
ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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PIERRE BOULEZ: *DOUZE NOTATIONS*, FOR SOLO PIANO¹

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the significance of the role of tempo and its proper regulation under “impossible conditions” – in a modernist score devoid of metronome tempo indications – with a view of tempo as the main driving force of expressivity, using Pierre Boulez’s *Douze Notations* for solo piano as an example. Although performers are free to interpret means of expression as they see fit, notated indications acquire their meaning only once we interpret them in relation to the *proper* or *right* tempo. And since the right tempo in this work is not yet a strictly defined category, we may speak of the acceptable limits of tempo, which, if they are not properly interpreted, lead to a clash between the formative forces that are meticulously notated in the expression markings, that is, the instructions that the composer left to the performer as a roadmap for a correct understanding not only of the character, but also the musical flow of the 12 miniatures.

Keywords: Boulez, *Douze Notations*, means of expression, tempo, character

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¹ *Douze Notations*, pour piano

Although often characterized as a product of a “dry” intellect, *impassioned* only by issues regarding technique, in recent years the musical language of the French composer Pierre Boulez (1925–2016) has found a different, warmer reception among many performers. In one of the most comprehensive biographies of the composer, in a chapter illustratively titled “The Lyric Age”, Dominique Jameux apologetically emphasizes “a marked lyricism and an almost ultra-romantic vehemence”² in his early creative period. In an interesting essay about Boulez’s early creativity, Gerald Bennett discusses the development of his compositional technique (which he accomplished with success and ease in his youthful works such as *Notations* and *Sonatine* for flute and orchestra) as an attempt at applying strict rules to music material as well as, later, the tendency of his materials to “break free” from ever stricter control.³ A consistent implementation of the rules of integral determinism is characteristic of Boulez’s creative period from 1950 to 1952, which produced *Structures Ia*, a piece that has been accepted as a paradigm of the integral serial technique. Nevertheless, the strict rules of serialization quickly gave way to a freer mode of organizing music material – various types of aleatoric music and the open work concept.

When it comes to Boulez’s early style, one may single out two separate but complementary aspects. On the one hand, Boulez adopted Olivier Messiaen’s (1908–1992) approach to rhythm (or *rhythmic unrest*, as he described it himself).⁴ The other line of influence concerns Anton Webern’s (1883–1945) interpretation and implementation of the twelve-tone technique. Developing the ideal of construction by applying “privileged motives (“instead of respecting the integrity of the series”)⁵ and the Messiaenian approach to organizing metre and rhythm, Boulez continued with the reconstruction of the relationship between musical space and time that was initiated by early 20th-century composers.

² Dominique Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1991, 20.

³ Gerald Bennett, “The Early Works”, in: *Pierre Boulez, A Symposium*, Ed. by William Glock, London, Eulenburg Books, 1986, 41.

⁴ Peter Heyworth, “The First Fifty Years”, in: *ibid.*, 9.

⁵ Paul Griffiths, *Boulez*, Oxford Studies of Composers, London, Oxford University Press, 1978, 8.

Douze Notations

Boulez's *Douze Notations* for solo piano stands out among his early works, because, although it was first printed only in 1985, it is considered his first published piece (on account of its year of composition – 1945). The compact dimensions of these piano sketches are a result of the context of their composition: at the time, Boulez was attending Olivier Messiaen's lectures in harmony and analysis and the Paris Conservatoire, taking private lessons in counterpoint with Andrée Vaurabourg Honegger (1894–1980), and exploring the work of the Second Viennese School with René Leibowitz (1913–1972), almost the only musician in Paris at the time who had studied composition with Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951).⁶ The manuscript, which is kept in the archive of the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel, attests to the time-frame of Boulez's work on this piece – matching the beginning of his collaboration with Leibowitz. In addition to *Douze Notations*, the same period (December 1945–January 1946) saw the composition of *Onze Notations*,⁷ that is, the first (unpublished) orchestral version of the piece.⁸

⁶ Leibowitz is one of the few musicians whose practice/methodology did not receive a “pardon” in Boulez's texts or interviews. Nevertheless, Leibowitz did play one of the principal roles in young Boulez's formative years. Among other things, in February 1945, he organized a private concert, on which occasion Boulez heard music by Schoenberg performed live for the first time – his *Wind Quintet* op. 26, conducted by Leibowitz – and then, in December the same year, he staged a concert that featured a performance of Webern's *Symphony* op. 21, where Boulez played the harmonium as a member of an ensemble that performed Schoenberg's *Herzgewächse*.

⁷ Peter O'Hagan, *Pierre Boulez: “Sonate, Que Me Veux-Tu?” An Investigation of the Manuscript Sources in Relation to the Third Sonata*, doctoral dissertation, University of Surrey, 1997, 18.

⁸ *Notations* for orchestra is one of a series of works that Boulez kept revisiting (and which, in a certain sense, remained unfinished). The first four miniatures were commissioned by Daniel Barenboim (b. 1942) after his appointment as chief conductor of the Paris Orchestra and their composition is officially dated at Universal Edition to 1978/1984. *Notation* no. 7 was likewise premièred by Barenboim, in 1999, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (the printed edition cites 1997/2004 as the year of composition, which corresponds with Barenboim's statement that Boulez, immediately after the première, went back to work on this piece). Tobias Bleek (b. 1975) writes that Boulez announced in 2012 that he would begin working on *Notation* no. 8. Revisiting the material of *Notations* (1945/1978/1984/1997/2004/2012) is an indication of his compositional procedures and need to keep developing and refining his musical language, as well as a testament to his continual reflection on the material on which he built his technique whilst still a student.

A critical take on dodecaphony and its idealization of the number 12 may be found in some underlying symbols that are woven into the musical construction of *Notations*: the work comprises 12 short pieces built on a twelve-tone series and each one of them comprises 12 bars of music. Even though there are frequent contrasts not only between individual miniatures but also within them, Boulez achieved formal unity by using one and the same twelve-tone series. Although referring to the work of the Second Viennese School composers, Charles Rosen's description of the expressive potentials of miniatures is entirely applicable to Boulez's *Notations* as well: "The miniature form is, of course, peculiarly apt in its compression for conveying the expressive intensity so important in this period. These miniatures of Webern, Berg, and Schoenberg do not diminish the emotions they express but enlarge them, as if fragments of feeling were blown up by a powerful microscope. They give, indeed, less the impression of fragments than of complete works, but only because the great variety of color and sound they contain implies a fierce, laconic repression that forces a large gesture into a rigid and cramped space."⁹

Despite already visible stylistic indications that he would develop over the following months in the *First Piano Sonata* and *Sonatine* for flute and piano, and the very fact that they were "released" in print (which basically sets them apart from his student works), *Notations* are, as Boulez put it himself, a sort of exercise, a study of the dodecaphonic technique that, apart from Schoenberg's *Sechs kleine Klavierstücke* op. 19, is informed by the music of Claude Debussy (1862–1918), Maurice Ravel (1875–1937), André Jolivet (1905–1974), Igor Stravinsky, and Béla Bartók (1881–1941). In video interviews conducted in 2012,¹⁰ Boulez warns us about the dangers of inadequate familiarity with existing literature, which often results in an inaccurate interpretation. Notwithstanding his desire to "break away" from tradition, he was aware of his own historical and cultural conditioning, as well as the fact, as

⁹ Charles Rosen, *Arnold Schoenberg*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 53.

¹⁰ The interviews, a series of short interviews conducted with the composer by the pianist Tamara Stefanović and German musicologist Tobias Bleek, are available on the "Explore the Score" webpage (<http://www.exploretthescore.org>). The quoted passages from Boulez's interviews were all reproduced from this website and concern only conversations about (the piano) *Notations*. <http://www.exploretthescore.org>, accessed 14 October 2017

he put it himself, that “nobody starts from scratch; everyone is born out of something”.¹¹ Therefore, interpreting and rendering the means of expression in *Douze notations* rests on understanding the tradition with which the composer communicates in this piece, as well as some new, unique, and sometimes quite unusual performance instructions.

Different Approaches to Interpreting Tempo Indications

At the beginning of each miniature there are tempo and/or character markings. Pianists will recognize in this detail the “handwriting” of Debussy. Instead of conventional instructions (in Italian), Boulez resorts to descriptive explanations (in French), using expressions that *describe* to the performer the atmosphere of each miniature.¹²

1. Fantasque – Modéré / 2. Très vif / 3. Assez lent / 4. Rythmique / 5. Doux et improvisé / 6. Rapide / 7. Hiératique / 8. Modéré jusqu’à très vif / 9. Lointain – Calme / 10. Mécanique et très sec / 11. Scintillant; *Faire ressortir le chant en sauts disjoints* / 12. Lent – Puissant et Âpre

What one notes immediately is the absence of metronome indications. In one of his interviews, Boulez explained this as follows: “Both Debussy and Schoenberg emphasized the fact that metronome indications are not especially important and that they apply only in the first bar, and even there not necessarily! For that reason I quite often avoided inserting them, relying instead on the *intelligence of music*, which should always dictate the appropriate tempo.” The principle whereby the movements of a multi-movement piece are organized by contrast secures the auditory perception of alternation between fast and slow tempi, but the performer should pay attention to the added descriptions as well, if they are included (*very fast, quite slow, moderately to very fast*). Matthias Pintscher (b. 1971), the veteran conductor and music director of the *Intercontemporain* ensemble, emphasizes precisely the category of tempo as one of the most interesting aspects of Boulez’s interpre-

¹¹ The interview is available on the “Explore the Score” webpage.

¹² In English, the usual term is “character indication” or “marking”. Since these are not strictly defined terms, it seems acceptable to view this category in the case of some of Boulez’s *Notations* as an indication of the atmosphere of the work. That is how Siglind Bruhn discusses Debussy’s indications in his *Preludes* (“The indications for tempo and mood”, see: Siglind Bruhn, *Images and Ideas in Modern French Piano Music: The Extra-Musical Subtext in Piano Works by Ravel, Debussy and Messiaen*, Stuyvesant, NY, Pendragon Press, 1997, 8).

tation of the orchestral *Notations* (stark contrasts between the fast and slow movements, as well as contrasting sections within individual movements).¹³

Très vif

Probably the most exciting aspect of interpreting the means of expression in this work is the sense of freedom associated precisely with the domain of tempo. The all-encompassing constructivism that Boulez pursued and that culminated just a couple of years later in the first volume of *Structures* may be glimpsed already in *Notations*. There is almost no motive or figure whose expressive value is not “defined”, whether with a dynamics, articulation, phrasing, agogic, pedalling, or character marking (typically involving several categories at once). Tempo, on the other hand, is not fixed, but included in a relatively free domain of the score and, in that sense, escapes the composer’s direct control.

Let us take *Notation* no. 2 (*Très vif*) as an example.¹⁴ Since it is not strictly defined (with a metronome indication), its tempo is set with reference to the acoustic conditions, the capabilities of the instrument, the performer’s technical proficiency, etc. The material, which corresponds to the music of Bartók and Stravinsky, dictates a steady pulsation of the rhythmic figures in the right hand, tolerating no flexibility whatsoever. The rhythmic independence of the material is achieved by grouping the notes in units comprising two or three quavers in the right hand, and quavers, crotchets, and dotted crotchets in the left hand, which is further emphasized by contrasting articulation. The twelve-tone series is stated in the left hand (with a pedal point encompassing the entire series). Although the left hand, as the carrier of the series, could be described as having a more important role than the right hand, the identity of this *Notation* would not be complete without the ostinato quaver movement in the right hand, grouped by means of an accent marked above every starting note. Boulez says that this miniature was directly derived from his analysis of irregular rhythms in *Le Sacre du printemps* and that one could characterize it as “a very fast *Sacre*”, which particularly directs our attention to the accented quavers in the right hand.

¹³ On the website of the Viennese publisher Universal one may find brief remarks that leading experts in the domain of Boulez’s music made on the occasion of the publication of *Notations*. The comment by Matthias Pintscher was quoted from that web page; <https://www.universaledition.com>, accessed 3 November 2017

¹⁴ See *Notation* no. 2, bb. 4–7, in: *Pierre Boulez: Douze Notations pour piano* (1945), Wien, Universal Edition, 1985, 3.

By analysing three major performances, by Pierre-Laurent Aimard (b. 1957), David Fray (b. 1981), and Ran Dank (b. 1982), we arrive at the following conclusions:

- the considerable differences between these three recordings confirm there is much leeway in choosing one's tempo – Ran Dank's tempo is around 165 bpm, Pierre-Laurent Aimard's is around 180, while David Fray's tempo is around 195 bpm ($\text{♩} = 165/180/195$);
- mastering a (very) fast tempo almost automatically means losing the accents above the quavers in the right hand.

On first hearing, Ran Dank's tempo sounds compelling. And yet, when compared to Aimard's and especially to Fray's tempo, it begins to sound sluggish. By contrast, Fray's performance sounds too rushed. His performance lacks the overtones of Stravinsky and Bartók, not merely because the accentuation of the quavers in the right hand disappears in an overly accelerated tempo, but also because the speed of his performance affects the auditory differences between the two- and three-quaver units. Aimard's tempo sounds ideal: the quaver groupings are clearly defined, while the fact that his various recordings demonstrate almost imperceivable differences is likewise noteworthy, especially if we remember Boulez's already mentioned view of the *intelligence of music, which should always dictate the appropriate tempo*. One should add that a somewhat slower performance, such as Dank's, is not monotonous. His rendering of *Notation no. 2*, returned to its overall context, sounds organized and more striking than Fray's problematically fast rendition, which brings us to the insights made below.

The passages from *Notation no. 2* discussed above are almost oversaturated with expression markings. In them we find an indication of the overall level of dynamics (*ff*), articulation indications in the right hand (*staccato*, meticulously notated over each quaver), an accent on every starting quaver in every grouping in the right hand discussed above, sustained pedal points corresponding to the phrasing in the left hand (which "disregards" the *staccato* in the right hand), as well as the same tempo indication replicated from the top of the miniature (*Très vif*). Clusters, tremolos, glissandi, using all registers of the piano for big cluster leaps and the construction of a broadly shaped melody stretching across seven octaves make the texture of this miniature extremely demanding in terms of technique (in the prescribed *very fast* tempo) and points to the big changes that Boulez and numerous other composers would implement during the 20th century in terms of developing virtuosity.¹⁵

¹⁵ In light of the development of virtuosity during the latter half of the 20th century, marked by re-examining the boundaries of the possible, both in the domain of the tech-

Plentiful indications for directing the interpretation of each and every individual element of a technically demanding score are certainly not a novelty, but what does stand out in this case is the way these elements compete with and condition each other in Boulez's score. The accents, which sound robust, *folkloric*, and on which, at the beginning (and in slower tempi), the performer concentrates as exceptionally important elements in their interpretation, gradually fade as increasingly fast tempi are mastered, while in a tempo that is too fast, such as Frey's, they disappear altogether. The dynamics and tempo come to the forefront, while what was originally perhaps the most important element – the accents in the right hand – slowly blend into the overall sound image. This is certainly a polemic view and it is surely debatable just how *expressively* those accents should be played. They appear in the score in order to emphasize, above all, the dichotomy of the rhythmic patterns in both hands. Nonetheless, every performer who first “falls for” the impression of *Le Sacre du Printemps* in the right hand, and only then realizes the importance of the (*very fast*) tempo, will agree with my view that this is an example of a material that “cannot handle” all the indications that appear in the score and therefore “naturally” allocates them different levels of priority in the musical flow. Thus the *très vif* tempo indication strikes pianists as an ideal reference point: not “merely” fast – with the view of adopting/mastering (new) virtuosity, but not too fast either (in order to preserve Boulez's musical thought as a whole).

Modéré jusqu'à très vif

In one of his lectures given at the 1960 Darmstadt Summer Course for New Music, Boulez spoke about the need for new forms among composers of the new generation. We learn from that lecture that at the time, authors often resorted to organizing their forms according to rules that were not universal, but could be applied only in individual works. In other words, the material itself, i.e. “content” in Boulez's words, defined the form.¹⁶ In that sense, it goes

nical characteristics of instruments and in terms of performance and physical limitations and then also transcending them, typically led by bold performing leaps into the unknown and faith in the complexity of new musical thought, this miniature by Boulez, in a mere 12 bars, anticipates numerous “risky situations” that the *new virtuosity* of the latter half of the 20th century would only intensify.

¹⁶ Pierre Boulez, “Form”, *Orientations: Collected Writings*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1986, 91.

without saying that in a performance analysis, as well as in every formal analysis of a given piece as a whole or fragmentarily, we use tools that are applicable to the structural principles of that piece as a musical flow. An especially interesting approach to *Notation* no. 8, which is discussed below, is the analysis of its musical flow from the perspective of Berislav Popović's theory of structural gravity centers given that in *Notations* we find them in unexpected places – among means of expression such as tempo and dynamics.

"The special task of formal analysis is to find the type of composing technique actually applied in the given situation, that is those elements which the composer meant to perform the role of carrying the recognizable traits of the structure of the music flow – the elements upon which the relationships between parts of the form are established."¹⁷ One of the interesting principles of this theoretical view is that all the musical parameters equally affect the shape of a musical flow, but when one analyses their structural gravity centers, there is always one that stands out among them and "coordinates" the exposition of the material, that is, a music parameter or, rather, parameters that regulate the musical flow (which is the case in the present example). The basic "grammar" rules of tonal music stipulate that the centres of gravity typically comprise melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic elements. The following example is a good illustration of how expressive means such as tempo and dynamics may take over the role of structural centres of gravity, which further attests to the strength of their constructive potential.¹⁸

Notation no. 8 is an interesting example of correlating the activities of different means of expression based on the dominant role of tempo.¹⁹ The

¹⁷ Berislav Popović, *Music Form or Meaning in Music*, transl. by Miloš Zatkalik, Belgrade, Clio, 1998, 113.

¹⁸ *Douze Notations* for solo piano are an excellent example of music from the first half of the 20th century that blurs the boundaries between primary and secondary music parameters. In contrast to the hierarchy of musical parameters in the art music of the Western civilization up until the end of the 19th century, which entailed the division of primary and secondary parameters, those traits of 20th-century music that used to be considered secondary, in addition to their decorative significance, now often acquired a functional value as well. We may adequately grasp their constructive role in *Notation* no. 8, and even their supremacy over primary parameters, if we accept Charles Rosen's view that the clarinet part in Schoenberg's *Pierrot* may be played a semitone up or down without disturbing the musical sense of that work, but the same music becomes absurd if the dynamic markings are not honoured.

¹⁹ Pierre Boulez, *Douze Notations: Notation* no. 8, bb. 1–3, in score: *Pierre Boulez: Douze Notations pour piano* (1945), Wien, Universal Edition, 1985, 8.

melody is constructed on a repetitive perfect-fourth movement (b ♭ – e), which alludes to non-European folklore. The reductive harmonic layer of this miniature consists of two chords (comprising the rest of the twelve-tone series), which invariably occur in the same registers. Boulez repeatedly stated that at the time of writing *Notations* he was often exposed to music from the East as well as other non-European sources, such as talking-drum music.²⁰ The melody is inspired by the peculiar sound of the marimba, which he heard played when submerged in water, which affects its timbre and makes it sound warmer. That timbral aspect is achieved by applying the right pedal throughout, with quick and brief changes with every new statement of the chord. In the first bar there is a dynamic marking and an additional explanation of the main tempo indication (*Modéré jusqu'à très vif*): *pp – augmenter et accélérer d'une manière progressive et continuer jusqu'à la dernière mesure*.²¹ The final instruction concerns the melody as well as the overall mood of the work: *Donner à cette figure tout son caractère de percussion*.²² In it one may glean the descriptive title from 1945, which was suppressed in the printed version: *Afrique*.²³

The melody, that is, short phrases outlined by pointed entries of the chords, constitute the structural gravity center in the opening bars. Nevertheless, sonic rendering of the piece as a whole reveals a different profile of the score. With the gradual acceleration of tempo and increase in dynamics it becomes clear that these two elements *take over the role of the structural gravity center*, pushing the melody into the background. The rhythmic division of the melodic figure into sub-triplets is perfectly audible in a moderate tempo, while a clear articulation is possible even in quite soft dynamics, owing to the instruction about the percussive character of the piece. In a *very fast* tempo it becomes impossible (and almost every recording features the attainment of an extremely fast tempo). The sound image is then formed only by the outlines of the perfect-fourth movement, repressed amid a whirl

²⁰ The main function of these African instruments (hourglass drums) was to communicate important messages, encoded in a system of rhythmic patterns and characteristic intervals, abstract to all those who are unfamiliar with that “language of messages”.

²¹ “Pianissimo – gradually louder and faster in a continual progression until the final bar” (translated from French by Nataša Penezić).

²² “Inform this figure with a percussive character” (translated from the French by Nataša Penezić).

²³ Peter O'Hagan, *Pierre Boulez: “Sonate, Que Me Veux-Tu?”...*, op. cit., 18.

that culminates in bar 11, and *très violent* at that.²⁴ Berislav Popović explained this phenomenon in a musical flow as follows: “The coordinating component is in fact the *structural gravity center* of the musical content at that moment and accordingly, the arrangement and alternation of components is careful and organized. At the moment when the element which is the structural gravity center acquires the properties of automatic predictability – when it has been the gravity center for a sufficiently long time so that its power for ‘new tasks’ has been exhausted – it is pushed into the background and the structural gravity center moves to another level which has not yet become automatized, that is, to the elements of a new musical component.”²⁵

Fantastique – Modéré

(The double meaning of character indications)

The wealth of expression in *Notation* no. 1 is announced already with the first marking above the score – *Fantastique*, which the composer said should instruct the performer that the work has an “improvisational character”. The improvisational character of this miniature is chiefly suggested by its opening motive – an arabesque, as Boulez illustratively calls it,²⁶ which reappears in the upper part in bar 7 and then once again, at the very end, in the lower register in the closing bar. Unlike the opening statement of the arabesque (which goes on for two crotchets and a semiquaver), its variation in bar 7 is extended with longer note values (taking five crotchets in total), which secures a slower passage of time, whether or not pianists choose to perform it in a slower, faster, or the same tempo as the opening motive. At this point, we might take a look at the double meaning of the *Fantastique* marking in the context of interpreting it as opposed to the marking that reads *Modéré*. *Fantastique* is a character indication, suggesting an improvisational approach to the work, the constantly present “impulses” of energy in its musical flow, the contrasts woven into the material (even inspiring us, liberating and motivating us to explore the possibilities of expression in every detail). Nevertheless,

²⁴ At that point the musical flow stops, while the effect of an echo is achieved by another one, final repetition of the melodic figure, in a slower tempo (and a fermata, interpreted figuratively, since releasing the pedal “on time” would abruptly cut short the resulting sonic panorama, in which the piece finally reveals its true nature).

²⁵ Berislav Popović, *Music Form or ...*, in: op. cit., 111.

²⁶ The quoted terms come from the “Explore the Score” video interviews mentioned above.

it says much about tempo, especially if the listener does not have the score in front of them. No matter how many different recordings we listen to, we will not find two recordings with the same tempo, but what is shared by all (noteworthy) interpretations of this piece is that the tempo is constantly nuanced and varied. Viewed that way, *Fantasque* operates as a character as well as tempo indication, furthermore, as a marking that suggests not a contrasting tempo to *Modéré*, but every possible divergence in tempo from moderate.

Character/mood markings that take over the role of tempo indications may be found in the following *Notations* as well:

- *Notation* no. 4: *Rythmique* (rhythmically) – a marking that to every pianist communicates something different (which is borne out by numerous different recordings). In my view, given the fixed form of the figure in the left hand, modest dynamic markings, and a wealth of articulation markings, a fast tempo would be redundant and even somewhat destructive. Above all, *rhythmically* means no rushing, consistently retaining the same tempo from beginning to end. In a moderate tempo, articulation becomes the dominant expressive means in this *Notation* and therefore one could liken it to a little modernist study in articulation.
- *Notation* no. 5: *Doux et improvisé* (gently and improvised) – these character and agogic markings point to the contemplative character of the piece and suggest that the tempo is *ad libitum* (although it is questionable, given the extremely slow exposition of the material and listeners' inability to register the downbeats in every bar, whether the performer's idea of the tempo, as they hear it, finds a way to the listener at all).
- *Notation* no. 7: *Hiératique* (priestly, nobly, solemnly) – an illustrative character indication, more effective than any tempo marking; it leaves a deep impression on the performer, suggesting a dedicated, intensive listening to all three layers of the score and, of course, a calm and slow tempo. (It is an allusion to Medieval sacred music, inspired by a dirge for the salvation of a drowned man's soul, which Boulez heard as a young man.)
- *Notation* no. 10: *Mécanique et très sec* (mechanically and very dryly), additionally marked *martelé* in the opening bar, may be viewed as a word pun – a character marking (*Mécanique*) indicates the tempo, an articulation marking (*très sec*) addresses the use of the pedals, while an indication that comes from the vocabulary of string instruments (*martelé*, a short, quick move of the bow yielding a *secco* sound) is meant to condition piano articulation.

- *Notation* no. 11: *Scintillant* (scintillating, sparkling); *Faire ressortir le chant en sauts disjoints* – a marking indicating the mood of the work, which also “pushes” the tempo forward. Boulez’s choice of words suggests an unstable tempo, one that keeps rushing ahead, without slowing down.

* * *

I have had the opportunity to work on “extremizing” various parameters in works by Boulez with Ueli Wiget (b. 1957), a pianist and member of the Ensemble Modern.²⁷ In order to interpret his music adequately and faithfully, according to Ueli, one must heed the notated markings, as well as be willing, often and without hesitation, to exaggerate them, taking the dynamic plan “to an extreme” or highlighting some characteristic differences in articulation. It is an approach to interpretation that applies to much of 20th-century literature, which is affirmed by numerous texts by performers and composers. I am especially fond of various graphic comments by Peter Stadlen (1910–1996), who premiered Webern’s *Variations for Piano op. 27* and spent a great deal of time preparing the piece with the composer himself. His remarks on commitment and passion with which Webern approached even the smallest of details are precious (as his much quoted comment on Webern introducing *pensato* demonstrates), and give us valuable insight: “He never tired conveying to me the poetics of the work down to the minutest, most delicate detail – conducting, gesticulating, singing (he never played).”²⁸

Similar performing procedures in *Notations* acquire their real value only when the performer locates the boundaries of an acceptable tempo.²⁹ The music really dictates the tempo, but one should also take into account the fact that this is the only work by Boulez for the piano (or with the piano) that does not include metronome indications, where the tempo is most often merely *described* with a character marking. It concerns, therefore, a certain degree of freedom when it comes to setting the tempo (limited by the content of the

²⁷ The Ensemble Modern orchestra (founded in 1998) is one of the few orchestras in the world that only performs modern and contemporary music. The many projects undertaken by this institution include recording the orchestral version of Boulez’s *Notations* for Deutsche Grammophon’s exclusive edition of Boulez’s complete works in 2013.

²⁸ The comment was quoted from Peter Stadlen’s foreword for Anton Webern’s *Variationen für Klavier op. 27* (1936), Universal Edition A. G., Wien, 1979.

²⁹ One can listen nowadays to numerous performances, including various problematic interpretations, precisely due to imprudent decisions regarding tempo.

piece), while all other expressive means are conditioned, that is, predetermined by the performer's decisions in that regard.

Unlike tonal music, which has the power to "undertake" various types of experimentation in performance (remember the most famous examples: interpretations by Glenn Gould /1932–1982/ or Ivo Pogorelić /b. 1958/), Boulez's *Notations*, as an example of atonal music geared toward atomized expression, cannot be described in the same way. In the examples cited above, I sought to demonstrate how significant the role of tempo is, interpreting it as the main driving force of expression in these miniatures. It is indisputable that every performer builds a dynamic plan "in their own way" or characteristically, differently from other performers, perceives a *bitter* atmosphere or the *percussive* character of a certain figure, but those expressive means gain their meaning only when we shape them against the "right" tempo. Since the *right* tempo in this work by Boulez is still not a fixed category, we may speak of a palette of *right* tempi – one of the most interesting fields of research in the domain of interpreting those scores that find their way to performers without precise metronome indications.

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Summary

Douze Notations for solo piano by Pierre Boulez, the composer's earliest published work (by year of composition), stands out not only as a critical view of dodecaphonic works from the first half of the 20th century and the idealization of the number 12, but also by the specific characteristics of its world of expressive means, which would acquire more precise directions in later piano pieces, especially when it comes to tempo markings. There is almost no motive or figure whose expressive value is not "defined", whether by dynamics, articulation, phrasing, agogic, pedal use, or character markings. By contrast, its tempo is not fixed, but belongs to a relatively free domain of the score, which equates in this piece the process of interpreting expressive means, as one of the most interesting and important aspects of an original interpretation, with searching for the *right* tempo. The composer gave us detailed directions, in French and almost poetically (occasionally choosing quite original expressions), inserting character indications at the top of each miniature that describe their atmosphere and character, as well as take over the role of tempo indications.

Notation no. 2, saturated with expression markings, reflects their competition and mutual dependence – mastering ever faster tempi causes important elements of the musical flow to fade away, which means that one of the most important interpretative decisions regarding this miniature concerns choosing a tempo that will not suppress other expressive features. Interpretation of expressive means is shown on *Notation* no. 8 as an example, by analysing its musical flow from the perspective of Berislav Popović's theory of structural gravity centers, because we find them in this piece in unexpected places – among expressive means such as tempo and dynamics. Also, the paper provides a brief summary of other *Notations*, in which character, that is, mood markings clearly dictate the choice of tempo, as well as conclusions based not only on a personal interpretation of the composer's original directions, but also on the experience of learning and preparing a concert performance of this piece.