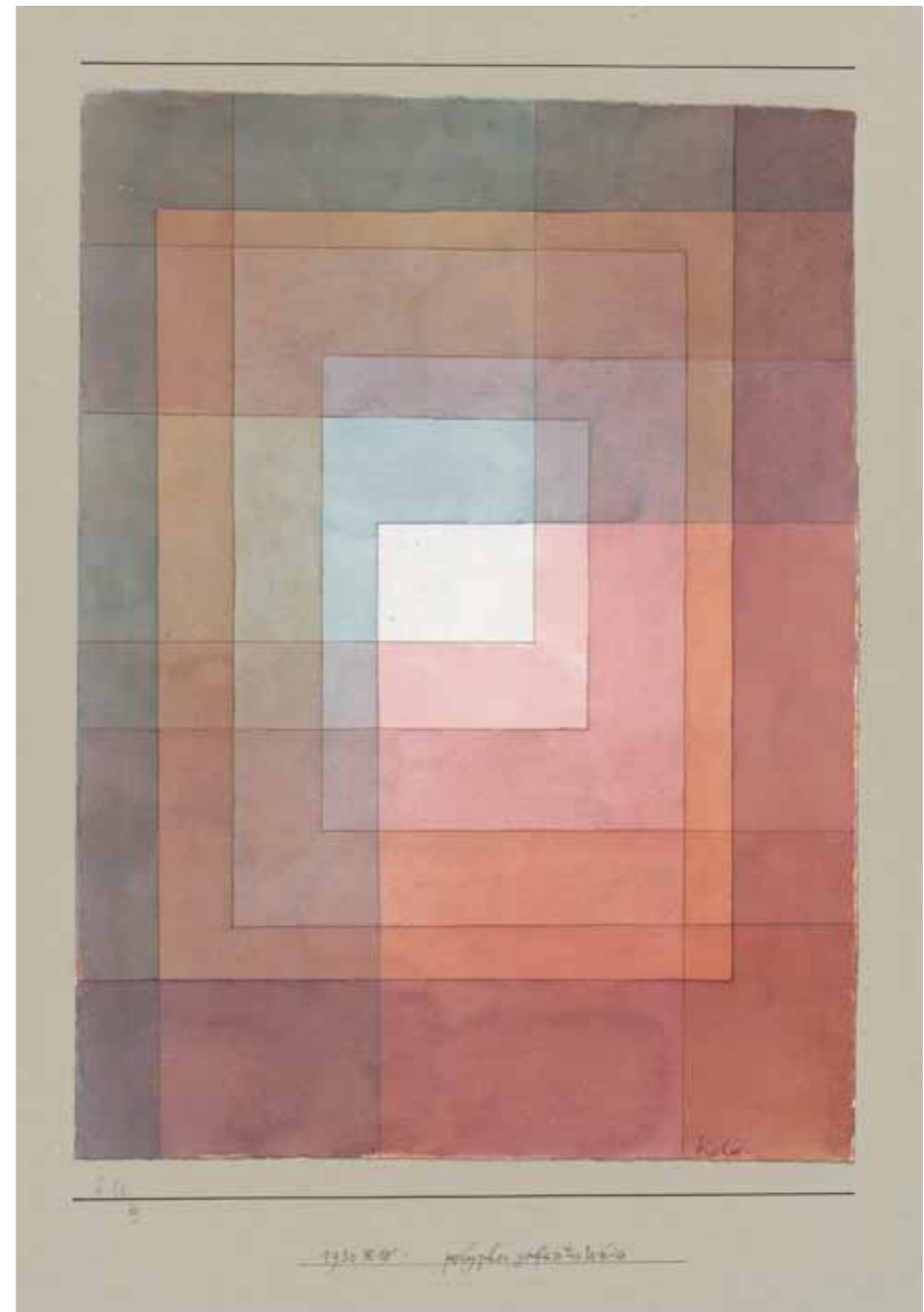


Texts, translations
and mutations

Etty Mulder

Paul Klee
Polyphonic setting for White
Polyphon gefasstes Weiss

1931
Water colour and brush on paper
33.3 × 24.5 cm
Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern



The Fertile Land

Pierre Boulez Paul Klee
Identifications

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water. Only
There is a shadow under this red rock,
(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you:
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

From T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922

Texts, translations, mutations
Etty Mulder

English translation
Eva Pelgrom

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Paul Klee, *Monument at the limit of the fertile land, Monument à la limite du pays fertile / Monument am Grenze des Fruchtländess*, 1929, water colour and pencil on cardboard, 45.8 × 30.7 cm, Museum Sammlung Rosengart, Luzern

Back cover
Pierre Boulez, photograph Louis Ingiardi [Ingi], 1958 during Figures, Doubles, Prismes

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Until several decades ago, all arts were described separately, literally per subject. Each philosopher of art or art theorist who was looking for connections between the arts or for an overall idea on the effect and function of art, could count on fierce criticism. These trends were seen as questionable especially in academic circles. Cultural historians and theoreticians, musicologists, arts historians, theoreticians of literature and poetry – an author who took the liberty of discussing the existence of connections between the arts as a natural possibility, arising from creativity itself, was criticised or even excluded from official canonisation. Professionals were reining out this repression not only on interdisciplinary research on coherence between different artistic fields, but also regarding the contemplation on relationships between art and the psyche as well as the connexions between the arts and social structures. At the time, the number of genres or schools within the humanities that used connecting terms such as psychohistory or semiotics exploded, also prompted by Anglo-Saxon vogues. The magic word ‘semiotics’ finally grew into a generalising denomination, a substitute for the entirely analytic and philosophical approach to the arts and even more: in the nineties, at the glooming of deconstruction, as it became common use to speak of the *semiotics of science*, a tautology for ‘meaning’ in the most meaningless sense.

Although the creative process that led to works of art received some attention, one would rather not touch upon its *existential* meanings, for fear of being labelled ‘un-academic’.

For fear of keeping too little of that distance that accompanied real scientific subjects, factual cumulative-quantitative models were nowhere clung to as stubbornly as in the [former] academic disciplines of arts.

In spite of all that – seemingly completing the chaotic situation – there were academic circles that kept alive some of the leftovers from famous tendencies, – Burckhardt, Huizinga, Cassirer.

After the sixties, in the Western-European and Anglo-Saxon countries musicology as well as the other art-disciplines were suffering from gradual severe devaluation, they were considered ever less significant as independent academic disciplines, and at some universities those disciplines were even lost in fragmentation.

I followed this situation and these developments in the art-sciences from the inside for many years. This caused that, in my own projects, I was incidentally looking for ‘ways out’ by which I could escape the repressive

¹ After the first book of Pierre Boulez, *Penser la musique d’aujourd’hui*, 1964.

In realizing my publication I would like to express my special gratitude to Pierre Boulez for making available the handwritten opening page of the manuscript from his book *Paul Klee: Le Pays Fertile*, 1989. The page, in blue ink on square paper, is part of the collection of the Paul Sacher Stiftung Basel, Inventaire de Textmanuskripte, Paul Klee 1988.

I express my sincere thanks to curators Robert Piencikowski and Michèle Noirjean-Lindner who received me at the Boulez Collection. I also want to thank the publisher of Boulez' texts Christian Bourgois Editeur, who is the copyright holder of the aforementioned handwritten page by Pierre Boulez. Since 2004 five publications have already appeared in the Netherlands as part of the project Boulez in Translation, Boulez Papers, under the auspices of Stichting Pierre Boulez, with translations of and comments to the editions by Christian Bourgois Editeur.

I am very grateful to Michael Baumgartner and Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern for making available text fragments from the catalogue published as *Le Théâtre de la Vie/Overal Theater* from 2008. The permission to use the Flemish-Dutch edition of this work was granted by Ann Mestdag of the Mercator Fonds Brussel, Bozar, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, in coproduction with Zentrum Paul Klee.

Finally, I express my special thanks to Museum Sammlung Rosengart Luzern and Zentrum Paul Klee Bern, as well as to the other collections mentioned in the book, for making available images of important art works and sketches of Paul Klee.

EM

I was confronted with it two years after the completion of its second version: Pli selon pli, fold by fold. Pierre Boulez had worked on it, with interruptions, between 1957 and 1962. He did so again between 1982 and 1989. The confrontation took place at the Institute for Musicology in Utrecht, where the piece was analysed and explained to students by the composer and theoretician Rudolf Escher.

The experience of what is new is inescapable. In all life has to offer, also if it is miserable or hard to endure, it is irrevocable: the shock that makes you put your hands over your eyes, the moment you are irreversibly hit, or *marked*.

You are walking on a street which descends towards the sea, hear voices of people you do not know and who come walking towards you, a cloud blots out the sun and suddenly --. It leaves you powerless. It takes away all your strength. At the same time, your opportunities seem to have increased in a way you could never have imagined.

This is what it is like when together with the other students I am drawn into the sonnet of Mallarmé and introduced to the sounds of Boulez. It indeed happened as the title of the work suggests: fold by fold, *carried* by the grave, almost concerned expression of the amiable and very earnest composer Rudolf Escher in 1964 who has been invited to the Utrecht Institute of Musicology to teach us on Pierre Boulez. He says: 'Last week, while I was writing something on the board, behind my back I heard one of you use the word *icy* after we had listened to the sonnet. Someone whispered: *how icy*. I heard it. And yes, it is true. It is even much more true, and also in a different way than you meant it, because this is exactly what it is about, this *icy* circumstance, as I already explained: *the swan is trapped in the ice*'.

That obsessive image comes from Mallarmé and this is the poem Boulez has used, in which the vowel *i* appears thirty-seven times. That is why it was nicknamed 'sonnet en *i*-majeur'. The redundancy on the vowel *i*, thirty-seven times, can be seen as a metaphor for the ice, for rigidity and paralysis. The risk of being forlorn, lost, for ending up in the scorch of the desert. Fear for the heat, the endless plains that might suddenly loom in front of you, creative artist, and that in fact always lie just around the corner. It is inconceivable how much uncertainty and insecurity there is in the creative process..

The title of the poem Rudolf Escher explained in 1964, set to music by Pierre Boulez, is *Le Cygne*, the swan. Another word automatically echoes in that title: *Signe*, sign; the poem is a sign. This connection between the auditory and the visual is referred to as iconicity. There is a 'pictogram' which is perceived in the same way by the ear and the eye. The poem is

*I even saw the corn, I also saw the king,
who's reigning ever since
the waste land and the wilderness.
I offered him some thistles and I signed
my young men's graves*

Ik heb het koren nog gezien, en ook de koning die
sindsdien de barre woestenij regeert,
ik heb hem distels aangeboden en de graven van mijn
dode jongelingen gesigneerd

Gertrude Starink, *The way to Egypt, twenty passages*, 1977, translation Etty Mulder

Following Paul Klee, Pierre Boulez sees the creation of a work of art as a vegetative process. During its creation, the limit of a *fertile land* is always kept in mind.

A century ago, Kandinsky published his essay *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* [1912], in which he describes the search for that margin from which a work originates as mysterious and mystic. To him, the genesis of art is similar to birth. The work springs from the artist as if it were a living being, a breathing organism; *the work of art is a being that breathes...*

To engage in this process, the artist must in his view be unconditionally free to use any means he chooses. An inevitable and deep uncertainty is at the basis of this all, which is expressed in the question: will my creative attempt be *fertile*; and where will it lead to?

The irrevocable ‘unchaining’ of the work of art is marked by an event taking place one century ago, almost simultaneously with the publication of Kandinsky’s essay, and with great authority, as was argued before, by Igor Stravinsky’s *Le sacre du printemps* [1913], *The Rite of Spring*. Most important in this context is its concluding dance, the *danse sacrée*, which revolves around complete submission to the germinating power of the earth, the begging for fertility in the bursting Spring. ‘Old wise men sitting in a circle witness how a young girl is dancing herself to death. They sacrifice her to conciliate the God of Spring.’ So the vision goes, the archaic notion that obsessed the composer. The piece, *Le sacre*, seals the fate of twentieth century music; it means radical change. Its theme – also on a music theoretical and choreographic level – is the need for renewal, and the fear of the overwhelming powers this involves. It proves that an ancient vegetation ritual cannot be conveyed in sounds and choreography, and to show this – paradoxically – it deals with this issue on stage.

Its message is: this work of art, this ballet eradicates our traditional and

centuries-old ideas on the performing arts. Not beauty, but necessity and truth are essential. Its musical means of expression and rhythm will mark the start of a new era. Its concepts will be crucial in the arts of the coming decennia. The independent *being* that the work of art is, in Kandinsky’s definition, evokes death: the inescapability of [self]destruction, a sacrifice on the level of the germinating and steamy earth.

The unequalled choreography by Pina Bausch fills the stage with peat dust and sweat. That bloody and blooming choreography from 1975 drags us into a terrifying dream that makes clear that this concerns us too. We too, the audience seated in our red velvet chairs, cannot escape the fear of being lost, of being left behind as the powerless remains of this overwhelming force, all for the sake of fertility.

There is nothing left for us but fear of ossification, the fear of death that is shown right before our eyes. This almost literal presentation of the fertility rite *on stage* is a perfect monument for the living connection between art and vegetation.

To mention Boulez and Klee in one breath – where do the stars collide [to make this possible]? The answer is: at the border – the limit, the edge – of the fertile land.

They have not known each other as contemporaries. There is an existential relationship between them through the interconnection of poetry, images and music, which is applicable to both. The works of both spring from precisely this interconnection. The visual works of Klee are imbued with Bach, Mozart, with poetry. And it is unconceivable that the oeuvre of Boulez were created without poetry or visual images.

En passant, Boulez thematises this relationship by borrowing from Klee the titles of two Egyptian aquarelles of Klee, *Monument im Fruchtländ* and *Monument an der Grenze des Fruchtländes*, for essays on his compositional techniques. Paraphrases of these essays have been included in the previous passages of this text.

It is no coincidence that for the *Zentrum Paul Klee*, which was opened in 2005 and designed by Renzo Piano, and located in Bern on the edge of the mountains, in the meadows, precisely this name was selected from thousands of works. For the centre’s name is: *Monument im Fruchtländ*. It is an address in its most profound meaning; it tells us where we must go. Although we, as bystanders, cannot have the same great pretensions in reaching the exact location at the border of that fertile land up to where Boulez wanted to follow Klee.

Limits

Egypt is a mythological cradle, crucial to Western cultural history. Its geographical location and the climatic extremities plaguing the area must be viewed against a dynamic and continuously changing background of mythological and religious symbols. We find them in various spiritual denominations, from antiquity to Christianity. Egypt represents passage; it is a metaphor for [individual] growth: for individuation, the path of life. The flourishing and development of Western culture, of an alphabetic instead of pictographic script, of the ability to abstraction and sublimation, have all followed that path and have left their marks.

The changing of the seasons forces man to reach an ultimate compromise with the overwhelming power of the earth. It must be begged, but also

Original text by Pierre Boulez, 1955, 1966

At the limit of the fertile Land
(Paul Klee)

Once a composer switches to using electronic means, choosing to leave behind the standard instruments, he will encounter numerous obstacles and barricades. In part, these are of a technical nature: he must learn how to work in a studio and how to operate electronic equipment. But that is merely a matter of adjustment. The true leap in the dark is about the inner hearing, which is seriously challenged in this transitional phase toward electronic music. An entire frame of reference with its laws and limitations is disrupted. Many boundaries are abolished, while at the same time several matters must be measured very meticulously, so that new boundaries are again formed.

It is a fact that the instrumental and electronic domains of music require totally different approaches. Imagine how familiar sound colours, intervals, dynamics, rules for the duration of tones and all their variations have become to us.

Take slowing down, for instance, which is always an issue. Musicians first and for all must bear in mind their own physical abilities and limitations. We must always take into consideration the options in sound production within the exact boundaries determined by each sound corpus. The crux is that, from now on, the possibilities to produce different timbres, tones, volumes and durations are infinite: we can now create an entire sound universe by ourselves.

Such a radical change, meaning that the composer can now create all sounds himself, is unprecedented in the history of music. For this does not simply involve one aspect, but the structure of music itself, a structure in which the performance is incorporated. In that context, the composer is at the same time the interpreter of his own work. In a way, he works much like a painter: he has a direct influence on the quality of the work as a whole, including its eventual presentation.

Diesseitig bin ich gar nicht fassbar
Denn ich wohne grad so gut bei den Toten
wie bei den Ungeborenen
Etwas näher dem Herzen der Schöpfung als üblich
Und noch lange nicht nahe genug

I cannot be grasped in this world at all
For I live just as comfortably with the dead
as with the unborn
Somewhat closer to the heart of creation
And yet not nearly close enough

From Paul Klee, *Gedichte*, 1920

Original text by Pierre Boulez, 1989

Paul Klee: The fertile land

I am painting a landscape which is like the view of the fertile land from the high mountains in the Valley of the Kings. The polyphony of the depths and the atmosphere have remained as transparent as possible.

Paul Klee to his wife Lily, 17 April 1929

How often have we not seen yet that brilliant artists of our times were hailed because of constant innovation, while others were condemned because they preferred to leave things as they were. Innovation and, correspondingly, familiarity; perseverance and, correspondingly, monomania are often mixed up. It is indeed not easy to avoid the obstacles here. The issues of the day does not lead you anywhere, but neither does clinging to old habits. Innovation? Of course, but preferably through an organic process and in such a way that changes of perspective are possible.

Neither in music, nor in painting are there many examples of progress that benefits both dynamics and diversity. Klee is one of very few innovators whose thinking and creativity develop through continuous transformations of views and actions, in such a way that it would be implausible and dangerous to predict the course of all that in retrospect. It is a fact that he has not explored all areas with the same consistency or effectiveness. But an overall view of his work in hindsight reveals great certainty, absolute self-confidence, while at the same time the essential questions remain unanswered. We can rely on the fact that, once a problem is touched upon, it will be approached in a consistent manner and that the outcome is crystal clear. And moreover: that several real and interesting problems are discussed. No useful step will be missed unless it leads to a certain obligation, and if it does

Special thanks to Michael Baumgartner and Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern for providing the texts discussed and published here, see p. 22, p. 104.

One of the most recent texts written by Boulez is devoted to Paul Klee. It is entitled *La Leçon de Paul Klee*. This text was appeared in several editions and was also included in the elaborate catalogue accompanying the exhibition of Klee's works called *Le Théâtre de la Vie*, in Dutch *Overall Theater*, which was on show in Bern and Brussels and has been published in several editions. Its organiser, Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern, asked Pierre Boulez to act as a guest curator and, in that role, to arrange a small section of it. A clearer and more direct link between these two titans of twentieth century art could not have been made.

Boulez' creative contribution as a curator led to the addition of a textual triptych to the catalogue about and by Boulez with the title Paul Klee and Music, written by Michael Baumgartner together with Claude Lorent. This important part of the catalogue was published in French and Dutch to accompany the exhibition in Bern and Brussels at the Palais des Beaux Arts. Next to *La Leçon de Paul Klee* by Pierre Boulez, the part *Paul Klee and Music* contains an interview with Boulez on The works of Paul Klee and an essay on music and Bauhaus, entitled Een inleiding in Paul Klees didactische en kunsttheoretische omgang met schilderkunst en muziek aan het Bauhaus 'An introduction to Paul Klee's didactic and art-theoretical views on painting and music at Bauhaus'. Author Michael Baumgartner is head of the research department and general curator at Zentrum Paul Klee.

In this article by Baumgartner, several themes are discussed that are of crucial importance to the history of twentieth-century art. This importance lies in the relationship between the creative process and inter-artistic connections between painting and music. These themes have still not fully been worked out in art theory and given their complexity they fall, as yet, somewhat out of the general scope of interdisciplinary art studies. Discussions of themes like these in Baumgartner's essay have the following titles: *From structural rhythm to a polyphonic composition of image and Bauhaus in Weimar; contributions to morphology in the plastic arts*. What follows are a few impressions from this meaningful catalogue-text.

The starting point is the question how Klee tries to find interrelations between the arts. His quest starts long before he is engaged as a teacher at Bauhaus. He writes in his diary: 'More and more similarities between music and the plastic arts urge themselves upon me.'

At the basis of this perception is the observation that both arts have a 'temporal character'. Referring to Robert Delaunay and Wassily Kandinsky, pioneers of Orphism and synesthesia respectively, Klee tries to visualize

Structures is the title of the composition for two pianos, in two separate parts, on which Boulez worked with an interruption of almost ten years: *Structures 1, premier livre* was composed in 1952, and *Structures 2, deuxième livre* in 1961. The first piece is about 12 minutes, the second 23 minutes. This is the work, especially the first book, he emphatically refers to in conversations and texts when trying to explain what ‘reaching the limit’ in his personal creative experience has meant to him. It was *Structures 1* that brought Boulez *A la Limite de Pays Fertile*, especially the very beginning of *Structures 1a*: 3½ minutes.

In the internal organization of *Structures* Boulez has confronted himself unintentionally with the point of no return that is thematized in the texts that together form this book. It is a problem dealt with earlier by Olivier Messiaen in his *Modes de valeurs et d'intensités*. In that work too, the creative work coincides with the creative method. The question to which extent the ‘creative method’, in this case the serial technique, can coincide with the creative work itself, has in the history of music been brought up ever since the eighteenth century, in connection with Bach’s *Wohltemperierte Klavier* and *Die Kunst der Fuge*. The latter work, in fact not written for a specific instrumentation, has for almost a century and a half been considered a technical exercise in fugue composing, with all its variables. Talking with Maarten Brandt, author of a collection of interviews that became well known as ‘the first Dutch book on Boulez’, striking remarks have been made by the maestro on *Structures*:

I wanted to free my musical vocabulary completely from any form of inner coherence, be it in figures, phrases or developments within the form. I wanted to reconquer every stage of compositional form, step by step, element by element, so that a completely new synthesis would emerge. A synthesis that is not immediately corrupted by stylistic reminiscences (external influences). Subsequently, I had the ambition to unite precisely those aspects of musical language that up to that moment had been in conflict with each other.

I had no intention, so to speak, to borrow a pitch structure from one composer, rhythmic principles from the other and a form concept from a third. In my view, the most pressing order was to create a unity of all elements within musical vocabulary, welded together according to one and the same organizational principle. A principle that would be responsible for the existence, development and mutual relationships within musical vocabulary.

And how did I think I would be able to free my musical

vocabulary from any form of inner coherence?

I included a numerical construction in different stages of the composition process – a network of numbers I myself could influence only indirectly, lending it a certain autonomy while at the same time ensuring that these automatic mechanisms would not lead to chaos. The musical vocabulary was incorporated in a strict network of well-defined options.

I was so strongly aware of this that, immediately after the work had been written, I felt compelled to give the very first part of it the title borrowed from an image by Paul Klee: *Monument an der Grenze des Fruchtlandes*. However, the obligation this presented to find similar dedicated titles for the other two parts of the work held me back and made me choose to grant the patent only to myself. Be that as it may, that [revoked] title indicates how strongly I felt that I must stay there, at the limit of the fertile land.

Three minutes were sufficient for me to mark the border with a sea of infertility.¹

In his texts about Paul Klee, Pierre Boulez links the question of ‘the method’ to limitations in the ‘significance’ of the creative system. In his case and according to his view, after dodecaphony – composing with twelve tones that are mutually interrelated – it is all about compositions of rows in which duration, timbre, dynamics and harmony are laid down: seriality. Where is the limit of comprehensibility in musical powers of expression?

This question is especially relevant to his *Structures 1*, which he describes as ‘some kind of tunnel that could not be avoided; a tunnel I had to go through in order to make progress’. In this work, he feels he is approaching Anton Webern as regards rigidity. Speaking of both ‘structures’ and of the difference between them, he says that he found himself in a stage where he had to reduce musical language to nothingness. Some way: the wheel had to be re-invented.²

The extreme lucidity, the richness and beauty of the works of Pierre Boulez are witnessing to which extend this ‘re-invention of the wheel’ appeared to be crucial in the music of our times.

¹ Boulez is aiming at the duration of *Structures 1a*.

² Pierre Boulez: 1962, in: M. Brandt, *Wegen naar Boulez*, 1995, p. 79-86.

1

Pierre Boulez

Texts from Pierre Boulez

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Pierre Boulez

ca. 1955

Photo: Kicia Laffon

Portraits de musiciens, Exposition Paris, 07-01-2006

Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris

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