

Pierre Boulez and His Cultural Legacy Today

Symposium, [Institut Français Edinburgh](#)



Thursday, 6 November 2025

1pm: Arrival

1.15: Welcome

1.30-3pm: Panel 1 (Chair: Edward Campbell)

Catherine Losada (University of Cincinnati) – ‘Pierre Boulez: Intercultural approaches to composition in the redefinition of a musical language’

Echo Davidson (University of Pittsburgh)

Peter Nelson (University of Edinburgh) – ‘Boulez and Xenakis: A study in technologies’

3-3.30pm: Coffee break

3.30-5pm: Panel 2 (Chair: Björn Heile)

João Gabriel Rizek (Freie Universität Berlin) –

Gabryel Smith (New York Philharmonic) – ‘Pierre Boulez in New York: Modernism at the New York Philharmonic’

Edward Campbell (University of Aberdeen) – ‘Composing with grace (notes): Boulez and piobaireachd’

5-5.30pm: Coffee break

5.30-6.30pm: Panel 3 (Chair: Morag J. Grant)

Benjamin Havey (University of Missouri) – ‘Atomic Sonata: Destroying Form in Boulez's *Deuxième Sonate*’

Björn Heile (University of Glasgow) – ‘Leibowitz, Boulez and the Dissemination of Serialism in France’

6.30-7.30pm: Dinner break (Delegates should make their own arrangements)

7.30pm Concert in the series The Night With..., featuring violinist Rachel Koblyakov

Programme to include *Anthèmes*, *Anthèmes II*, alongside work by Kaija Saariaho and Tim Cooper

Friday, 7 November 2025

9-11am: Panel 4 - Aesthetic, intellectual and biographical factors informing the composition of Boulez's *Pli selon pli* (Chair: Peter Nelson)

Caroline Potter (Royal Birmingham Conservatoire) – ‘*Pli selon pli* and Boulez's cultural labyrinth’

Ian Pace (City St George's, University of London) – ‘Between Paris and Baden-Baden: Boulez's biographical and aesthetic transition during the composition and first revisions of *Pli selon pli* (1957-62)’

Larson Powell (University of Missouri) – ‘Senza tempo. The contingent content of *Pli selon pli*’

Michael Spitzer (University of Liverpool) – ‘Time Bubbles in *Pli selon pli*’

11-11.30am: Coffee break

11.30-12.30pm: Panel 5 (Chair: Björn Heile)

Mark Berry (Royal Holloway, University of London) – ‘Boulez, Wagner, and Opera in Comparative Perspective’

Elsebeth Curry (University of Cambridge) – ‘Boulez and Dutilleux: A “Feud” (?) Explored’

12.30-1.30pm: Lunch break (delegates should make their own arrangements)

Abstracts

Panel 1

Catherine Losada – ‘Pierre Boulez: Intercultural approaches to composition in the redefinition of a musical language’

It is well known that Pierre Boulez was profoundly interested in the music of other cultures and that this interest, along with the expanded potential of his innovative serial techniques, accounts for the sonorous transformation that led to the widespread success of works like *Le Marteau sans maître* (1952-55) and *Pli selon pli* (1957-1962). Bassetto (2003, 4), following Boulez (1967; 1984) argues that the influence of music from other cultures on Boulez’s sparked a “questioning of the technical and aesthetic categories of Western music, as a whole.” Despite important discussions and a smattering of musical examples, by Boulez and others, of how it operated in many parameters, the precise ways in which this influence affected his output at a deeper level is unclear. In fact, although there is much excellent scholarship on Boulez’s aesthetics and on Boulez’s compositional techniques; the link between the two has not been explored in detail.

In this paper, I will explore this link. I will demonstrate how the music of other cultures transformed Boulez’s language at its very core. Building on previous work, I will explore deeper repercussions in the realm of texture, harmony, and their consequences to structure and overall form. Ultimately, I will argue that this was one of Boulez’s most important aesthetic influences and that his approach prefigured some of the larger cultural changes of the 1960s that opened the doors to truly intercultural compositional practices.

Echo Davidson

This paper critically reexamines Pierre Boulez’s *Répons* (1981–1984) as a founding gesture in the cultural genealogy of artificial intelligence and algorithmic music production. Born within the technocratic ecosystem of IRCAM—a state-funded institution that fused avant-garde aesthetics with scientific research—*Répons* realizes a compositional model premised on control, rationalisation, and computational transformation. Through its real-time processing and spatial diffusion, the work embodies a sonic imaginary in which human expression is mediated, abstracted, and ultimately subordinated to machine logics.

Rather than celebrating *Répons* as a visionary hybrid of music and technology, this paper interrogates how Boulez’s institutional power and compositional ideology laid groundwork for contemporary regimes of algorithmic authorship. Drawing on decolonial theory (Mbembe, Vázquez), feminist sound studies (Rodgers, Eidsheim), and media archaeology (Sterne, Goffey), I argue that IRCAM’s model of musical knowledge production upheld exclusionary epistemologies: privileging abstraction over embodiment, machinic neutrality over cultural particularity, and elite access over communal participation.

In an era when AI-generated music is often framed as revolutionary, Boulez’s legacy compels us to ask: revolutionary for whom? *Répons* stages not a democratization of sound, but an intensification of control—where sonic agency is concentrated in institutions, infrastructures, and code. By tracing the continuities between Boulez’s modernist technocracy and the logics of contemporary AI systems, this paper calls for a critical revaluation of musical futurity—one that resists the myth of neutral innovation and foregrounds plural, embodied, and decolonial approaches to sonic creation.

Peter Nelson – ‘Boulez and Xenakis: A study in technologies’

The dominant technological mode of the present is the digital. Music has participated in the development and acceptance of this dominant mode since its beginning, not just conceptually and practically but also through being the focus of key institutions which have disseminated this technology, and which have helped to weave it into historic cultural practices. Both Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis were critical figures in this narrative. Not only were they the initiators of significant technological and institutional developments in the field of music through the latter half of the twentieth century, they were rivals whose contradictions and disagreements can shed light on important aspects of the technologies they promoted and of technology in general. Starting from the documentary evidence showing that both Boulez and Xenakis were invited to participate in the development of a music research centre in the late 1970s at the Centre Pompidou, a centre which became IRCAM, this presentation will compare the approaches to technology of these two musicians. In doing so, it will

attempt to interrogate the conceptual and practical dynamics that helped to shape our current musical practices and possibilities.

Panel 2

João Gabriel Rizek

“Pierre Boulez is almost a public institution.” Charles Rosen’s assessment of the French musician’s multifaceted career contains a paradox—one emblematic of the very nature of Modernism. On one hand, it can be argued that Boulez was an “institution” because he actively worked to establish not only his musical organizations (Ensemble intercontemporain, IRCAM) but also his vision of the musical canon throughout his career as a conductor and artistic director of numerous venues. On the other hand, despite the public aspect of these enterprises (some state-sponsored), it’s hard to say that his inclination was truly “public” in the strictest sense. That is, the fidelity to the agenda that the composer considered correct (the type of compositions and practices, for instance, that deserved to be promoted), and followed with a teleological inspiration, could dispense with the public altogether. This characteristic is likely the clearest sign of Boulez’s approach to Modernism and its complete disregard for audience reception. Viewed as a historical and geographical movement, it addresses specific issues that arose in mid-19th-century Europe; therefore, Boulez can be, in any case, associated with a particular historical context. However, when his influence is recognized and adopted in other places, such as Brazil, these references become problematic. This paper, therefore, explores how Boulez influenced a group of composers in Brazil, where the musical tradition has a different history and relationship with the audience.

Gabryel Smith – ‘Pierre Boulez in New York: Modernism at the New York Philharmonic’

Pierre Boulez, New York Philharmonic Music Director from 1971-1977, brought a radically different perspective to a tradition-bound institution during a particularly challenging moment in the orchestra’s history. The composer-conductor’s six-year tenure began on the coattails of the beloved and omnipresent Leonard Bernstein, an intellectual and modernist in his own right, but with a reputation and charisma that superseded his programming. On the news of Boulez’s appointment, the New York press cast Bernstein’s successor as a revolutionary determined to advance music into unprecedented territory. Amplified by Boulez’s myriad polemical soundbites, fears that a prickly modern composer would steamroll over the subscription season were met by Philharmonic management’s attempts to assuage subscribers.

This paper gives an overview of Boulez’s modernist and intellectual pursuits at the New York Philharmonic. It contextualizes these findings within the larger performance history of the orchestra, touring (including bringing Elliot Carter’s *Concerto for Orchestra* and Ligeti’s *Lontano* to Edinburgh) the political and economic climate of a city in crisis, and analyzes ways in which Boulez modernized programming and captured new audiences. The paper also addresses how Boulez maintained tradition, and how an intellectual “image” was as imagined as it was real. Relationships and research projects begun during the Philharmonic years with composers, technologists, and students would feed development of future projects, including IRCAM. The research is based on the holdings of the New York Philharmonic Archives. In celebration of his centenary, more than 13,000 pages of archival materials from his tenure have been released digitally this year.

Edward Campbell – ‘Composing with grace (notes): Boulez and piobaireachd’

Pierre Boulez made a number of important visits to Edinburgh to perform at the international festival between 1948 and 2004. He first visited the city in 1948, as the ondes Martenot-playing musical director of the Renaud-Barrault theatre company, in what was also his first visit to the United Kingdom. The 1965 festival under the leadership of Lord Harewood mounted the first retrospective of Boulez’s music anywhere in the world, featuring six concerts in which he appeared as composer, conductor and pianist, including the UK première of *Pli selon pli*. Following the 1965 retrospective Boulez returned to the festival in 1967, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1975, 1978 and 1984, but after that it was not until the directorship of Sir Brian McMaster that he returned regularly, performing in 1994, 1995, 1998, 2000, 2001 and 2004. Among the highlights of those years were the UK première of the final version of ... *explosante-fixe* ... in 1994 and a second festival retrospective of his music in 1998 including the world première of the complete *sur Incises*. In a different register, Boulez told Joan Peyser that the idea for opening of ...*explosante-fixe*... came to him in what is identifiable as Inveraray Castle in August 1971 (Peyser 1976, p. 238).

In the context of this long relationship with Scotland, in which Boulez brought so much to the city of Edinburgh, I focus in this paper on one important point of influence which Scotland had on him, namely the piping tradition of piobaireachd. The paper traces Boulez's statements relating to piobaireachd over several years in relation to key compositions and examines certain seeming anomalies. While Boulez's Scottish connections may be no more than footnotes to a long career, this conference which is dedicated to his legacy, and which is being held in Scotland's capital, seems an appropriate moment to call to mind what he once brought to the city and to reflect on what he might have taken in return.

Panel 3

Benjamin Havey – 'Atomic Sonata: Destroying Form in Boulez's *Deuxième Sonata*'

Pierre Boulez's Second Piano Sonata (1946-1948) attempts to destroy classical forms, and the first movement targets sonata form. The result is musically powerful and historically influential, although previous accounts of this Sonata assert that the destruction of form is inaudible (e.g. Salem 2023 and Campbell 2010). I argue that Boulez destroys sonata form in the first movement by replacing resolution with thematic fusion. My reading of Boulez's Sonata prioritizes audibility of the form through musical narrative and intertextuality, which challenges assumptions about audibility in postwar modernism.

Boulez uses expected conventions of sonatas in the exposition and development. The first theme group is defined by thrashing arpeggios and a short-short-short-long rhythm. This rhythmic cell is an audible connection to Beethoven's "Fate Motif." The second theme is a chorale, distinguishable through texture and tempo changes. After a brief development that explores the first theme, Boulez eases into the recapitulation. Instead of preparing harmonic resolution, the recapitulation oscillates between the theme groups through breathtaking climaxes. The final bars replace an expected cadence with a climax that combines both themes. Boulez fuses the material of the chorale and arpeggios to end the movement explosively.

Like Ravel's *La Valse*, Boulez's Sonata both celebrates and undermines a genre through narrative. My reading recontextualizes Boulez's early work as a reflection of post-war France, including the stylistic explorations in Paris and the transition from WWII to the Cold War. This reading also provides clarity for non-specialists to perform or write about this Sonata for general audiences.

Björn Heile – 'Leibowitz, Boulez and the dissemination of serialism in France'

It is well known that Pierre Boulez learned the twelve-note technique from the Polish Jewish immigrant René Leibowitz. What is less known is that Leibowitz himself learned the technique from the German Jewish refugee Erich Itor Kahn, a composer and pianist who had premiered Arnold Schönberg's Piano Piece Op. 33a in the composer's presence, among other things. Together with the composer Paul Dessau and the violinist Rudolf Kolisch, the leader of the Kolisch Quartet and one of Schoenberg's closest confidants, Kahn and Leibowitz formed an intimate circle that lasted their entire lives.

At a time when, due to methodological nationalism, Boulez's work and career are increasingly reduced to the French dimension, it is important to stress that serialism was only introduced to France and, prior to Leibowitz's school, practised by Jewish immigrants. Indeed, it is fair to say that it could not have been adopted in France without the mediation of Jewish immigrants. Furthermore, as a cultural practice, serialism is anything but 'neutral', and it formed an essential part of Boulez's compositional identity, thus aligning him with what Florian Scheduling has called a 'migratory aesthetic'. In my talk, I will use primary sources to throw light on the circle of immigrants around Leibowitz and the lessons Boulez may have learned from them.

Panel 4: 'Aesthetic, intellectual and biographical factors informing the composition of Boulez's *Pli selon pli*'

This panel brings together four papers with original perspectives on Boulez's *Pli selon pli* as a central work in the composer's output and development. The speakers explore this work in terms to his discoveries of East Asian cultures, music and ethnology; in terms of Adornian and other views of the 'open work' and compositional indeterminacy; on Boulez's conceptions of time interpreted through the prisms provided by the work of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, Gilbert Simondon and Peter Sloterdijk; and on the composition of the

work during a time of great personal change for the composer through his relocation from France to Germany, facilitated by his key relationship with Henrich Strobel, and major growth in Boulez's career as a conductor, all of which coincided with shifts in his aesthetic.

Caroline Potter – 'Pli selon pli and Boulez's cultural labyrinth'

It is commonplace to state that many French composers have been inspired by musics from outside Europe, not least Boulez. As a student, Boulez encountered east Asian musics through his friend and colleague Yvette Grimaud and through private study with Messiaen. For many decades, the writer and ethnologist André Schaeffner was an important contact who enabled Boulez to source a wide collection of percussion instruments from all over the world, and it is well established that the sonorities of *Pli selon pli* draw on diverse musical cultures. And Debussy both had a direct connection to Mallarmé and was an example of a composer who dealt with extra-European musical influences that Boulez explicitly followed.

Boulez appreciated the seriousness of purpose of cultures that treat music as part of everyday spiritual life; he always had a horror of music being considered solely as entertainment. Contemporary musicology tends to be nervous of European composers' employment of instruments and concepts from different musical cultures, but my purpose in this paper is to avoid simplistic judgement. Instead, I propose to contextualise *Pli selon pli* within a literary and intellectual framework that draws on Michel Butor's writings and on scholars including Luisa Bassetto and Xiaofan Amy Li, as well as interviews with Boulez himself. Exploring the connections between Boulez's interest in extra-European music and Mallarmé's poetics, focusing on *Improvisation II* 'Une dentelle s'abolit', will provide fresh illumination on *Pli selon pli*.

Ian Pace – 'Between Paris and Baden-Baden: Boulez's biographical and aesthetic transition during the composition and first revisions of Pli selon pli (1957-62)'

The composition and first revisions of Boulez's *Pli selon pli* come during a key transitional period in the composer's life (1957-62), involving his relocation from Paris to Baden-Baden, and his conducting career progressing from work primarily with Domaine musical towards multiple German radio orchestras, especially that at Südwestfunk in Baden-Baden, but also first appearances with the Berliner Philharmoniker, and Concertgebouw Orchestra. These, together with the various performances Boulez conducted of *Pli selon pli* in 1960 to 1961, played a decisive role in establishing his reputation as a conductor, and paved the way for his illustrious career which took off from 1963 onwards.

Also central to Boulez's biography during these years is his decisive professional relationships: that with Heinrich Strobel, leader of the Music Section of Südwestfunk, Baden-Baden, who first met Boulez in 1950 on a trip to Paris, and had of course commissioned *Polyphonie X* to be premiered at Donaueschingen in 1951, and the later withdrawn *Poesie pour pouvoir*.

In this paper, drawing upon archival materials from the SWF archives and also the Paul Sacher Stiftung, I consider Boulez's aesthetic shift as witnessed in the revisions of the *Improvisation sur Mallarmé I* and orchestration of the original 1960 soprano and piano version of *Don*, but also the wider development of his musical language, in this biographical context, focusing above all on Boulez's approach to sonority and timbre, from the hard-edged angular world of *Structures I* towards the greater opulence in his works from *Improvisation sur Mallarmé III* and *Tombeau* onwards.

Larson Powell – 'Senza tempo. The contingent content of Pli selon pli'

According to Richard Klein (*Musikphilosophie*), three developments in music provoked philosophical responses: the development of abstract instrumental music, Wagner and atonality. One could adduce the questioning of the work concept (provoked by Cage and chance procedures since the later 1950s) as a fourth. My talk will explore what one may call, with Adorno, the philosophical Gehalt (content or import) of *Pli selon pli*, seen as a crucial moment of Boulez' compositorial reflection, roughly contemporary with *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* and "Nécessité d'une orientation esthétique" (and with Eco's 1963 *Opera aperta*, another reflection on chance and art). This does not mean simply "applying" Adorno, or any other extant philosophy, to Boulez (and is thus distinct from Edward Campbell's investigation of Boulez' relation to philosophy). Adorno himself understood *Pli* as little as Stravinsky at first hearing. Nor does it mean solely historicizing Boulez – although one can detect a historical period shift at the time (seen also in Luhmann's turn to contingency). The thesis is that *Pli* builds a compositional reflection on chance and open work into its technique and structure. This may seem

uncontroversial, but it has not been fully worked out philosophically; philosophers' frequent lack of musical knowledge has often led them to prefer Cage as exemplar of chance. The talk will situate *Pli* philosophically with the aid of recent work by Morag Grant, Inge Kovacs, Losada, Guldbrandsen and others, and the late modernist philosophical reconsideration of Mallarmé (Badiou, Rancière), concentrating analytically on the third *Improvisation*.

Michael Spitzer – ‘Time Bubbles in *Pli selon pli*’

‘Bulles de temps’, or ‘time bubbles’, is the name for one of the four folders of generative sketches for *Improvisation III* from *Pli selon pli* (Guldbrandsen, 2015). It's also a concept floated by Boulez in his 1958 essay, ‘Son, verbe, synthèse’. There, Boulez explains it in terms of time being ‘stationary’ or ‘instantaneous’, analogous to Stockhausen's ‘moment’. More generally, ‘time bubble’ follows in the wake of Boulez's use of ‘blocs sonores’ after *Le Marteau sans maître* (Salem, 2018) and, more generally still, from the composer's proclivity for pockets of static harmonic or timbral resonance. I will propose in this talk that ‘time bubble’ is a useful tool to set against the more established categories of ‘smooth’ and ‘striated’ time incepted by Deleuze, drawing ideas from the work of Gilbert Simondon, a Bergsonian vitalist whose influence on Deleuze is often overlooked. I will propose that Simondon's network of concepts – including ‘individuation’, the ‘metastable’, ‘the crystalline’, and quasi-cellular ‘membranes’ – can illuminate the temporal transitions in Boulez's music, illustrated with analytical slices through *Pli selon pli*. Two of Simondon's ideas are especially useful. He regards the caesura between two percepts as analogous to a biological membrane, as if a percept were ‘alive’. Second, he puts a biological cast on Leibniz's notion of the ‘fold’ – with obvious resonance with how Boulez conjures polyphony by folding a single line; and vitality effects by folding serial ‘crystals’ into living ‘improvisations’. By way of *envoi*, a parallel with Sloterdijk's spherology of bubbles.

Panel 5

Mark Berry – ‘Boulez, Wagner, and opera in comparative perspective’

There are many ways to situate European musical modernism, yet the figure of Richard Wagner always looms large. I shall examine Pierre Boulez's relationship to Wagner as a changing, developmental process, but also by comparison with that of two contemporary composers to Boulez: Luigi Nono and Hans Werner Henze. Unlike Boulez, both completed multiple works for the operatic stage, broadly conceived. Opera, above all Wagner, nonetheless loomed large in Boulez's career as conductor: less surprising than some might respect, when we recall his music directorship of the Renaud-Barrault company. It also played a significant role in imperatives concerning musical history, opera as a genre, and broader operatic culture, as well as influencing his compositional work.

Whilst the focus will remain on Boulez, that comparative element will help contextualise and sharpen, contrasting him with two composers for whom overt political commitment stood as a guiding aesthetic principle—as it had for Wagner. If that did not persist in Boulez, an ambitious project of institutional revolution remained. He ‘programmed’ himself in the 1950s for the rest of his life, in Jean-Jacques Nattiez's characterisation, like Wagner in the 1840s. This arose for both through their activity as conductors, theorists, and institutional reformers utopian and practical, and as composers profoundly interested in spoken drama and in the potential expansion of musical possibilities offered by drama and theatre. Viewed through this series of historical lenses, what might Boulez's example offer contemporary musical, theatrical, and operatic life?

Elsebeth Curry – ‘Boulez and Dutilleux: A “Feud”(?) Explored’

Boulez's modernist profile, as an intellectual titan and cultural figurehead, finds in Henri Dutilleux not a straightforward opposite as might be so easily assumed, but something closer to an aesthetic mirror. Both were conversant in literature, art, and broader music, and both, as composers, were perfectionists in their craft. The “feud” between Boulez and Dutilleux began with a public snubbing at the premiere of Dutilleux's Symphony No. 1 in 1951. Dutilleux's continued adherence to classical forms and pitch hierarchies in harmonic construction clashed with Boulez's espousal of serialism in the 1950s. Dutilleux was excluded, along with others who did not fit within Boulez's modernist model, from the ‘Concerts du Domaine musical’. Despite Boulez's later self-exile from France, this rejection was to initiate a later rhetorical presentation of Dutilleux as an “outsider” to the French musical establishment, itself a well-trodden French musical tradition.

In this paper, I examine the failed ‘reconciliatory’ commission from Boulez and his Ensemble Intercontemporain (EIC) of a clarinet concerto by Henri Dutilleux in the late 1980s-1990s. I present previously-unexplored archival material at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and build on Rae's (2025) examination of

Boulez through his institutional and aesthetic relationships to other composers. Through this material, I argue that this commission complicates the cultural legacies and narratives that have arisen around both Dutilleux and Boulez: from the image of their perceived “outsider-insider” image, the materiality of their relationship links to Boulez’s IRCAM and the EIC, congruent with the shift in Boulez’s changing modernist and technological imaginary.