

Stichting Pierre Boulez 2007

***Explosante Fixe by Peter Struycken,  
Dynamic Colour Imagery for a composition by Pierre Boulez***

on the occasion of the opening of the exhibition *The Digital Paradise*,  
22 September 2007, Groninger Museum, the Netherlands

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...Explosante - Fixe....

The title simultaneously evokes an explosion and something that is immutably set. Exploding – fixed.

This name of an important composition by Pierre Boulez conveys an enormous tension. It is the piece of music on which Peter Struycken based his large dynamic colour imagery on five screens which premiered in the Groninger Museum on 22 September 2007. Pierre Boulez, the most important composer of the twentieth century and one of the very most important modernist artists, took this title from *L'Amour Fou*, mad love, a phrase from a text by André Breton, the founder of surrealism. The document dates from 1937.

The title also evokes an unprecedented vehemence. Vehemence is a central theme in Boulez's work. In this theme, amongst other elements, Peter Struycken recognizes his own creative identity. The music sounds, directly from the start with an immediate, unprecedented vehemence. This is how the work presents itself to us: it bursts open. In the sensation of –perhaps – Spring blooming, like a *Sacre du Printemps*, an explosion of birdsong in the early morning, the 'beginning' in every way.

When overwhelmed by the sounds and the colours from speakers and screens, you will ask yourself: what is going on in this dynamic musical colour imagery? What is the relationship between those images and the music, and how has all been created? Would people who are solely confronted with the images – without the music – automatically think of Pierre Boulez's piece of music, of this important composition of his?

The music to the eyes by Peter Struycken, his dynamic-visual work of art, these associations of images and sounds and this vehemence raise questions. These questions can be reduced to a few starting points, which can in this text only be dealt with in broad outlines, or schematically. And, to be honest: what can be said at all? Are there any words that suit this synesthetic experience, which astonishes us so - 'eye to eye, eye to ear, ear to eye'.

The experience that is taking place in the aural and visual domains here knocks us off our pedestals as if it were a staggering phenomenon of nature. Such great intensity, such magnificent display of immensely complex seas of colours and sounds, fans, small identifiable coloured objects, surfaces, veils, coloured grit, and geometries of sound.

Only a poet could approximate this experience in words; others would but stammer. One would have to use a language different from every day speech, perhaps

employing the expressionist tenor, as proposed by André Breton: a little bit crazy, under guidance of a bolt of lightning: L'Amour fou.

In 2004, the Stichting Pierre Boulez foundation and the Groninger Museum commissioned Peter Struycken to create a visual analogy to accompany Boulez's *Explosante Fixe*, for the occasion of the eightieth birthday of the composer. The piece of music came into being by the *work in progress* principle characteristic of Boulez. It was created in the years 1972, 1985, 1991, 1991- 1994, fully generated by the computer, and in part, where it concerns the midi flute part, electronically adapted by instrumental amplification. This simply means that the individual instruments have been amplified electronically.

This composition cannot be performed without direct technical assistance. The technical assistance – an essential part of the musical expression – can only be given by Boulez's own studio (IRCAM). Each time the piece is played on a stage, IRCAM's specialists must be present. This is why we are very pleased to have the magnificent 1994 registration by the Ensemble Intercontemporain, conducted by the composer himself.

Struycken's visual version can, in the light of the phased creative process employed by Boulez, be interpreted as the last phase of the work, after an experimental pre-phase on one screen, shown on 26 June 2006 at the Holland Festival, simultaneously with a live performance of the piece by the Nieuw Ensemble in the Amsterdam Muziekgebouw aan het IJ.

If we understand work in progress in such way, and there is much to be said for it, then for convenience's sake we consciously ignore the fact that Boulez and Struycken are completely different artists, and that music and the plastic arts are traditionally separated. We consider the visual construction as the fully logical consequence of the composition; as a pendant of Boulez's music, inextricably bound to this piece.

Now that this version for five screens has been completed, there are new plans in progress, in the form of a version where Struycken's images run synchronously with a live performance of the composition. The Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern has already showed its interest.

Much of Boulez's music can be characterized by the fact that it removes the boundaries between different artistic disciplines, in accordance with the message of modernism. The greatness of Pierre Boulez - of which a lot can be said, for example when we place him within the tradition of music history – becomes especially evident from the morphological principles of his music. The poetics, the basic principles of the creative power that are operative here, are essential. In *Explosante Fixe*, these principles directly form into visual evocations to the listener, one could say: audible movements of tone colours, which are also movements for the eye, or, as Struycken puts it, *in the eye, entoptic*.

The physical character of Pierre Boulez's vehemence cannot be expressed more clearly. It is sensory in the broadest sense of the word. It also illustrates in which physical way the assimilation process of Peter Struycken's analogous creation of images has taken place.

The word entoptic starts from the fact that the eye also perceives its own structures, differing from one incidence of light to the other, a spectacle which is closely related to what we describe as 'seeing', and which is usually reserved to ophthalmic practice. I think Pierre Boulez would be very open to the assumption that this special, usually implicit level of observation plays a role in *Explosante Fixe*. He has used the term *scanning* with reference to his music. The idea is that impulses from the retina also drive the composer to sounds.

References to light in descriptions of Boulez's music are numerous. Microscopic observations, refractions of light, and dispersions of colour accompanying it, are present in the layers of the musical structure, and are evoked by a stimulation of the senses.

Boulez himself does not explicitly use these terms when he speaks about the creative process, and no one has so far asked him any questions of this precise kind. He does however use visual terms, as a matter of course: in referring to *Explosante Fixe* he speaks of the technique of mosaic, of coloured cells, germs that lead to a certain theme when joined together, to which layers are added, eventually forming an image together.

He mentions mosaics – Boulez was in Ravenna – within one large mosaic, fragmented mosaics and those in which there is perfect harmony.

Others compare his music – and the continuous references to a visual world – to a labyrinth. It is about reflections, a game of mirrors, a hall of mirrors....

The central role of the amplified flute is incessantly echoed, in many different dimensions and perspectives. This echoing determines the labyrinth nature, but there is, after all, a way out, an unmistakable haven, in which Ariadne's thread leads to the exit: one note, a tone, a halt: *Fixe*. The pitch is E flat. Here, Boulez suddenly has his feet firmly on the ground, in a way typical of him. It is simply the S for Stravinsky, greatly admired by him. It is an homage.

The reference to the S for Stravinsky especially concerns the symphonies for wind instruments – it occurs in the last segment of the work.

When we allow ourselves to interpret the work – today - in an open and free way, then on this happy occasion of the opening of *The Digital Paradise*, the tone S (for us) momentary does not stand for Stravinsky, but for Struycken...!

This last passage - within *Explosante Fixe* indicated by the separate title *Origine!* - in which this E flat tone functions almost as a magnetic centre before the end or standstill has been achieved, also exists as an individual piece of music, separated from *Explosante Fixe*, and bears the title *Mémoriale*.

It is an *Abschied*, as the composer himself explains, as if he were speaking of Mahler. *Mémoriale* is an in memoriam for the very best, still very young flautist – again an homage – from his ensemble Intercontemporain, Laurence Beauregard, who passed away between the two versions in the genesis of the work. As a flute player, he had already played an important role in the realisation of the sounds of *Explosante Fixe*.

Without Boulez's preoccupation with the plastic arts and Struycken's fascination with music, the visualization of *Explosante Fixe* could not have come into being.

Boulez's commitment to visual images originates, just like his fascination for certain poetry – and this is a matter of importance – in the first place from music itself, which can to him take on the quality of words and images, or incorporate them. He says: to

me there is no essential difference between a painting and a score; both concern a whole, composed of different rhythmic patterns.

Apart from that, and closely related to the previous: Boulez has a predilection for certain artists: the poet René Char, without whom he would never have started composing, and Paul Klee, who is most important.

Boulez wrote many intriguing texts on all themes that occupy his creative mind. He dedicated a book to Klee, entitled *Le pays fertile* (the fertile land), written in 1988, partly as a sequel to an earlier study on Paul Klee and music. Klee was equally proficient in music, as a performing musician, as he was in the plastic arts.

Boulez has several lucid observations and demonstrates how, in Klee's work, the imagination and the elements that form the creation of the image have been reduced to an utmost state of plainness and clarity. This appeals to him: the way in which Klee tries to find simple, univocal basic elements which he transforms into a multiplicity of possibilities, subsequently interpreting them as proliferations of those elements. Boulez's own working method can at least partly be described in these very same terms.

These thoughts of germs, basic principles, budding, shelling, proliferation are where the fertile land is, where new forms come into being. The principle of germinating kernels is very well understood by Struycken.

The text by Boulez on Klee, which is very informative on the influence of visual elements in the work of the composer, addresses space, time and direction, dimensions in which sounding and visual forms make themselves felt in analogous ways. This also applies to terms such as symmetry and register. Boulez uses the term visual rhythmicity. The relations between foreground and background in visual forms, perspective and horizontality and verticality are equivalent to musical processes.

In an article on the importance of Kandinsky, Klee and Mondriaan in the work of Boulez, Peter Stacey writes:

Boulez was influenced by a movement, in music and the visual arts, which concerned itself with the expression of the inner self, which aimed to achieve an abstract, autonomous status, and, for this purpose found it necessary to establish a new language [...].

A visual artist who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. He naturally seeks to apply the methods to his own art.

And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical abstract construction, for repeated notes in colour for setting colour in motion.

It is of the greatest importance to elaborately address this visual identity of Boulez as an artist in connection with the new work of art by Struycken. Without it, any connection with the images by Struycken would not have been possible. However, yet another approach is possible. Boulez, like Struycken, has often been portrayed as a master of figures. Merely the fact that he used the computer lead to this image - and Peter Struycken will have the same experience. Without any awareness of the

shared basic principles in the creative process, Struycken could not have unveiled the very important qualities of Boulez in *Explosante Fixe*. Since this is the way it should be seen: Struycken *unveils* Boulez.

Struycken's analogy of colours did not come into being through an analysis of the score of Boulez's work, or through some kind of transformation of principles from the auditive to the visual domain, so as to match the images and the notes as closely as possible. Struycken did not use a rational, analytical method of such kind. He chose what one might call a 'short cut', via the impulses he experienced during a long and intense process of observation and full surrender, a complete familiarization with the sounding forms of a version conducted by the composer himself. This process was a full and passionate identification of Struycken with Boulez through the composition.

Gradually, a structure originated from the listening process, a schematic grip at first, some kind of global map, schedule, chronometry. It was an honour for me to lend assistance, together with Ton Hartsuiker, in this phase. It was a symbolic rendering in which the acoustic form, with all its individual elements and extensions and repetitions was recorded per second, or was registered auditive. This was done to objectify and make manageable the fixed cores and recurrent elements that stick in the memory as possible elements of the visual power of imagination. This led to a first production for one screen, which, as mentioned above, has been shown in Amsterdam as part of the Holland Festival - quite an experience.

For the five screen version, Struycken went deeper and deeper into the music. The original concept was, with a few adaptations, preserved as a basic form for the greatly extended images, moving on five screens.

The multiplicity of screens enabled Struycken to make the plural dimensionality, the diverse perspectives and the layeredness of the music fan out and bloom in far greater dimensions: *Explosante...*

The musical perspective can in this version unfold to a bottomless visual depth and introspection; moments of intense motionlessness or suggestions of motionlessness. In whatever way: *Fixe*.

By referring to these moments of standstill, one could also use the term transcendence - not as a religious term of course, but literally: transcendence of music to image, and also in an even deeper, almost visionary sense, to a meta-level of absolute abstraction and transparency. In these moments, to use Boulez's own words, the sound - or the creative moment - has become fully detached, totally free and brand new.

This freedom and existential renewal has now, in the work by Peter Struycken taken on a visually perceptible form, after a most fascinating preparation. A moment suprême in the history of music and the visual arts.