

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Pierre Boulez – *Livre pour cordes*

*Born March 26, 1925, Montbrison, France.
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Livre pour cordes

Boulez composed his *Livre pour quatuor* for string quartet in 1948 and 1949. It was premiered piecemeal at Donaueschingen and Darmstadt between 1955 and 1962. Boulez reworked the first movement for full string orchestra as *Livre pour cordes* in 1968 and conducted the New Philharmonia in the first performances in December of that year in London. *Livre pour cordes* was further revised in 1988 and that version was premiered by the BBC Symphony Orchestra, under the composer's direction, on January 17, 1989, in London. Performance time is approximately eleven minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Boulez's *Livre pour cordes* were given at Orchestra Hall on February 27 and 28, 1969, with the composer conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on December 2, 3, 4, 5, and 7, 1999, also with the composer conducting.

A short piece for strings, *Livre pour cordes* offers us a disproportionately expansive view of Boulez's output. For one thing, it takes us to two very different points in his career, starting in the late 1940s, when his radical views and bracing early works breathed new life into the music scene. (Like many mathematicians—and mathematics was one of Boulez's first interests—Boulez made his mark while he was still in his early twenties.)

The world of music was a relatively staid and uneventful place in the forties, and, after 1945, when it lost two of its greatest pioneers—Webern and Bartók—it seemed particularly bereft of visionaries. The two aging giants of the early century, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, were still writing music, although Stravinsky was stuck in the neoclassic mode he

had been perfecting for two decades and Schoenberg was at something of a standstill, his output diminished by poor health and bad eyesight.

Boulez arrived in Paris in the autumn of 1943 to study music, and the following September he began to work privately with Olivier Messiaen, who had made his name before the war as the composer of several striking and idiosyncratic works. (His wartime masterpiece, *Quartet for the End of Time*, brought him renewed fame.) Boulez was not a student for long—that is, his singular, independent musical personality quickly emerged—and, with a string of compositions in the late forties, he rapidly staked his claim as one of the truly original musical thinkers of the time. The twelve short *Notations* for piano he composed in 1945 (later withdrawn and later still reexplored in versions for full orchestra) are among the earliest of these works. By the time of the *Livre pour quatuor*, a “book for quartet” composed in 1948 and 1949, Boulez had more than fulfilled the promise he later said any teacher must expect of a student: “Throw away the book I have taught you to read and add a new, wholly unexpected page!” This radical new *Livre* is the genesis of the *Livre pour cordes*—the “book for strings” performed at these concerts.

Livre pour quatuor foreshadowed much of Boulez’s development as a composer, and it also stood as a refutation of all that was passé and predictable in music at the time. (The Janus-face of the century at its mid-point—when the shockingly new squared shoulders against the old-fashioned—was never more apparent than in the premieres, just three weeks apart in 1950, of two major scores—Strauss’s *Four Last Songs* and Boulez’s *Second Piano Sonata*.) *Livre*, in its first version for string quartet, is a collection of six movements (although the fourth was never published) which can be played in any order. (It predates the many scores of the fifties and sixties that leave the sequence of movements to the players.) It is an answer to the advances of earlier pioneering composers of quartets, from Beethoven to Bartók. Taking the last works of Anton Webern and the brand new *Four Rhythmic Etudes* of Messiaen as more immediate point of departure, in certain movements Boulez began to explore the idea of “total serialism,” where not only the pitch, but the duration, intensity, and timbre of each sound is governed by the rules of serialism. The work was introduced piecemeal over time, from 1955 to 1962—among the earliest of Boulez’s works to yield a series of premieres—and was then withdrawn by the composer, partly because of its extreme demands on the players.

By 1968, when Boulez returned to the *Livre*, he was no longer a young rebel but a distinguished leader of the avant-garde. His founding of the *Domaine Musical* concerts in Paris in 1954 had set up an important dialogue between

contemporary composers and “a public interested in its own century.” And the premiere in 1955 of his *Le marteau sans maître* (The hammer with no master)—an instant classic—established him as an undisputed master in his own right. Beginning in the early 1960s, Boulez also emerged as a significant orchestral conductor. (His Bayreuth debut, conducting *Parsifal* in 1966, was a brilliant success.) *Pli selon pli* (Fold upon fold) for soprano and orchestra—a setting of texts by Mallarmé dating from 1962—was immediately recognized as a landmark in the complex landscape of post-war music.

Boulez had been planning to revise *Livre pour quatuor* for some time. In 1968, he set out to completely reconsider the work, now recasting it for full string orchestra. The new *Livre pour cordes* was never just a practical renovation—simply spreading the players’ difficulties over a large ensemble, for example—but instead a total overhaul, allowing Boulez to explore every implication of his earlier score. The original quartet was not so much expanded as exploded—at one point there are now thirty-four different lines of music on the page—into a work of intricacy, depth, and surpassing textural beauty. (The distance traveled is not as great as that of *Notations*, which blossomed from twelve-measure pieces for solo piano to much bigger structures for large orchestra, but the kind of journey undertaken is of a similar, transformative nature.)

This kind of reexamination, and, at the same, amplification of early work, has become a hallmark of Boulez’s output, and he is a master at considering a single musical idea from every point of view—and creating a body of exquisite, ever-richer, often distantly related works in the process. Although Boulez has moved through distinct phases in his work—so-called total serialism in the early fifties, for example, or the more recent fusion of electronics with traditional instruments—essential ideas and preoccupations run through his output, linking past and present. As Boulez said in an interview with Jean-Pierre Derrien, “There is no doubt that my world is now more elaborate than it was before. It is basically the same with Proust, where the beginning and end of *A la recherche du temps perdu* are clearly by the same writer, but the whole nature and outline of the developments are different.”

In 1968 Boulez introduced the new *Livre pour cordes* in London. (It has two parts: 1a, Variation, and 1b, Movement.) In the meantime, he withdrew the original version for string quartet. Twenty years later, Boulez returned to this long-running work in progress, and revised *Livre* yet again, in the process making one movement of the two parts. At the moment, therefore, the piece performed at these concerts is the only remnant of the original *Livre* in the repertory—the sole extant “chapter” from the large book Boulez began some sixty years ago.

For the Record

A 1999 performance by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra of Boulez's *Livre pour cordes* (conducted by the composer) is included on *From the Archives*, vol. 19: *A Tribute to Pierre Boulez*.

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