

First-hand account

FRANCIS ROUTH

These interviews with Pierre Boulez were first recorded for Belgian Radio in 1972, and edited into their present form in 1974. They make riveting reading, as a first-hand account of one musician's wrestling with the contemporary position, as he sees it.

Whether or not they were modelled on the Stravinsky/Craft conversations, one can hardly help making a comparison with them. Stravinsky and Craft conducted their public dialogue, which was really a monologue, along Platonic lines: the young disciple would pose a leading, sometimes explosive question for the master to take up and enlarge on. Often the question was little more than a peg on which could be hung the master's *exposé*, which much enlightened and pleased us, the bystanders. Such a procedure of course presupposes an awesome, Socrates-like figure at the centre of the stage, whom we all recognise as such, and whose pronouncements as a result are acceptable, indeed eagerly awaited by us.

In the case of Stravinsky, when the first instalment of these 'conversations' appeared in 1959 he was seventy-seven years old, with a secure world reputation behind him, resting on a dozen or more acknowledged masterworks. Not surprisingly Craft as it were speaks for the rest of us, as he probes and investigates.

In the case of Boulez, he was forty-seven in 1972, and he has not yet written a work which is generally and widely considered a masterwork — save perhaps one (*Le Marteau sans Maître*), which was taken up as a 'contemporary classic' by the Darmstadt *avant-garde* in the Fifties, but rarely performed since. So we read these remarks not so much as Socratic pronouncements, of general relevance and validity, about works which are already familiar and accepted, but rather as the articulated reasoning about his day-to-day technical problems, which are the problems shared by most other contemporary composers, by a highly articulate and intelligent musician. Since 1947, when his Flute Sonata, Opus 1 was first heard, Boulez saw himself, rightly or wrongly, in the position of pace-setter for the younger European composers. A precarious role indeed!

Partly, and I found it the most valuable part, the book is a sort

of artistic autobiography; partly it adopts a tone of self-justification, as the composer tells us, in no uncertain terms, why he took such and such a decision, or what he thinks of this or that 'ism'. As we now know, analyses of contemporary works can be tediously self-defeating, and Boulez has himself declared his works to be beyond the analyst's reach. So ultimately I think what are of value are the self-analysing reasons for the artistic decisions he took; particularly the decision to pursue total serialisation of the *materia musica*, which was to drive him inevitably to ever-increasing complexity of texture, and at last to silence, as composing gave way to conducting.

His preoccupation with 'proliferation' technique, and with rhythmic elaboration, are carefully described. There is a logic in the argument which is irrefutable; and the ultimate logic of his career so far is the decision to give himself over to musico-scientific research (at IRCAM, the Pompidou Centre in Paris) into the total range of electronic sounds. In effect he has now become not so much a composer as a research scientist. To some extent, we see in retrospect, he always has been. Has not composition for him been a gradual feeling one's way forward in the light of the most recent discovery? Are not his numerous writings merely the 'published findings', and just as interesting as the compositions, which are the putting into aural effect of a particular aesthetic or technical theory? Now, at IRCAM, Boulez sees himself as one of a team, in seeking to be about nothing less than a worldwide 'evolution in musical thinking'.

When several decades have passed I hope this remarkable first-hand account — not just of one man's work, but of one aspect of our Alexandrian age as a whole — will be followed by a further volume of conversations with an older, and perhaps, wiser, Boulez.

PIERRE BOULEZ

Conversations with Célestin Deliège

123pp, Eulenberg/Schott, £3 boards; £1.50 papers.