

The Aesthetics of a *tabula rasa*: Western Art Music's Avant-garde from 1949–1953

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In art, the notion of a *tabula rasa* is, self-evidently, problematic. If the tablet is erased, if the slate is wiped clean, if everything is swept from the artistic table, then so too, by inference, is aesthetics itself. And the assumption that the previous contents are swept away to make room for other contents, rather than the contemplation of a bare surface—bare, that is, apart from the residual scars of the preceding overthrow—does not necessarily permit one to assume that the new artefacts are intended as replacements in the sense of a perceived radical ‘improvement’.

One could argue the merits, or rather, the consequences, of the various metaphors: the obliterated tablet script, the table swept bare, the slate wiped clean—in particular, in terms of what happens to the objects which once sat on the second, the signs inscribed on the last. For in most cases, it's not that the signs didn't serve a purpose, or that they didn't mean anything. Rather, someone, somewhere, has decided that the purpose is longer required, or that the meaning is no longer desirable. Perhaps there's not so much an abolition as a prohibition. After all, what else is to stop the scattered objects being picked up off the floor, or the erased signs from being restored?

What will be considered here is a particular instance: that of the young composers in Europe (and to a lesser extent, the U.S.A.) who, after the end of World War II, rapidly installed an avant-garde which, as far as their historical situation permitted it, momentarily effected a radical break with virtually all preceding Western art music. I certainly don't wish to endow it with paradigmatic status. And yet it has certain ‘model’ features, in so far as the young avant-garde that has cleaned the slate agrees, in broad terms, on the new signs that are to be inscribed in place of the old; the intriguing complication is that they

do so from a variety of motives, and by no means agree on what new signs actually mean or imply. The main composers in question are Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and to a lesser degree Luigi Nono. There are two older actors: Olivier Messiaen and John Cage—*mezzo nel camin'* in terms of their eventual life span, but still in the first third of their creative careers. Boulez is the link between them: he had studied with Messiaen in 1945 (when Boulez was 20), and then repudiated him, albeit with a certain degree of deference. Cage got to know Boulez in April 1949, when he was in Paris to study the works of Erik Satie (which by the way, Boulez loathed). The two became close friends, and corresponded regularly for the next few years.

By way of background, if one wanted broadly to sketch the trajectories of what we currently regard as significant innovation in twentieth-century Western art music, one could depict them as two curves, both of which arch sharply to a peak, maintain that peak for a while, then fall slowly until a point is reached where a radically different, non-modernist paradigm intervenes. No need to explain what the second of the those paradigms is: it is post-modernism. Perhaps, though, it is sobering to remember what the first one was (and to remember that it only really applies to Eurasia): it is totalitarianism, whether fascist or communist.

Most of these young composers (the European ones)—had received their early musical experiences—and in some cases, training—within the fascist era. That is, the totalitarian aesthetics of the day had already effected their own *tabula rasa*: in the fascist sphere of influence they had erased the Jewish output which, in most fields, was amongst the best they had to offer, and had branded all but the most banal aspects of modernism (Carl Orff, for example, whom Stravinsky once described as 'neo-Neanderthal')¹ as 'cultural Bolshevism'.

After the war, at least in Western Europe, everything was suddenly available again—the works by formerly banned composers such as Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Hindemith, Bartók, Berg and Webern (the latter three all being dead by this time), as well as works by younger generations. So on the face of it, the main issue for a young composer was to decide which of the various paths on offer seemed most worth pursuing.

The young avant-garde in Europe decided to choose none of them—despite some deference paid to Webern, essentially they threw out everything, and looked for a completely new start. In other words, what is so different about the second curve is that it arises

virtually *ex nihilo*: from a position where what was previously banned by totalitarianism is suddenly restored. But far from being viewed by the young Turks as revitalisation, it is repudiated almost as emphatically as the repressive forms of conservatism that had taken its place. Perhaps it was that brutalised experience of aesthetic values that enabled them in turn to brutalise history when their turn came to speak. Like Brecht's Galileo, they could say, simply and unsentimentally, 'Die alte Zeit ist herum, und es ist eine neue Zeit' ['The old times are over, and these are new times'].

The immediate consequence is a series of works of notably abstract character, composed for the most part with the use of some kind of arithmetic structuring principle. The arithmetical aspect in itself is nothing new: Bartók and Debussy used Fibonacci series to determine formal proportions, Webern's later 12-note instrumental compositions are clearly a great deal more 'number-orientated' than anything by Schoenberg, and nearly all of Cage's most popular works from the 1940s, such as the *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, and various pieces for percussion ensemble, make use of a so-called 'square root' method to determine rhythm and form. Messiaen too had long been working with all kinds of numerical devices to shape rhythm details.

What *is* different in these new pieces, and very strikingly so, is the way in which the constructional devices are deployed to erase, as far as possible, any trace of personal 'style', and any reminiscence of past music. One means by which this is achieved is the automation of the compositional process: the use of charts to ensure the constant equal presence of all elements—all pitches, all dynamic levels and all selected note-lengths—constantly permuted to avoid any sense of repetition.

There is a certain minor pantheon of works that is regularly (and legitimately) invoked in this context, which technically involves what has come to be known as 'total serialisation'. First, there is Messiaen's piano study *Mode de Valeurs et d'intensités*, composed in 1949; second, Stockhausen's *Kreuzspiel*, written late in 1951, shortly after Stockhausen, a young man making his first visit to the Darmstadt summer course, had listened with astonishment to a recording of Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs*; third, the first piece of Boulez's *Structures* for two pianos, also from 1951, and using material directly appropriated from Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs*, and fourth, Cage's *Music of Changes*, also from 1951, at a time of intense correspondence with Boulez. Somewhat parenthetically, one could also add the

early works of Luigi Nono, such as the *Variazione canoniche* (1950) and *Monodia-Polifonica-Ritmica* (1951), written independently, but sufficiently similar for Nono to be temporarily welcomed (or appropriated) into the Darmstadt circle of young iconoclasts.

What motivates these apparently fragmentary utterances? Despair, iconoclasm, nihilism, boredom? In many cases, there is an element of all of these. But also a Stoic optimism—a belief that there might be a future in something else. And it seems very likely that it is the diversity of these motivations which accounts for the diversity of paths that followed the initial *tabula rasa* stance.

It's a cliché to say that music takes up where words are no longer adequate. At this particular historical moment, arguably, the reverse is true: the music is so bare, and so wilfully uncommunicative, that supplementary words are almost essential to articulate the nature of its *refus*. One can see (or rather, hear) what is being done, one can sense motivations, but there is infinite scope for misunderstanding, and it is not surprising that festival managers and radio producers in the early 'fifties clamoured for verbal explanations, if only to find a basis for articulating the unease of the listeners, rather than the desires of the composers. But what this paper will draw on is not the composers' public utterances at the time, so much as their private ones, primarily through their correspondence, taking as a starting point the correspondence between Boulez and Cage.

What kind of words, what kind of explicatory framework do these composers use in relation to their new work? It may come as no surprise that even before the overthrow has been effected, the language of aesthetics is being supplemented by that of science—or more exactly, scientism. The key word is 'research'. In 1953, Boulez writes an article entitled 'Recherches maintenant', and the *musique concrète* group that starts up in French Radio around this time soon renames itself the *Groupe de recherches musicales*. But much earlier, introducing a performance of Cage's *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano in Paris in 1949, Boulez says: 'There are, therefore, two parts to Cage's research. First, the writing of more or less abstract works, without specific instrumental composition; then, experimental essays in every area of struck sound. The instrumentation of these abstract works therefore stems from experimental discovery'.²

'Experimental': like 'research', a word from the laboratory. It is not just a matter of public stance. In a letter to Cage (January 1950), Boulez writes: 'keep me in touch with your own experiments.... As for me, I may be going to try some experiments with P.[ierre]

Schaeffer'.³ Coupled with this is a use of mathematical terminology which, even if it does not go beyond high school terms of reference, does involve more than counting from 1 to 12. This trait first emerges in a letter from December 1950, in which the 12-note series are labelled as 'functions' (e.g. $f\phi$).⁴ In a letter of August 1951, this is considerably extended, particularly in a section intended for publication as an article, and therefore a 'public' communication, which describes musical material in these terms: 'A series is a sequence of n sounds ... forming a series of $n-1$ intervals ... If one takes a series between the frequency band F and the frequency band of double the frequency, $2F$, then serial transposition may be achieved by multiplying or dividing the frequencies by 2, 4, etc., up to the limits of the audible frequency range'.⁵ Yet there are limits to this mathematicisation: towards the end of the article section of his letter, Boulez comments: 'Algebraic symbols are used as a concise way of making the different phenomena concrete, and not with a view to a truly algebraic theory of musical parameters'.⁶

The theorising trait is less strong in Cage, and so too is the inclination to use mathematical description in public. But nevertheless, here a part of his description of *Music of Changes*: 'In the charts for durations there are 64 elements.... Through the use of fractions ... these durations are, for the purposes of musical composition, practically infinite in number ... because addition is the generating means employed, the durations may be said to be "segmented". These segments may be permuted and/or divided by 2 or 3.... A way of relating durations to sound has been thought of in the course of this work, but not in it utilised: to let 4 durations equal a specified length (on the chart) ... this specified length being subject to change.'⁷

Is this a purely cold-blooded exercise, or is it, perhaps, a refuge from recent memories and future fears? There seems to be a mixture of euphoria and escape, with the former being not entirely explicable in terms of the latter. In December 1950, in the midst of the arithmetic formulae alluded to above, Boulez writes to Cage: '... you cannot imagine how happy I was to see how we are progressing in making discoveries ... we are trying not to think of the war too much, and to live each day as it comes, going as far as we can with our investigations'.⁸

The war involved here is the Korean war, not the Second World War; having got rid of one war, perhaps the younger European generation shudders at the thought of another. But still, one senses a certain exultance at the *results* of its iconoclastic experimental actions.

Cage's stance is more detached. He has not had the direct experience of war, or occupation, only the internal, personalised, post-Auschwitz and Hiroshima guilt and horror that led him, shortly after the war, to say that henceforward he would only write quiet music. This suggests it is a guilt and horror about humanity, not about nations—Cage is looking for personal redemption through some other dimension of human thinking, and this is about to come through Zen Buddhism, which will release him from those kinds of personal responsibilities. But in the mean time, he and Boulez seem to share a desire to rid themselves of history, especially recent history, by means of research. In an article from 1949, *The Forerunners of Modern Music*, he uses a strikingly postwar metaphor, which is also affirmatively iconoclastic: 'The problem of a composer in a musical world in this state is precisely to supply another structural means, just as in a bombed-out city, the opportunity to build again exists. This way one finds courage and a sense of necessity'.⁹

In this context, Cage's report to Boulez of a conversation with Milton Babbitt, the only other significant American composer who at that stage was engaged with mathematics as an element of compositional musical research, is most intriguing. Cage writes: 'He has talked to me about rhythmic inversions. He takes a duration, and he inverts the fractions (corresponding to the octave and interval inversion). But he looks like a musicologist'.¹⁰

Though musicologists might feel duty bound to respond with mild outrage to this Platonic/Socratic evaluation of aims through personal appearance, the assessment is most perceptive. As it turned out, Babbitt's position was not intended as a break with history, but an idiosyncratic reinforcement of it: for him, mathematics was and is a contemporary means of reinforcing universals, in which theory assumes a central role—not in the young Boulez's exploratory sense, but in the sense of consolidating knowledge established by authorities of the recent past. For him, compositions are essentially an exposition of the latest expansions of the theoretical domain (though this does not necessarily strip them of expressive content). As such, they have nothing to do with a *tabula rasa* mentality, and never did. Though the technical procedures of a work like Babbitt's *Composition for 12 Instruments* superficially have much in common with the works cited above, its aural surface suggests a relatively placid stance vis-a-vis innovation, however radical the piece may have been in its historical and geographical context.

To return to Cage and Boulez: since the rejection of art's immediate

heritage demanded a deliberate erasure of 'style', and of any expressive intent, whether personalised or otherwise, it seems reasonable to touch upon just what was being erased. That is, one may wonder what kind of personal volition was being wiped out along with 'history'. Cage had already sought to distance himself from the tenets of Western art, but without in any way denying the expressive potential of music. His major work of the late 1940s, the *Sonatas and Interludes* for prepared piano, was inspired by what a young Indian student had told him about the 'permanent emotions' of Indian philosophical traditions. When Cage asked her what her Indian teacher had considered to be the purpose of music, 'She replied that he had said the function of music was "to sober and quiet the mind, thus rendering it susceptible to divine influences".'¹¹ Cage records his astonishment at learning that the seventeenth-century English composer Thomas Mace had used almost exactly the same words; to that extent, one could even view the *Sonatas* as the transference of the baroque 'doctrine of affects' to another culture's mode of thinking.

In contrast, Boulez's most striking work before *Structures*, the *Second Piano Sonata*, is an act of Oedipal rebellion against the Second Viennese School, and Schoenberg in particular. As he puts it: 'I tried to destroy the first-movement sonata, to disintegrate slow movement form by use of the trope and repetitive scherzo form by use of variation form, and finally, in the fourth movement, to demolish fugal and canonic form.'¹²

Those two distinctive stances establish the scenario for what follows. In the subsequent *tabula rasa* years, Cage erases his personality to achieve a more harmonious, quasi-Zen relationship to the world. It is in this context, I believe, that one should view Cage's comment on his *Music of Changes*: 'It is thus possible to make a musical composition the continuity of which is free of individual taste and memory (psychology) and also of the literature and "traditions" of art. ... Value judgements are not in the nature of this work either as regards composition, performance or listening.'¹³

Boulez, it seems, has exactly the opposite motivation: he abolishes his previous persona in order to reinvent it, and to place himself at the centre of a new musical university—the initial gesture may be self-effacing, but the ultimate intent is anything but that. He subsequently described *Structures* as 'an experiment in what one might call Cartesian doubt: to bring everything into question again, make a clean sweep of one's heritage and start all over again from

scratch ... I borrowed material from Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs et d'intensités*; thus I had material that I had not invented and for whose invention I deliberately rejected all responsibility in order to see just how far it was possible to go.'¹⁴ In this respect, it is perhaps significant that Boulez claims that he wrote the first piece of *Structures* in a single night; Cage, on the other hand, laboured over *Music of Changes* for nine months. In one case, metaphorically speaking, the demolition was effected with a bomb; in the other, the edifice was patiently dismantled brick by brick.

But can one take Boulez's abrasive assertions at face value? The first piece of Boulez's *Structures* for 2 pianos was originally going to be named after a painting by Paul Klee, 'At the Limits of the Fertile Land', and Boulez later referred to it as 'what Barthes might call a reduction of style to the degree zero'.¹⁵ And even if, referring to another work composed at the same time, Boulez speaks of 'a construction where the combinations create the form, and thus where the form does not stem from an aesthetic choice',¹⁶ the choice of a Klee title scarcely suggests the total renunciation of aesthetics, except in so far as the provisional renunciation (and it is only provisional) is itself an aesthetic decision.

Now let us consider the social dimension: after all, this *tabula rasa* is not being carried out in a monk's cell. Apart from a narrow circle of Parisian friends, everything and everyone gets a bad press from the young Boulez—the *tabula rasa*, it seems, can only be maintained by steadfastly asserting the worthlessness of everything contemporary which is not a part of it (one thinks of Goethe's Mephistopheles: 'Ich bin der Geist der stets verneint/ und das mit Recht, denn alles was entsteht/ ist wert, daß es zugrunde geht' ['I am the spirit of perpetual negation/ and rightly so, since every new creation/ deserves no better than annihilation']). Of works by Dallapiccola, the first of the Italian twelve-tone composers, he writes to Cage: 'either dodecaphonist or not dodecaphonist, they were very bad in all ways! The Italian lyricism!'¹⁷ He refers to 'a Fifth Symphony by Honegger. Disastrous. At the same time we had something—I don't know what—by Copland. Even worse.'¹⁸ Of Messiaen's colleague and contemporary André Jolivet, he writes 'Have you heard the famous (??!) concerto for Martenot by Jolivet? It is absolutely zero.'¹⁹ The major figures aren't spared either. Of Stravinsky: 'Have you heard Rake's progress? What ugliness!'²⁰ On the Bartók string quartets: 'The music itself is very disappointing.... And in the time when you see this music is so poor ... all the musical people of Paris enjoys with it. Which makes you

seem perverse!'.²¹ Concurrently, he is writing an article called *Schoenberg is Dead*.

Then, along comes Stockhausen, three years younger than Boulez. He has come to Paris to study with Boulez's former teacher, Olivier Messiaen. He doesn't have anything like Boulez's musical experience: he has only just graduated from the Conservatorium in Cologne, in a course that laid as much emphasis on performance and music education as on composition. Compared to Boulez, his background is utterly unsophisticated: his father was a village school teacher, and virtually all his other relatives are farmers. His experience of the war, on the other hand, is a great deal more drastic than that of Boulez, who has 'merely' been subjected to the cultural humiliation of the Nazi occupation of Paris. Stockhausen is an orphan: his mother, suffering from mental illness, has been killed off as 'a burden to the state', and his father died on the Hungarian front. As a teenager at an élitist Aryan school, he was too young to be drafted to the front as a soldier, but he was seconded to a hospital unit as a stretcher-bearer. In an interview he describes typical experiences with the victims of Allied Forces phosphorus bombs: 'I often tried to find a hole going to the mouth with a straw, to pour some liquid down it, so that someone who was still moving could be nourished—but there was just this yellow spherical mass, with no sign of a face. That was everyday life. There was no longer time to bury the dead ... Death became something completely relative for me.'²²

Unlike Boulez and Cage, Stockhausen had no early works to negate, unless one counts talented student works. His first 'real' work is *Kreuzspiel*, inspired by the sound of Messiaen's *Mode de Valeurs*, and using the same kind of arithmetical organisation as Boulez's *Structures*, though quite independently. Its underlying intentions, though, could scarcely be more different. Whereas Boulez's position is, essentially, one of atheistic rejection, of existentialist *refus*, the young Stockhausen is a fanatical Catholic. For him, everything must be swept aside because it is, to partially misappropriate Nietzsche, 'human, all too human'. That is, unacceptably imperfect, though here the criteria are, for the time being, those of theology, not science or humanism. The aim of Stockhausen's early work is a striving for a new, religiously inspired 'perfection', in which the number series and the permutations attempt to mirror the 'perfection' of the Divine Creation by maintaining all elements in a state of equal balance, but in ever-new configurations: an extraordinarily Faustian ambition, all-in-all, but one which calls for an erasure of the personal in favour of what

the Stockhausen of later years would call the 'supra-personal'.

Stockhausen's primary correspondent at this time is the Belgian composer Karel Goeyvaerts, to whom he writes, in October 1952: 'I sense it's going to be a while yet before our music has achieved the necessary degree of purity and perfection'. A couple of months later, commenting on a broadcast of his *Schlagquartett*,²⁴ which in many ways is a direct successor to *Kreuzspiel*, he writes: 'I had the feeling: that's someone who is on the path, but a lot is imperfect. What made me really glad was the fact that I really forgot about that "era" while I was listening: not once could I have said consciously "That is 'my' music from Spring 1952".'

So how does Boulez respond to this new, untested presence in the Paris scene? Again, his correspondence with Cage gives us a fair indication. His first reference, in October 1952, is to 'a young German composer, most remarkable'.²⁵ By July 1954, this estimate has expanded considerably: 'Stockhausen is more and more interesting! He is the best of them all in Europa! Intelligent and gifted! I greatly enjoy discussing with him—even fiercely if necessary—all the current problems.'²⁶

By that stage, Stockhausen is back in Cologne, and the process of post-*tabula rasa* reconstruction is well under way. But we can probably extrapolate those 'fierce discussions' back to earlier times. We get some taste of this from Stockhausen's letters to Goeyvaerts. He first met Boulez in March, and was favourably impressed: 'I spent a whole day with him. He was extremely polite, even kind and hospitable [Boulez's personal reputation had obviously reached Cologne, along with his music], and had very interesting things to tell me about his experiments at the radio studios.... In the evening I spent hours there with him, listened to tapes with him, and watched him at work (till 12 at night). We discussed everything under the sun.'

On the other hand, within a month we get a very different impression of the 'Boulez circle': 'On Saturday I was invited to Boulez's place—with Barraqué, Lacharité, Fano, and 3 others whose names I've forgotten. They did nothing but run people down, especially Messiaen: always the same, utterly uninteresting and tedious. They drink a lot, smoke a lot, and gossip. Still: in every situation Boulez was the clearest, the least dirty, the only one with objective criticisms. He must have changed a lot, to judge from everything I've heard of him previously....'

One more month, and the distance is palpable: 'I've been meeting Boulez more often in concerts etc.: I feel increasingly what a world

lies between him and our ideas and work! He radiates fury!'. Yet in the same letter, he talks about the partial premiere of Boulez's *Structures*, and his evaluation of this notoriously thorny piece is quite remarkable. He writes: 'So I can only make mention of the first piece, and I found it very interesting: in it, all Boulez's aggression and solidity has mellowed.'

One shouldn't assume from this that Stockhausen was inclined to charity where other people's works were concerned. As early as October 1951, his response to Stravinsky is: 'the other works, especially *Oedipus*, disappoint me now; years ago the first impression was much stronger. I can't find much good to say of Messiaen's *Harawi* either—there are embarrassing *Léhar*-gestures.' Later, in Paris, he describes Messiaen's more 'advanced' *Messe de la Pentecôte* in these terms: 'It's extraordinarily good in places, but still has these silly passages he should have got over by now (bird-songs, flagrantly programmatic details, added sixths etc.)'. And once again, where less celebrated contemporaries are concerned, no mercy is accorded: 'Henze has become a wily film-music composer—he'd be better off writing poems for some provincial newspaper.' And of a concert with works by Tippett, Chaynes and others, he comments: 'Downright bad stuff—or dead stuff, to put it better.'

Perhaps the essential difference between Stockhausen's attitude and that of Boulez is that whereas the latter is innately angry, and on more than one occasion gets involved in fist-fights, along with his playwright friend Armand Gatti, Stockhausen is essentially indifferent. For him, it doesn't matter when these pieces were composed: they belong to the past—they're dead. A few years later, in a tribute to Messiaen's teaching, which frequently referred to models from the past, he wrote: 'Many things I already knew from my studies in Cologne. But most of it I knew without it mattering to me: it was dead. Messiaen awakened the dead.... I listened with insatiable curiosity.... But I got to know it in order to separate myself from it; to hear what had already been done, what had already had its life, so that I would not repeat or revive anything.'²⁷

It may seem that, so far, 'aesthetics' has been invoked in a somewhat fast and loose manner, and in particular, that the word 'beauty' has been notably absent. What role, if any, does beauty play in a *tabula rasa*, and more specifically in this one?

For Cage, the aim was to disempower Western aesthetic criteria by making *everything* beautiful; this is clearly implicit in the first story of his lecture *Indeterminacy*:

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

One evening when I was still living at Grant St. and Monro, Isamu Noguchi came to visit me. There was nothing in the room: no furniture, no paintings. The floor was covered wall to wall with cocoa matting. The windows had no curtains, no drapes. Isamu Noguchi said, 'An old shoe would look beautiful in this room'.

For Boulez in the years preceding *Structures*, the watchword was clearly the last sentence of André Breton's *Nadja*: 'La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas' ['Beauty shall be convulsive, or not be at all']. This is a point of reference which is spelt out much later in the piece *Explosante-fixe* (1967-), which derives its title from Breton's later, lamer expansion of the sentence from *Nadja* in *L'amour fou* (and by that stage, one might argue, Boulez's own 'convulsive' aesthetic was much lamer). Whether or not one now regards works like *Structures* as 'beautiful' is, perhaps, of rather marginal relevance. Even then, perhaps, their 'beauty' lay in what they swept aside, in the fanatical strength of their renunciation: their 'beauty' was that of the convulsive historical gesture, rather than emotive convulsion.

With Stockhausen, the situation is different. In his correspondence of this period, he applies the word 'beautiful' to many things: to Netherlands renaissance art, to the church in Altenberg, the village where he was born, to non-European percussion instruments in the Parisian *Musée de l'homme*, and to a Balinese gamelan orchestra. But as far as new European music is concerned, he applies it only to his friend Goeyvaerts' *Sonata for 2 Pianos*, which had been another influence on his own *Kreuzspiel*, and to Webern's *String Quartet Op.28*. Yet in a radio conversation from mid-1953 (and perhaps this is a yardstick for measuring where the *tabula rasa* phase ends), the role of beauty in new music springs to centre-stage. Asked about the danger of pursuing the new at any price, the 24-year-old Stockhausen replies: 'It is not the new at any price that I am looking for. The price I pay is the old style—so as, with the necessary luck, to find a new beauty.' Pressed for further details, he responds as follows:

Today and in the future, as in the past, it will always be a matter of discovering what is beautiful, of drawing close to beauty, of writing beautiful music. Never have the chances for a composer been as great as they are today to make this preparation for a new epoch.

I don't view beauty as something abstract, as an idea somewhere that minds perceive. I think that beauty exists, issues forth, wherever a person concerns himself that shaping that which inspires him, and which he finds beautiful ... A piece of music in itself is either beautiful or it isn't. The judgement as to whether or not it is beautiful falls to each

individual, as an aesthetic judgement ... what is required is that this music should be heard as a work of art, just as it came to me, and not that one should be thinking of other music that one knows already.... Letting oneself be surprised and—this would be the only thing that can help my music or any other, or indeed the listener—believing it is possible that one will encounter beauty in this music. If not, then I can't change it. The spirit wafts where it will. Reveals or conceals itself, when and where it wishes.²⁹

It is not this paper's task to advocate or debate Stockhausen's aesthetic stance. The point is that, in a context that has been habitually characterised in terms of cold cerebration, statements such as those reproduced above show that *an* aesthetic outlook emphatically exists.

Finally, it seems fair to ask how these composers viewed their 'tabula rasa' works in subsequent years. It seems no accident that the two older composers, Messiaen and Cage, came to regret them. Asked a decade later about *Mode de Valeurs*, the devoutly Catholic Messiaen simply replied: 'There are various Messiaens who are dead.'³⁰ Messiaen's momentary radicalism was also, for him, a momentary Fall from Grace—and from a Grace which none of the younger composers but Stockhausen had the slightest interest in attaining or maintaining. For them, the absolution, if any, was to be not that of the papacy, but of history, for there is no doubt that these composers were intensely aware of their 'historical position'.

Cage had equally strong reservations about *Music of Changes*. Within a few years, he was to write 'The *Music of Changes* is a music more inhuman than human, since chance operations have brought it into being. The fact that these things that constitute it, though only sounds, have come together to control a human being, the performer, gives the work the alarming aspect of a Frankenstein's monster.'³¹ But his continuation is less predictable: 'This situation is of course characteristic of Western music, the masterpieces of which are its most frightening examples, which when concerned with human communication only move over from Frankenstein monster to Dictator.'³²

Of the younger composers, Luigi Nono too sought to distance himself from a purely aesthetic *tabula rasa*. Even at the time of his earliest works, he was heavily committed to a rather idealistic version of Euro-Communism, and his espousal of 'progressive' artistic methods on behalf of left-wing ideals leant heavily on the writings of Antonio Gramsci. The avant-garde's own designation of its work at this time was 'punktuelle Musik' ['point music'] (referring to the relative

autonomy within the compositional system of each isolated 'point' of sound). Asked at the end of the 'sixties about his relation to this approach, Nono replied: 'I never composed "point music": that's an invention of the critics. A musical concept in which each point of sound is hermetically encased involves a way of thinking utterly alien to me. Applied to daily life, that would mean that every person is self-sufficient, and that their only motive is one of self-realisation. But it was always clear to me that people can only realise themselves in relation to others, and to society.'³³

Boulez, in conversation with Célestin Deliège, seems to shrug his shoulders. Conceding that 'This piece was very important in my development', he continues: 'I had taken the experiment to absurd lengths, and it is very amusing to see that certain commentators, even those who are composers, had failed to see this element ... this sort of absurdity, of chaos and mechanical wheel-within-wheels tending almost towards the random, was completely intentional. ... This equivalence between disorder and order is finally overthrown, becoming an opposition between the two.'³⁴

With Stockhausen, once again, the situation is very different. Like all of his works written during the years 1951 and 1952, *Kreuzspiel* was withdrawn almost immediately. But this was because, in terms of Stockhausen's fanatical trajectory towards a theologically 'perfect' music, into a quasi-Faustian omniscience, every new step was virtually predestined to be subsequently adjudged imperfect, and repudiated. By 1953, Stockhausen was well on the way to rejecting that ultra-purist outlook; thereafter he came to view his work in terms of cumulative exploration, and to see a piece like *Kreuzspiel* not in terms of what it rejected, but of what it paved the way for. It was the first of the 'purist' works that, in revised form, Stockhausen readmitted to his official catalogue (in 1959), and in 1961 it formed the starting point for the article *Erfindung und Entdeckung* ['Invention and Discovery'], which represents his first decade of work in just such a 'cumulative' light.

By way of coda: in 1955, a couple of years after the period considered here, Boulez was invited by Stockhausen to write an article for a new avant-garde journal, entitled *die reihe*, whose first issue was devoted to electronic music. He gave it precisely the Paul Klee title that he had originally intended for *Structures*, 'At the Borders of the Fertile Land'. Yet here we are embarking on another story. For all its almost total rupture with earlier music, electronic music, in the early 'fifties, was not intended as a means to effect the

tabula rasa—it assumed that this had already happened, and the first steps had been taken into the Promised [fertile] Land. In other words, far from exemplifying the *tabula rasa*, it is the first medium of radical reconstruction. ‘In twenty years’, says the young Stockhausen to a studio technician, ‘no-one will listen to Bach and the classics any more.’ Forty years later, maybe that’s largely true—but not, for better or worse, in the sense that Stockhausen intended.

Notes

- 1 Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries*, London, 1960, p.123.
- 2 Jean-Jacques Nattiez, ed., *The Boulez-Cage Correspondence*, Cambridge, 1993, p.28.
- 3 Nattiez, p.44.
- 4 Nattiez, p.81.
- 5 Nattiez, p.99.
- 6 Nattiez, p.102.
- 7 Nattiez, p.107.
- 8 Nattiez, pp.86, 89.
- 9 John Cage, *Silence*, Cambridge, Mass., 1966, p.63.
- 10 Nattiez, p.48.
- 11 Calvin Tomkins, *Ahead of the Game*, Harmondsworth, 1968, p.96.
- 12 Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*, London, 1976, p.41.
- 13 Nattiez, p.107.
- 14 Boulez, p.55–6. I have reversed the order of the two sentences in the original.
- 15 Boulez, p.55.
- 16 Nattiez, p.86.
- 17 Nattiez, p.53.
- 18 Nattiez, p.91.
- 19 Nattiez, p.36.
- 20 Nattiez, p.118.
- 21 Nattiez, p.53.
- 22 Cited in Michael Kurtz, *Stockhausen—A Biography*, London, 1992, p.19.
- 23 The following translations of Stockhausen’s letters are from an unpublished ms. by the present author.
- 24 Subsequently revised as a *Schlagtrio*.
- 25 Nattiez, p.134.
- 26 Nattiez, p.150.
- 27 Cited in Kurtz, pp.47–8.
- 28 Richard Toop, unpublished monograph (cf. note 27). Partial citation in Kurtz, p.60.
- 29 Quoted in Paul Griffiths, *Olivier Messiaen and the Music of Time*, London, 1985, p.153.

The Sydney Society of Literature and Aesthetics

30 Cage, p.36.

31 Cage, p.36.

32 Kürg Stenzl, ed., *Luigi Nono: Texte*, Zürich, 1975, p.200.

33 Boulez, p.57.

34 Kurtz, p.63.