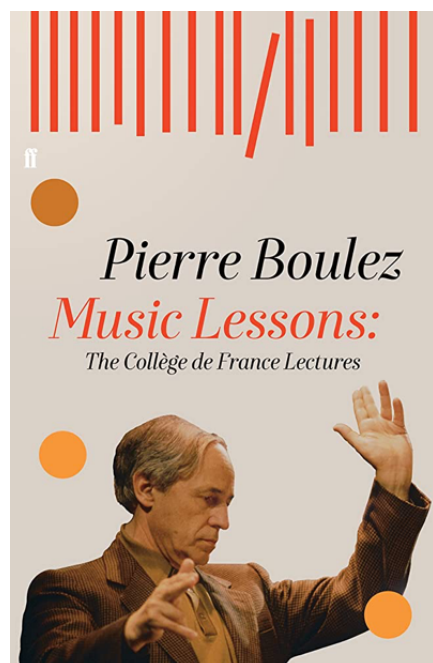


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Pierre Boulez. Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures. Ed. and trans. Jonathan Dunsby, et al (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019)

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Pierre Boulez. *Music Lessons: The Collège de France Lectures*. Ed. and trans.

Jonathan Dunsby, Jonathan Goldman, and Arnold Whittall. Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 2019. 688 pp. ISBN 9780226672595. \$40.

That Boulez was a major figure in post WWII twentieth-century music is indisputable. This book demonstrates the depth and breadth of his contemplation of musical topics over a period of nineteen years of lectures at the Collège de France. Boulez held the chair of Invention, Technique and Language in Music during this period. While Boulez was a major composer in the

serialist school who helped in the early 1950s to develop “total serialism” by structuring all musical elements (pitch, timbre, rhythm, dynamics, etc.) serially in an attempt to obliterate all that had come before—a not uncommon reaction amongst artists to the horrors of WWI and WWII. Note, however, that this volume is not a composition manual, but rather it is full of discursive reflections on the issues he confronted as a composer during this essentially twenty-year period, and in some ways it shows his development during that time. Boulez offers profound insight into his thinking as he approached compositional problems, and he delivers this with the absolute conviction of someone who believes in an inviolable objective truth in music, and in particular, in serialism.

The book is divided into various parts which are the themes of compositional problems that Boulez was confronting: “Preliminaries (1976)”; “From Work to Ideas (1977–1979)”; “The Composer’s Gesture (1979–1981),” “The Problem of Thematics (1982–1985)”; “The Eye and the Ear (1985–1988)”; and “Memory, Writing and Form (1988–1995)”. There are sixteen lectures, each of which deals with a specific aspect of composition or music within these themes, typically the compositional issue he was dealing with at the time of writing.

Surprisingly, there are no examples of music notation in the book, which helps to make it approachable by those who are not music specialists, although there are numerous references to specific works to demonstrate a point. I was surprised to see very early that Boulez thinks that music theory has not kept up with the progress made by composers (3). Boulez certainly knew of the work of other composers and non-serialists, such as Xenakis, with a strong theoretical basis, and Boulez also knew that music theory often follows compositional practice rather than preceding it. Composers develop rules to create a work and theoreticians later develop a theory, typically based on several works; this has been true for centuries, but Boulez was passionate about serialism and convinced that it was "the path forward" in music. The only path forward. This is evident again where Boulez writes, "But composers are justified in feeling frustrated at seeing their ideas nullified by a musical practice that lags behind them, and that in itself is not daring enough in its analysis of the current situation" (6). The subject of analyzing compositions comes up at other times, and in the chapter "Memory and Creation," Boulez seems to heavily criticize analysis, for instance writing, "So what should analysis be other than this ability to reduce? ... cannot explain what I will call the *why* of a work, but merely the *how*" (453). He goes on to claim that neither analysis nor composition can be taught, but later says that the value of analysis is extremely *personal*, not something that can be generalized to others (453).

All of the compositional aspects described in the book relate only to Boulez's music and process, and he is prone to criticizing anything that differs from that, including work of Stravinsky (31). Boulez is additionally highly critical of the strict rules of twelve-tone composition, comparing dodecaphony to a collective language from the Middle Ages, and of its development from nineteenth-century Romanticism (31, 104). Boulez wanted to continue the development of the formal exploration of music after the Viennese School, and seems to be pushing to free himself from all historical conventions in an attempt to create music that "advances" the art in a personal purist aesthetic. He describes the many aspects of composition he is investigating as "problems," and he is searching for a solution. This is a curious attitude, and an indication of how Boulez approaches composition: as a problem to be solved, as if there is a universal and perfect solution. At other times Boulez discusses concepts that seem anathema to his process, such as indeterminacy with an in-depth reflection on the issues he discussed with John Cage through their sustained correspondence (Chapter 6). The final chapter, entitled "The Work: Whole or Fragment?," seems to be a reflection on Boulez's oeuvre and concentrates on the theme of the work as a whole or as part of a larger and sustained aesthetic concept. The chapter references Wagner's *Ring* as an exemplar of the later, but goes on to discuss "pure music" as a more

difficult proposition, with references to a number of other composers such as Brahms, Straus, Mahler, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, as well as comparisons of their examples to his own works. Boulez closes the book by saying he is trying to resolve the conflict between opposed dualities, such as closed and open, or the whole and a fragment (592-93). To me this is an imaginary conflict; there is no resolution to these, but rather a rich space for musical play. The chapter ends with, "One can now, after all one's experiences of the twentieth century, arrive at this completely provisional and doubt-filled conclusion: the work can be only a fragment of an imaginary whole" (631). This is an excellent example of Boulez's complex thinking, something that pervades this work.

This book is readable by people unskilled in music, but many of the concepts in it would be quite foreign to non-musicians, so I imagine that it is aimed at serious students of music and composers, particularly those interested in twentieth-century musical practice or serial composition and the thinking behind it. Because of this, comparing this book to others is difficult. There are certainly other books on this topic, but few, if any, with such insight into an individual's practice and concerns. Bálint András Varga's books interviewing composers (Berio, Kurtag, Xenakis) offer some similar material from other composers, but the same level of detail is rare. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in Boulez and to those interested in late-twentieth-century serial composition. The dogma that comes through with Boulez's words can sometimes be confronting, but if this music is of interest, then the book also will be.