



MUSIC REVIEW
Revisiting a Mellowed Pierre Boulez



Marcus Yam for The New York Times

Talea Ensemble, conducted by James Baker, performing at the Miller Theater on Monday.
By ALLAN KOZINN
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[Pierre Boulez](#) celebrated his 85th birthday in March, and in keeping with the classical music world's customarily expansive treatment of composers' birthdays, the festivities have run through the year. The latest installment was a sold-out Composer Portraits concert at the Miller Theater on Monday evening. The virtuosic [Talea Ensemble](#) performed, and Mr. Boulez was on hand for a lively onstage interview with Ara Guzelimian, dean of the [Juilliard School](#).

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[Elliott Carter](#), whose 102nd birthday is on Saturday and to whom Mr. Boulez dedicated "Dérive II," the only work on the second half of the program, was also present. Mr. Boulez wrote the piece for Mr. Carter's 80th birthday, in 1988, and it is the very definition of a gift that keeps on giving. When Mr. Boulez first performed it in New York, in 1991, [Donal Henahan wrote](#) in The New York Times that it "had the merit of extreme brevity." In 2003, when Mr. Boulez brought it back to New York, it had grown to about half an hour. The current version, completed in 2006, clocks in at 53 minutes.

A huge score now, it unfolds organically, with intricate rhythms and pointillistic textures giving way to insistent,

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Marcus Yam for The New York Times
Pierre Boulez at Monday's Composer Portraits evening to celebrate his 85th birthday.

forward drive and richly contrapuntal sections. Except for its spiky accent, stretches of the work could have been 19th-century chamber music; in fact, the way into this daunting piece is to focus on the vital interplay between individual instruments and the full ensemble. In a long section toward the end an angular violin theme is taken up in turn by the oboe, clarinet, bassoon (with oboe) and cello, often with ensemble passages setting apart the solo turns.

Other surprises in “Dérive II” included a syncopated tandem passage for clarinet and oboe that had a decidedly (if fleetingly) jazzy sound, and a tremolando chordal passage, near the end, that seemed an allusion to one of [Steve Reich](#)’s signature moves — something one hardly expects in Mr. Boulez’s music.

Mr. Boulez’s champions [have been saying for at least two decades](#) that he has mellowed. But it would be hard to find a clearer demonstration than “Dérive II” that his frequently quoted assertion that “all art of the past must be destroyed” is fully behind him.

The real barrier between Mr. Boulez’s work and listeners who have resisted him may have less to do with his provocative pronouncements than with the earnest but often chilly way his music has been performed. That was not a concern here. The Talea musicians moved through Mr. Boulez’s music — even works from his most severe period — with astonishing fluidity and warmth. Much of Anthony Cheung’s traversal of “Notations” (1945), in its original piano version, was swathed in the velvety timbres and graceful phrasing you expect in a [Chopin](#) performance, and though Mr. Cheung did not underplay the movements with harder edges, the suppleness of his reading made this early 12-tone score sound alive rather than abstract.

The ensemble pieces, conducted by [James Baker](#), benefited similarly. In “Dérive I” (1984), timbres melted into one another to create an otherworldly sense of drama. And in the first two of Mr. Boulez’s three “Improvisations sur Mallarmé” (1957) the soprano [Mary Elizabeth Mackenzie](#) sang the angular vocal line with an alluring agility against a backdrop laced with mildly exotic percussion timbres.

The Talea players’ achievement, particularly in the shorter works on the first half, was to cruise through the difficulties of Mr. Boulez’s music and to find the magic in it.

The next Composer Portraits program, devoted to the music of Julia Wolfe, is on Feb. 3 at the Miller Theater, Columbia University, Broadway at 116th Street, Morningside Heights; (212) 854-7799, millertheatre.com.

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