

CONVERSATION WITH PIERRE BOULEZ - PARIS. JUNE 12th 2006.

We began by reminiscing about the PIERROT LUNAIRE performance we did together at the Roundhouse with members of the BBC Symphony Orchestra in the seventies.

(Near the beginning of our conversation his Secretary interrupted with the news of the death of Gyorgy Ligeti – my last visit to IRCAM had been to record Ligeti's *Aventures/Nouvelles Aventures* with PB and the Ensemble Intercontemporain, with the composer present)

JM. I've recently visited the Arnold Schoenberg Center in Vienna, where I listened to the recording of your conversation with Theodor Adorno, in 1965, in which you compared Schoenberg's 1940 recording of PIERROT LUNAIRE with Erika Stiedry-Wagner, with your own 'recent' disc with Helga Pilarczyk.

I also looked at the transcript of the interview in the publication '*Musik Concepte: Schoenberg und der Sprechgesang*'.

P.B. That was long ago!

J.M. From today's perspective: has your view of the work changed since then? What, if any, has been the effect of conducting more opera, Wagner in particular? Did this perhaps give a more Germanic slant to the piece?

Has your view of the sprech-stimme changed over the years? Christine Schäfer is very different from Pilarczyk. Do you see the work as Expressionist, or do you prefer a lighter cabaret style? What would be your ideal voice/interpretation?

P.B. The Wagner was very interesting – I did it because they asked me to do it. No it did not really alter my view of Pierrot or anything else, but today's way of doing Pierrot is now different – much less exaggerated and emphatic (less 'Expressionist')

There are a number of different ways it can be approached: poetic, dramatic, sarcastic, and humorous.

. I always change the interpretation and adapt to whatever weight and register of voice the singer has – so it is different each time. (Pilarczyk was lower than Schäfer) I have no clear preference, but I look forward to doing it with Anja Silja next.

Pitch accuracy should now certainly be the norm – (actresses who cannot attempt accuracy should not be engaged). The aim is to do what Schoenberg wanted, though his instructions in the Preface are ambiguous and unclear.

I heard a recording of Marya Freund with Italian Radio - she sang it. Severino Gazzelloni played the flute. The voice was separated from the instruments.

J.M. How much personal control have you/do you like to have with the vocal performance? How do you interpret Schoenberg's confusing instructions?

Do you believe it should be nearer to singing than speaking tone basically?

(Christine Schäfer sings the start of no.21) How did you feel about Yvonne Minton's mostly sung performance? Did you mind that Pilarczyk was not entirely pitch accurate? What would you say to those who still say it doesn't matter about pitches or intervals in the voice part? How should one react to Leonard Stein's anecdote about Schoenberg demonstrating *Ode To Napoleon* and saying that expression was more important than accuracy?

PB. I do not want to have much personal control over voices, and I never coach them on this aspect (I reminded him of the tips he gave me – closing on to the final 'n' of

‘verschwiegen’ in no. 8 *Nacht*, and rolling the ‘r’s in ‘ver-lernt’ in no.9 *Gebet an Pierrot*. I do not mind people doing the work differently. I encouraged Schäfer to begin no.21 non vibrato. Yes, pitches DO matter, and closing on to consonants early helps with sprech-stimme. I am surprised that Yvonne Minton was criticised so heavily – she worked very hard and it was a taxing experience for her – she found it very difficult indeed. She did such a fine Countess Geschwitz in *Lulu* – I wonder what has happened to her?

I do prefer accuracy to a reliance on personal charisma.

I too am confused by Schoenberg’s reported views on putting expression above accuracy, but agree that expression is important – but it’s all in the music.

J.M. You were quoted as saying that sprech-stimme is an imperfect/impure (‘unrein’) middle way. You dislike hysteria - perhaps this is a French rather than a German characteristic. In a recent Musical Times article an American musicologist puts forward the view that Schoenberg’s sprech-stimme was influenced by hearing French cabaret artists while in Berlin. What do you think about that?

In your own music (e.g. *Le Marteau Sans Maître*, *Le Soleil des Eaux*) you’ve used sprech-stimme subtly to inflect the ends of phrases so that it falls quite naturally and is not so very strange on the ear. (I also mentioned Webern’s little-known use of sprech-stimme discovered just after that Adorno interview – an early orchestral song ‘*O sanftes Glühn*’ – Australian composer, pianist and conductor Keith Humble had smuggled a photo-copy out of Paris, and showed it to me in Australia!) .

P.B. Yes I do dislike hysteria and I suppose I do have a French view of this work I am interested to hear of the idea about French cabaret singers’ influence, and believe this is highly possible. I know of the artists mentioned and of their work, especially Yvette Guilbert . The French cabaret heyday was from 1870-1880. I think s there was a definite influence on Schoenberg’s 1912 masterpiece. For the ‘Cabaret du Chat Noir’ Jules Laforgue wrote some moon poems which were used as cabaret songs. The company came to Berlin and caused quite a stir. ‘Diseuse’ was actually the term used by Germans.

Yes, I do prefer to use sprech-stimme to inflect the ends of phrases and to combine it with normal singing. I am interested in Keith Humble’s smuggling (laughs!). I do indeed recall that Webern piece, which was discovered after I had made the Adorno interview.

J.M. For Pierrot could one not make even weirder sounds? There are possibilities for endless new timbres and colours in a more adventurous and imaginative use of the voice, and vocal acting. Would you object to ‘howling’ (as Adorno did), screeching, groaning, moaning, breathiness where appropriate? It seems that there is room for much more in this medium once ‘normal’ beautiful singing is no longer asked for. Must it always sound ‘nice’? Should the individual timbres of one’s own speaking voice be explored? What is your view on this aspect?

Schoenberg, rather worryingly, said that all the expression was in the music and that one should not put anything else in- surely that inhibits one from going too far?

P.B. In principle, there could perhaps be more scope for imagination, as long as the music comes first. It is possible that people are too much worried about sounding nice.

(Here I demonstrated a variety of more extreme colours and modes of delivery and he listened politely, seemingly interested and sympathetic, but I'm not sure if he really approved!)

J.M. The texts: You've described them as a 'picture of an epoch'. The Hartleben is of course not a literal translation – the Giraud French originals are often more gruesome still. Should voice really be so detached from the meaning? The words have wonderful sonic properties, and the syllables make their own music. Is this something you enjoy – savouring the words?

P.B. Yes the words are an excellent vehicle and the sounds they make are very important. To savour the syllables is interesting. It's not great poetry.

J.M. Can we talk about the aspect of parody:- You've said that the horrors of Part II of PIERROT for instance, are very stark but are suddenly dispelled by a small gesture, - it's a game of fear, rather than just plain horror. There are swift mood changes which give an interpretative challenge. (eg the end of *Nacht*, with the sforzando on the cello and the bass clarinet; and the sudden pianissimo on 'Sein Herz' in no.11). Is irony always lurking amongst the horror? Are all the movements parodistic and relatively detached?

P.B. Yes this is, for me, a very important aspect – I see parody throughout, with the exception, perhaps of *Die Kreuze*, and moments in *Madonna* and *Rote Messe*. I still hold the views I did then about mercurial mood changes, where the horror suddenly dissipates. Always there is irony.

J.M. You've described PIERROT as a series of character studies, like Webern's *Traktl Songs Op.14*. You believe there's more of Webern than Berg in Pierrot. You say it's also a song cycle, (in 3 parts) for which the preparatory study is the George cycle Op.15 (*Das Buch der hängenden Gärten*). Schoenberg and Webern are masters of word setting, in their awareness of the characteristics of consonants and vowels, approaches to extremes of range, sensitivity to dynamics, accents; also their judgment of phrase lengths and natural vocal contours. Your own music shows this same sensitivity to vocal writing – were you influenced by either?

Can you comment on the connection between Schoenberg's 'normal' songs and the vocal writing of PIERROT, and the post-Pierrot influence shown in Webern's cycle?

Is it a general aesthetic in common, or something more specific?

P.B. The Op. 14 songs are Webern's best work, and yes, the word setting is exemplary. Yes, I do see the connection in the meticulous vocal writing and setting of syllables, and yes, I have been greatly influenced by this in my own vocal writing.) Yes, I still believe in the character study/song cycle trajectory. I am glad if my music seems to fit the aesthetic.

J.M. I'd now like to examine some specific moments in PIERROT that need special care. What should one do in general when the music goes really high and notes have to be sustained? I have found that it helps to close on to the consonants as quickly as possible and avoid elongated vowels. Glissandos are useful, especially for large intervals. ('Menschheit' in no. 6.). But some performers slide much of the time –

Ilona Steingruber, Erika Sziklay, Stiedry-Wagner on Schoenberg's own recording, and other early performers such as Ellen Adler).

P.B. I dislike too much use of glissandos – they are only good when intervals are wide and the lines are not distorted. And yes, closing on to the consonants is good.

From here onwards we discussed specific sections, and I demonstrated a few passages, such as the detailed final phrases of no. 7 and the liaison between '–stickt and 'Du' in the same number. Boulez agreed that adherence to the detail of the score was essential.

J.M. In no.3. *Der Dandy*, there are many quickfire changes of delivery – that unique 'fast gesungen' passage and the whispering, and so on. Not everyone observes these as written.

P.B. They must be clearly defined.

(I also demonstrated in no.6 the long high F sharp 'Mu---- (tter) at the end ; also that crucial ppp high passage on 'Steig, O Mutter aller Schmerzen').

JM: Helga Pilarcyck told me that this high soft passage was not possible and said it should not be attempted at pitch!) (P.B. laughs)

(more excerpts: 9. the 'coloratura' on 'Schneemann'.;
no.10 'mit seinem Zechkumpanen' ('whisper' on last syllable).
No.17. The melismas and details in the canon.

P.B. Sprech-stimme is indeed a rich resource for such matters.

JM. There is a stamina problem in *Die Kreuze* No.14, with its sustained phrases which tax breath capacity – lighter voices are at a disadvantage here.

P.B. That is very interesting

(I tried the beginning of no.21 with a breathy quality to avoid proper singing- he seemed interested in this as a solution)

JM. What are your views on staging PIERROT ? Also the position or separation of instruments and voice?

P.B. It is important for the voice to be separate from the instruments for clarity and balance. I dislike too much theatricality – it is not really necessary. The music says all, and I am aware of Schoenberg's strictures on such things.

JM.. I've done the work many times without conductor – your view on this? Many rehearsals are needed of course. I felt it gave a special feeling of flexibility, with the deep collaboration and involvement with each 'protagonist'. Do you see the instrumentalists as 'actors' too, participating in the drama (eg. Flute/moon, cello/'viola',etc.). This is true musical theatre!

PB. Without conductor a very great many rehearsals are needed! Yes, the instruments are indeed protagonists in the drama, and this adds to the difficulty of achieving a perfect balance. It is music theatre at the highest level.

J.M. How would you react to the idea of a man performing the vocal part? (Richard Hoffmann thought that Schoenberg would not have minded). Perhaps a counter-tenor, tenor, or baritone? Or an actor/actress? (Albertine Zehme was a singing actress).

Recent performances by Barbara Sukowa, the distinguished German actress have been admired. She is charismatic , but unfortunately does not obey the score, yet she was chosen by Mitsuko Uchida for performance with her special ensemble – why is it that instrumentalists of high standard seem to have another set of standards for singers? ‘Presence’ is of course an important part of a singer’s equipment, but not at the expense of the music, surely!

And what do you think of Schoenberg’s use of sprech-stimme in his other works, e.g. *Moses und Aron* or *Ode to Napoleon*?

P.B. I hate the idea of a man for PIERROT– the tessitura is all wrong, and the relationship with the instruments’ pitches is destroyed! It could never work! I heard it done 8-10 years ago by a baritone at Salzburg, a man called Marthaler and it was awful – the text was completely lost. ‘No’ ‘to the actors as well unless they can do the pitches properly. I dislike the cult of personality and distraction from music and agree that it is strange that fine musicians sometimes judge singers on a different level.

Schoenberg was a real idealist and had a wonderful ear. Scherchen told me they had 40 rehearsals for the premiere.

He reverted to simple and less extreme use of sprech-stimme (or second-degree vocalising) in later works – the notation was freer with more freedom for the singer. ‘Moses’s’ sprech-stimme has no accidentals and Schoenberg said not to worry about pitch. *Ode to Napoleon* is notated on 3 lines yet with accidentals! Schoenberg’s first use of sprech-stimme was in *Gurrelieder* (difficult for tenor) in D major!

J.M. Would you yourself ever consider writing a work entirely in sprech-stimme, or have its possibilities all been exhausted by now? Is it of its time, or due for revival?

P.B. No I would never write a whole work in sprech-stimme. Perhaps it is of its time.

JM. Finally, do you think it would be possible, with today’s technology, to notate PIERROT LUNAIRE in absolute detail, with all the micro-rhythms of enunciation, and every minute pitch inflection? Perhaps it could be done electronically – or maybe a graphic representation could be arrived at?

P.B. I think to attempt an exact notation in that way would be a huge waste of time, but a graphic representation of the score could be interesting and revealing.

(We concluded the conversation with lively reminiscences of London colleagues including his former pupils, Richard Rodney Bennett and the late Susan Bradshaw. He then had to rush off to dictate a condolence telegram to Ligeti’s wife.)

To sum up:

My general impression was that Boulez's main concern is, of course, the all-round musical result of the vocal performance of PIERROT LUNAIRE, rather than the actual mechanics of vocal technique as applied to sprech-stimme. He believes in utter faithfulness to the details of the score – also to the sound quality, blend and balance of voice and instruments. (I was amplified, at his insistence, when I performed the work with him) His acute aural sense makes him especially aware of subtleties of dynamic, attack and articulation. The atmosphere and aesthetic ambience of the texts are important to him, and he reacts to these with an identifiably French sensibility. He feels strongly that a undercurrent of parody and humour should permeate the piece even at its wildest moments. There must always be a controlled detachment, and hysteria must be kept at bay. Although he is, as ever, concerned with rhythmic precision and accuracy, the micro-timings of syllables and the minute vagaries of pitch inflection have not been a major sphere of interest for him - he prefers to let the singer take care of these things. But he is aware that breathing and stamina problems have to be taken into consideration.

I think it may have been quite an unusual experience for him to have such a detailed discussion with a singer. He obviously has the composer-conductor's overview of the work, and I suspect his vocal soloists may not always have had much opportunity to go through their part with him, due to the realities and practicalities of the rehearsal situation, where security, ensemble and balance have to come first. His flexible, adaptable attitude to the voice part was most refreshing, perhaps even a little surprising. He did not wish to be drawn on the matter of 'favourite' types of voice, and I believe he relishes the challenge of different vocal approaches. Anja Silja will certainly be a considerable contrast to Christine Schäfer!

I am very grateful to him for giving his valuable time for this interview.

During our conversation, Pierre Boulez drew my attention to the sleeve note he wrote (in French) about sprech-stimme, for his recording with Pilarczyk in 1961.

Re-reading this, one identifies with his palpable frustration at Schoenberg's confusing instructions, and also at the unsatisfactory nature of the only true historical 'document': the recording under the composer's own baton (with Erika Stiedry-Wagner). He feels that the declamatory style seems extremely old-fashioned now, and that 'the perpetual glissando from one note to another rapidly becomes irritating'. He finds that the emphasis on an Expressionist approach completely takes away any trace of humour or parody, and is totally at variance with the character of the instrumental parts. Like others, he believes it is very hard to arrive at any exact idea of Sprechgesang, but, despite the vocal inaccuracies in the Schoenberg recording, ('except for the rare 'sung' notes – impeccably correct') he cannot bring himself to believe that such detailed notation was not intended to be followed faithfully.

He finds this difficult to reconcile with an anecdote from Leonard Stein, Schoenberg's pupil and assistant, about the preparations for *Ode To Napoleon*. The composer insisted that expression mattered above accuracy, and duly gave a demonstration in which he deviated considerably from his written vocal pitches. Stein also said that Schoenberg was not at all bothered by Stiedry-Wagner's approximations.

Boulez's basic argument on sprech-stimme concerns the connection, or lack of it, between the speaking and the singing voice. He says that in many individuals the two ranges simply do not coincide. In the female voice in particular, the singing voice can comfortably soar to heights well above the speaking range, but may be correspondingly weaker in the low register. (I believe this is a matter of training, but understand this viewpoint). He cites actors as being in better control of tessitura,

managing to keep sung and spoken ranges at the same level. Ultimately, he feels that that there are insoluble problems in performing PIERROT LUNAIRE.:‘The work is both too high and too low’.

He describes the speaking voice as ‘a type of percussive with a short resonance’ whose quality cannot possibly be maintained through a held note. This is of course the major worry for all PIERROT vocalists . Finally, and most interestingly, he cites the opinion of his friend and correspondent, the ethno-musicologist André Schaeffner, that ‘ the theatre of the Far East provides invaluable instruction in achieving stylistic and technical solutions which, in Europe, we have yet to find’ . It is indeed fascinating to see whether a study of, for instance, Kabuki theatre or Chinese opera, would give a different slant to the verbal declamation of Pierrot Lunaire. This would make a splendid subject for a doctoral thesis.