

21M.260: STRAVINSKY TO THE PRESENT

Class 14: March 31

ASSIGNMENT: Due April 5

Reading: Auner, p. 190-199; Babbitt, "Who Cares if you Listen?" and Boulez, "Tendencies in Recent Music"

Anthology work: Pierre Boulez, *Le marteau sans maître*, Movement 5

Supplemental: Olivier Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*, "Abîme des oiseaux"  
Milton Babbitt, *Semi-Simple Variations*

Before you begin, skim the Grove Music Online article about Boulez. Use the Auner textbook excerpt to take brief notes on the different musical systems explored by Boulez, Messiaen, and Babbitt. What was each composer systematizing, and why?

BOULEZ:

MESSIAEN:

BABBITT:

The three works in this assignment are relatively inaccessible to the ear. That is, it may be difficult to enjoy them upon first hearing. However, I want you to try. Listen carefully and open-mindedly to each piece once through (use the Naxos for Babbitt for now). Then come up with three nice things to say about each piece – what is valuable to you in these works?

I like *Le marteau sans maître* because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I like "Abîme des oiseaux" from *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

I like *Semi-Simple Variations* because:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

To better understand the mindset behind the difficulty of listening to these works, read the Boulez and Babbitt articles.

For the Boulez article, note how the composer takes a historical approach: he is predicting the future based on the recent past. What are some of the most promising things he sees? What are some of his critiques (things he thinks are dead ends)?

What are some of the specific technical advances Boulez mentions?

Knowing whatever you know about the state of current contemporary music, to what extent did Boulez's views bear fruit into today?

For the Babbitt article, first encapsulate what the composer thinks is valuable about music's difficulty. What is Babbitt's attitude toward the listener? What does he think should be the value system instead?

Now, jot down some reflections. Do you see his point? To what extent should music be thought of as a kind of knowledge production or research, rather than an art to be consumed by the general public? What are the drawbacks of this attitude?

Finally, take a look at the YouTube link to "Semi-Simple Variations" from YouTube, which features a very different take on the Babbitt. What might these musicians' goal be? Do you think it is effective?

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