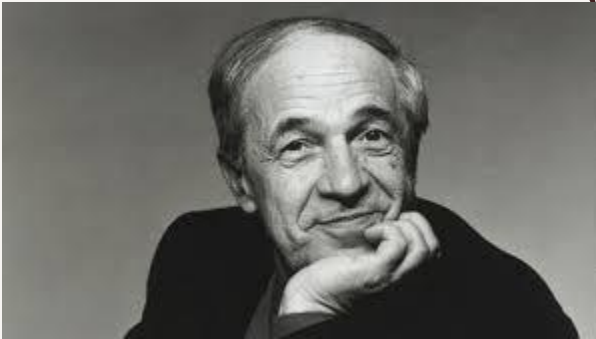


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Pierre Boulez — Vol. 19 (St. Laurent Studio)



*A colleague on a collector list claims that many of the recordings Pierre Boulez made for Deutsche Gramophon were marred by engineering that drained the life out of them. The truth in this statement becomes crystal clear when comparing his 2000 version of Hector Berlioz's dramatic symphony, *Roméo et Juliette*, to the 1974 concert broadcast comprising the 19th volume of Yves St. Laurent's Boulez series. Not only is this now one of the best offerings in the estimable St. Laurent Studio catalog, it also puts many other better known recordings of Berlioz's wild and wooly hybrid vision to shame.*

*It seems fair to posit that we wouldn't have the orchestra in quite the form we know it now were it not for Berlioz and his grandiose ideas of what a Gargantuan ensemble might entail. His 1830 *Symphonie Fantastique* pulled out all the stops in terms of program and orchestral execution, but nine years later, with the choral innovations of Beethoven's ninth symphony firmly in mind, Berlioz turned his attention, on a vast dramatic scale, to Shakespeare. It's no overstatement to say that *Roméo et Juliette* is one of the most radical conceptions of the 19th century, and deeper exposure to its formal, structural and timbral innovations, not to mention its sublimely strange rhetoric, cements that notion. It's neither symphony nor opera, though it has elements of both genres, but the main roles are suggested by the orchestra rather than sung. The orchestral contribution is where the November 13, 1974 concert with Boulez, contralto Helen Watts, tenor Ian Partridge, bass Jules Bastin and the BBC Symphony Orchestra is absolutely stunning. The opening fugue is meant to suggest the bustling city streets of Mantua, Montagues and Capulets deep in conflict, and from the first bristling phrases, we hear a less analytical and more involved conductor than many of his later recordings suggest, one who presents the combination of danger and the sheer excitement, the joy of living, that Berlioz's music so often involves. Boulez builds the contrapuntal form until the open fifths in the brass slow the tempo down, the timing both inevitable and flawless, preparing for the prince's intervention as represented by the low brass recitative.*

At the other end of the emotional spectrum, there is the scene where Romeo stands outside of the Capulet residence, his loneliness contrasted with the festivities inside. A conductor like Riccardo Muti renders Romeo's anguish, as one might expect from the somber Wagner-anticipating harmonic aesthetic, but Boulez finds many more subtleties of expression in the chromatic writing and the constantly morphing orchestration. Listen out for the oboe entrance at 1:58, which is then taken up by the strings in gloriously aching crescendo; the moment prefigures similar felicities in the finest of

Boulez's late-period recordings, also in concert, of the only completed movement from Mahler's 10th symphony. *In no other performance I know are the complexities of Romeo's humanity at that crucial juncture so vividly portrayed, rendering the ensuing celebratory music inside the Capulet ballroom all the more bitterly poignant. Boulez brings a similar energetic grit to the Queen Mab scherzo, with its dizzyingly high strings and dexterous flute writing in stark relief, all aided by the raw vitality of the concert experience. Then, there is the gorgeous love scene, beginning with double chorus as the Capulets depart from the party, expertly performed if not as stereophonically detailed as in Leonard Slatkin's recent version, a double chorus feature which transitions into the balcony scene, again represented by orchestra alone. The Beethoven's Ninth allegiance is particularly evident in the opening sonority, which Boulez realizes in astonishing pianissimo, but the real treat is the delicious blending of layered strings and winds, complete with pizzicato basses, as he slowly combines textural build and subtle tempo fluctuation, ratcheting up the Romanticism to boiling point. Obviously revelling in the composer's gift for melody, as did Wagner, Boulez doesn't miss a phrase in what is really a symphonic poem anticipating Franz Liszt's coinage of the term. In Boulez's hands, the combined effect of string recitative, winds response, daring harmonic writing and equally innovative juxtapositions in mood and orchestration demonstrates how far ahead of his time the French composer really was. If further proof were needed, the staggering contrast during Romeo's internal struggle at Juliet's tomb makes the case. The myriad pauses, sudden shifts in sonority and violent outbursts render the orchestra a unified voice, especially under Boulez's direction.*

None of this is to denigrate the vocalists' performances. Helen Watts' rich and dark voice rises majestically above the choral recitative as the plot is elucidated in the prologue, and particularly effective is Bastin's warm-blooded contribution as Friar Laurence, imbuing the finale with a healthy balance of heft and wisdom. *In fact, the finale may be among the most sumptuous versions on record, a fitting foil to the frenetic fugal opening as all forces are united. Here, the instrumental and vocal ensembles' deployment across the soundstage is as vivid as could be desired, leading to well-deserved applause. Though neither text nor translation is included, they are easily found online. Of course, fans of the St. Laurent Boulez series will not hesitate, but for anyone looking for another version of this relatively unknown and prescient opus to adorn your shelves, alongside those vintage contributions from Charles Munch, Pierre Monteux and Sir Colin Davis, look no further!*

Marc Medwin

