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Lambert Dousson, *Une manière de penser et de sentir : Essai sur Pierre Boulez*

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REFERENCES

Lambert Dousson, *Une manière de penser et de sentir : Essai sur Pierre Boulez*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2017, 380 p.

- ¹ *Une manière de penser et de sentir : Essai sur Pierre Boulez*, is the product of Lambert Dousson's doctoral thesis, defended at the University of Nanterre in 2011. Dousson sets out to show how Boulez's musical thought contains 'an unstated ['informulé'] philosophy of the subject' that is practiced 'tacitly' in his composition (p. 17) and which corresponds to the author's conviction that 'every practice is at the same time a practice of the self' ['pratique de soi'], a starting point that undoubtedly resonates with statements made by Boulez. Dousson locates Boulez's subjectivity in the 'paradoxical relation' between his activities as a composer of music and a writer of prose (p. 18), claiming that far from clarifying his musical practice, his 'arsenal of concepts' in fact only makes it more obscure and unanalysable and serves in helping him to cover his tracks. As Dousson notes, Boulez's musical 'philosophy' arises from the activity of composition (p. 20) and from technical writing ('écriture'). While a large number of compositions from *Douze Notations* for piano (1945; 1985) to *Sur Incises* (1998) are alluded to in the introduction, and Dousson captures something of the sweep of Boulez's compositional trajectory, there is very little mention of the music in the main body of the text. Similarly, while Dousson picks up in his Introduction on Boulez's many references to other composers, writers and artists in the articulation of his own positions, this is purely by way of context-setting.

- 2 Foregoing any chronological or historical account of Boulez's philosophical engagements, Dousson's first reference to other philosophers / thinkers is the well-known meeting at IRCAM in 1978 with Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, which occurred relatively late in the composer's career. Indeed the book is firmly centred for the most part on the Boulez of the Darmstadt lectures¹ from 1960 and a few surrounding articles and lectures, interpreted in particular relation to Foucault's statements in a conversation with the composer and in a short article. While Foucault perhaps has the primary place, the other chapters and the entire structure of the book seem determined to some extent by the presence of the three great thinkers at IRCAM in 1978, and each is given prominence at different points in Dousson's discussion. Following the division operative within the musical subject between 'music's autonomy' and 'the autonomy of the subject' (p. 27), the book is structured as four lengthy chapters, (1) 'The subject of writing [*écriture*]'; (2) 'Structures'; (3) 'Proliferation degree zero' and (4) 'Cuts' [*Coupures*] followed by a conclusion and an interview with Boulez which draws on two meetings with the composer in 2006 and 2007. Over the course of the book, Dousson assembles a great number of Boulez's concepts in an idiosyncratic constellation centred on the structural model.
- 3 Chapter 1, titled *The Subject of Writing* [*Le sujet de l'écriture*], sets out from Foucault's article 'Pierre Boulez, l'écran traversé'² (1982) and the published conversation between Boulez and Foucault 'La Musique contemporaine et le public'³ (1983). For Dousson it is significant how in the written form of the conversation both participants seem either to avoid responding directly to what the other has said or respond obliquely. This leads him to infer that the encounter brings to light 'an inflection in Foucault's thought' and something 'unthought in Boulez's reflection' (p. 31), a double movement whereby 'musical writing [*écriture*]' properly speaking is split off from "thought", from "reflection" on its "rules" and "techniques" and secondly where 'the "external face"' of this musical writing 'breaks with its internal "face" making it so "difficult" to listen to, so "imperious" (*impérieu[se]*), in contrast with the familiarity engendered by 'repeated listening to classical music'.
- 4 Considering Boulez through a Foucauldian lens, the Darmstadt Lectures are viewed as embodying 'a specific form of subjectivation' (p. 37) in which thought is not 'pure theory' but rather 'a fold in practice' (p. 38), a 'non-normed place' (p. 40), a 'new free space' which in Boulez 'articulates an ontology of the limit' (p. 41), of 'transgression', a step Dousson relates to similar moves in Blanchot, Bataille, Artaud and Genet (p. 42). Accordingly 'there is no originary subject of music (transcendent or transcendental), that would have to be obliterated by norms' (p. 43) and musical creativity works itself out in this space between the 'ontology of the limit' and 'pragmatic play' (p. 45). Foucault and Kant are the primary sources in this first chapter, and Dousson subscribes to Foucault's suggestion that modernity is an 'attitude', an 'ethos' and 'a manner of thinking and feeling' that is better understood in relation to 'difference' rather than to 'rupture' (p. 50). In a line of thought linking Boulez with Kant, Baudelaire and Foucault, it is a matter of imagining things other than they are and of transforming them not by destroying them but in capturing what is really within them (p. 57), by negotiating 'the truth of the real and the exercise of freedom' (p. 58). What is rather surprising in this first chapter is the extent to which any detailed discussion of Boulez's writing is absent, though generous quotations are appended from Foucault, Kant and others. While Dousson is undoubtedly preparing the ground theoretically for the later chapters, there

is nevertheless a sense that Boulez's views are to some extent sedimented for the author and already in place for philosophical processing. The discussions of Foucault and Kant are nevertheless extensive and interesting and we are to recognise the composer as embodying Foucauldian subjectivation and the Kantian working of genius. Dousson tells us that the remainder of the book has the task of 'retracing the steps in the formation of this subject for whom Pierre Boulez is the proper name' (p. 77), beyond which, he identifies 'formalism, modernism, autonomy' as 'the Ariadne's thread of the Boulezian labyrinth' (p. 79).

- 5 In Chapters 2-4, reference to the Darmstadt lectures is pervasive. Chapter 2 'Structures' is primarily a commentary on Boulez's axiomatic-deductive processes in the lectures and the composer is identified at the outset (courtesy of Barthes) within a structural universe along with Troubetzkoy, Dumézil, Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Mondrian, Butor and others (pp. 81-2). Picking up on Barthes's insight that structural thought is a certain manner of doing and thinking that is transversal in its applicability to 'ideas' and 'languages', analysis and creation, Dousson identifies 'structural man' as 'the name of this subjectivity' (p. 82). From this he infers that 'the structural analysis of self and the structural creation of self are two folds in the same exercise of subjectivation' (p. 83). Structure is 'the name of a power of subjectivity' and 'structural man' is 'an effect of the structure he exercises'. Indeed, 'the model of "structural man" is the writer, painter, musician; the principle of the intelligibility of structure, its "common sign", is art' (p. 84). What Foucault attributes to 'the formal' Barthes sees in 'structure'. Acknowledging the breadth of definitions and forms of structuralism, Dousson suggests that if *Boulez on Music Today* 'contains a structuralist theory of musical writing' this is the case 'because the structure is this operator of reflection on the rules of musical writing through which a certain form of subjectivity is configured' (p. 85). While brief reference is made to the axiomatic theory of Louis Rougier, this is quickly subsumed within the structuralist paradigm (p. 87), and where Dousson embarks on a close reading of certain passages of *Boulez on Music Today* in relation to processes of deduction, these are retranslated in terms of Barthes's 'structural activity' (p. 91). Nevertheless, 'the structural axiomatic is also what constructs a space proper to subjectivity' (p. 97) and discussing a little of Boulez's idiosyncratic serial practice ('penetrating [it] more profoundly' (p. 97)), Dousson concludes that the Boulezian series amounts to 'a structure' (p. 100).
- 6 Dousson's descriptions of Boulez's serial practice, as set out in *Boulez on Music Today*, are accurate but nevertheless rather limited in scope and, at least to this author, seem rather arid and abstract [a fault that was levelled at Boulez's original text] in comparison with the work of many contemporary Boulez scholars who show how all of this theorising operates in practice. While it may be argued that this is to miss Dousson's point, which is to discuss Boulez's musical thought in its separation from musical result, it is difficult to see how limiting himself for the most part to the explanations and examples set out in the Darmstadt lectures matches the work of those scholars who show how deduction operates within individual works, from work to work and across families of works. At the same time, Dousson raises the compositional problem of how to accommodate freedom and system to that of a serious philosophical question deserving of explanation, and this is interesting (e.g. p. 124). What is missing however is any kind of acknowledgement of the historical factors that led to the brief implementation of rigorous systems before the reintroduction of aspects of freedom. Dousson augments the discussion towards the end of the chapter when he introduces

points from further essays by Boulez and highlights in the process certain shifts in position and emphasis. Ultimately, he argues that ‘it is not a question of calling the validity of the conceptual machine of *Boulez on Music Today* radically into question’ but rather of ‘interrogating its presuppositions’ (p. 150).

- 7 In Chapter 3 ‘Proliferation degree zero’, Dousson suggests that with Boulezian proliferation ‘everything happens as if the true subject of proliferation was less the practice of writing than a writing which practises itself, alone. As if, behind the *I* of proliferation, proliferation itself (a one [‘on’]) loomed’ (p. 155). Unlike with deduction, proliferation ‘discloses a dimension of musical invention that the structural paradigm does not allow us to think, even hides’ (p. 156) and the accumulations engendered by proliferation lead Dousson to consider the question of perceptibility (p. 158). When we finally reach the concept of dialectic, it is one where ‘structure ... is the motor for a *dialectic* of history’ (p. 165) in which ‘everything happens as if modal and tonal scales could be considered as structures deduced from generative rules like those of serial technique’ and whereby ‘serial technique appears to contain and recapitulate the entire history of musical language within its rules’ (p. 168). The concept of ‘evolution’ also enters the picture at this point and Dousson states that ‘for Boulez structure is not only the heuristic instrument in the light of which one can understand, beyond the variations to which it submits, the coherence, unity, linearity and unidirectionality of this history ruled by necessity’ (p. 169). In consequence, generalised serialism marks ‘the end of history’, its ‘unpassable horizon’ from which there is no way back, a conviction which forms the ground for Boulez’s many criticisms of other composers, past and present (pp. 173-7).
- 8 Boulez’s practice is described as one of ‘erasure’ [‘effacement’], which consists of ‘radically *disconnecting* the notion of practice from that of subjectivity and, in consequence, of reducing practice to technique’ (p. 186). Erasure leads Dousson to ‘negation’ and Barthes’s idea of the ‘degree zero of writing’, which for Boulez is tied up with Cartesian doubt (p. 188). While the negational period in Boulez’s trajectory relates only from 1946 to at the very latest 1954, during which time he produced a number of interesting and revealing articles on his practice, Dousson persists for the most part with the Darmstadt lectures and other writings and lectures from around the same time (late 1950s/early 1960s), as well as the conversations with Deliège (1970s), thus ignoring for the most part the earlier writings from the 1940s and early 1950s. Arguably, those writings would not suit his purpose quite so well since Boulez is at his most identifiably structural in the Darmstadt lectures, and Dousson seemingly wishes to assemble all other insights from whatever period of Boulez’s development around this central idea. When some early writings are cited (e.g. ‘Moment de Jean-Sébastien Bach’ (p. 215), they are generally not related to their chronological place in Boulez’s development.
- 9 Lévi-Strauss’s criticisms of Boulez’s serialism are discussed with Dousson concluding that ‘Boulez’s structuralism is, in reality, nothing other than *formalism* (which is to say exactly the opposite of structuralism, since its radical conventionalism surreptitiously reintroduces an idealist opposition ... between “form” (serial) and “content” (musical), “form” and “matter”, “abstract” and “concrete”’ (p. 219). As elsewhere, Dousson cites only the basic primary texts, in this case Boulez’s lectures and Lévi-Strauss’s book *The Raw and the Cooked*,⁴ which are discussed in isolation from other formative forces on the one hand and with no reference to what other commentators (in this case Pousseur,

Eco, Court, Nattiez et al.), have made of them, on the other. It is also regrettable that Dousson spends so much time on *Structures Ia* (1952) with very little attention given to arguably more interesting musical compositions though there are a few pages on *Éclat* (1965) in the final chapter. The presence of these pages indicates that further reference to particular compositions would not have been inimical to the author's theoretical approach.

- 10 Chapter 4 'Coupures' begins again with Foucault, and Dousson makes the claim that in Boulez, 'space is ... the terrain of play in which practice goes through the screen of listening ['traverse l'écran de l'écoute']' (p. 242). The central theme of the chapter 'the cut ['la coupure']' is defined, in terms highly reminiscent of the conversations with Deliège, as 'this operation which articulates chance' either as 'un hasard "par hasard"' or as 'un hasard "par volonté"' (p. 243), in other words the difference between accidental chance and willed chance. The concept of 'space' brings Dousson to Boulez's smooth and striated spaces, which the composer applied to all of the parameters of sound, and Deleuze and Guattari, who appropriated the smooth and the striated as philosophical concepts are also invoked at this point (p. 245).
- 11 Dousson translates Boulez's terms idiosyncratically into smooth and striated structure (p. 260). At this point, Dousson is still writing about the 'degree zero' and *Structures Ia* across the face of the crucial changes in Boulez's approach since that short experimental period in the early 1950s. *Structures Ia* is not at all what Boulez has in mind in discussing the smooth and the striated (p. 279) and while some acknowledgement of Wyshnegradsky's panisority, Cage's quarter-tones, as well as glissandi and clusters in Xenakis, Ligeti and Penderecki might have helped focus the discussion, all of this is ignored. For Dousson, 'the cut ['la coupure']' designates the conceptual operation, proper to practice, which permits one to think the categories of the smooth and the striated as *properties*, as perceptual qualities of space' (p. 277). Or again it is 'this *practical* operation by which it is possible to think the smooth and the striated conceptually in accordance with the structural paradigm' (p. 278). In several places throughout this book I wondered why the author did not call upon the work of Umberto Eco who theorised so well in relation to music, structures and openness, but it is nowhere to be found. Returning to his initial hypothesis at this point, Dousson can now write that this space which Boulez conceptualises is 'the place of subjectivation where an *experience* of music is established' (p. 283) and ultimately it is in the creation of this 'new free space' that the composer develops 'other ways of feeling and thinking' (p. 332).
- 12 I like the fundamental impulse that seems to be at the origin of the book but the author's single-minded focus on a very short time-frame within Boulez's career in selecting his key texts, primarily the Darmstadt lectures, and the seriousness with which he accepts every word with little thought to context, limits the result severely. Few would disagree that there is much that is difficult in the Darmstadt lectures when taken alone and it may well be that at this point in his career (c. 1960) Boulez did in fact want to surround his work with an aura of inscrutability. While numerous commentators over the years lamented the remote nature of the theory contained in the Darmstadt lectures and the seemingly analysable nature of *Le Marteau sans maître* (1952-1955) and other of Boulez's works, this complaint was no longer tenable by the time Dousson was writing his PhD, never mind the date of its eventual publication. From Lev Koblyakov's poetic analysis of important aspects of the making of *Le Marteau*⁵ and the

essays of Robert Pienckowski⁶ and Pascal Decroupet⁷, to Jonathan Goldman's analyses of the late works⁸, Peter O'Hagan's work on Boulez's piano music⁹, and the multiple analytical contributions in our edited volume *Pierre Boulez Studies*¹⁰, to take only some key examples, scholars have long come to terms with retracing Boulez's working practices and the interplay of ideas and technical processes. While Dousson does not make claims of unanalysability, his book is predicated on the basis of splits between Boulez the theoretician and composer, an argument which is to some degree undermined by recent scholarship revealing the many links between theory and practice. That Dousson may nevertheless still have a point worth pursuing is not in question but what seems key is that in order to make it more forcefully and persuasively, he would need to take much greater account of what has been going on in Boulez Studies over a considerable period. Of course, he may argue with some justification that he is doing philosophy and not musicology.

- 13 Scholars are long used to considering Boulez's writings, interviews and his many correspondences (mostly unpublished) along with his voluminous sketches and redrafted scores. Lacking most of this, Dousson's Boulez is based only on a segment of writings revealing only an aspect of his activity and thinking. Even then, the ideas in the Darmstadt lectures are much more comprehensible when viewed in relation to the context of the time and what Boulez did with them in practice. This would not be to drag Dousson into the fields of musicology or music analysis but merely to emphasise that Boulez's writings are not self-standing philosophical texts and that they were written in conjunction with a great deal of compositional work which changed over time in subtle ways. How can the author be so sure of a split between musical writing and musical reflection or between the external and internal faces of the music, without knowing something about those internal aspects? How can he know what Boulez means by the terms he uses in the Darmstadt lectures and elsewhere without seeing what they mean for him in practice? While Foucault and Barthes provide productive departures for re-thinking aspects of Boulez's work including subjectivation, as with the Darmstadt lectures, Dousson gives too much credence and importance to Foucault's texts with and about the composer.
- 14 It is stated at the outset that this book is the product also of the interventions of the panellists on the jury for his PhD examination. This notwithstanding, it is surprising that very few items in the bibliography date from after 2011. Furthermore, the bibliography indicates a lack of reference to sources not available in French.
- 15 Lambert Dousson is clearly a rigorous thinker who has produced a well-written study. It is a study which promises a great deal at the outset and which is partially successful in its aims, but which also proved itself a rather frustrating experience at times, at least for this reader.

NOTES

1. Published in German as *Musikdenken heute 1, Darmstädter Beiträge zur neuen Musik*, n° 5, Mainz, Schott, 1963; in French as *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*, Paris/Geneva, Gonthier/Denoël, 1963; in English translation as *Boulez on Music Today*, trans. Susan Bradshaw and Richard Rodney Bennett, London, Faber and Faber, 1971.
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 6. For example: PIENCIKOWSKI Robert, 'Nature morte avec guitare', HÄUSLER Josef (ed.), *Pierre Boulez: eine festschrift zum 60. Geburtstag am 26. März 1985*, Vienna, Universal Edition, 1985, p. 66-81; *id.*, 'Introduction', BOULEZ Pierre, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991, p. xiii-xxix; *id.*, "'Assez lent, suspendu, comme imprévisible". Quelques aperçus sur les travaux d'approche d'Éclat', *Genesis*, 4, 1993, p. 51-67.
 7. DECROUPET Pascal, 'Comment Boulez pense sa musique au début des années soixante', ALBÈRA Philippe (ed.), *Pli selon pli de Pierre Boulez. Études et entretien*, Genève, Contrechamps, 2003, p. 49-58; *id.*, LELEU Jean-Louis (eds.), *Pierre Boulez: Techniques d'écriture et enjeux esthétiques*, Genève, Contrechamps, 2006.
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 9. O'HAGAN Peter, *Pierre Boulez and the Piano: A Study in Style and Technique*, London, Routledge, 2016.
 10. CAMPBELL Edward, O'HAGAN Peter (eds.), *Pierre Boulez Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016.
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