

Inter-Centre Research Exchange Report

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Project Summary

The motivation to do an inter-centre research exchange at the Sacher Foundation was a necessary step in completing my thesis, which involves reconstructing and performing an abandoned vibraphone version of Boulez's *...explosante-fixe...*, a landmark in the development of live electronics. While the vibraphone version had already been developed and premiered in 1986, there has been little to no publicly available documentation on the history of this work. Although I had already discovered materials at the Sacher Foundation in a previous visit, this second visit was necessary to thoroughly examine all the remaining scores and sketches, correspondences, and conduct an interview with the performer, Jean-Claude Forestier.

Findings

The first task I had before me when I arrived at the Sacher Foundation was to read through the correspondence between Pierre Boulez and Jean-Claude Forestier, for whom the vibraphone version of *...explosante-fixe...* was dedicated. The correspondence was quite substantial, spanning a time period from 1971 to 2011. All the letters were either written in French or German, and although some were printed with a typewriter, the handwritten ones were particularly difficult to decipher at times, especially the ones from Boulez, who has a characteristically unique and equally frustrating microscopic style of writing.

The earlier letters mention plans for rehearsing the ensemble version of *...explosante-fixe...* from 1973, which clearly confirms that Jean-Claude Forestier was involved in the early rehearsals and performances of this iteration, not only as a performer, but as a leader in organizing the logistics for rehearsals and performances, which clearly came from his sincere interest in the piece and in Boulez's music in general. Although Boulez would eventually abandon this version, the idea of writing a solo vibraphone version first appears in a letter from as early as 1976, where Forestier references Boulez's idea to create a version for vibraphone and several synthesizers. Although it's still not clear when Boulez actually began working on this version, it does show that this piece began much earlier than originally thought (previous references to this piece cite that the piece was developed between 1982-1987). Another letter from 1980 references a vibraphone method book that Forestier was working on with Lionel Hampton, in which he asks Boulez for permission to publish excerpts from *...explosante-fixe...*, which demonstrates that in 1980 there were already some movements that had been completed. The final version of the method book in question includes three movements from *...explosante-fixe...*: *Transitoire IV, Originel*, and *Transitoire VII*.

Hans Peter Haller, who was the head of the Heinrich Strobel Foundation experimental studio of the Südwestfunk, was the original technician in charge of electronics for the 1973 ensemble version as well as this early version for solo vibraphone. In one particular folder, there is information confirming the date and location of the premiere: September 2, 1986, Stadtcasino, Basel. In this same folder is a letter from Haller to Boulez trying to schedule a time for Boulez to listen to this version at the studio. This letter, in addition to an account of Haller's work on this piece in a book he published about his work with composers at the experimental studio, confirms that the electronics for this version were conceived entirely by Haller.

Further letters between Boulez and Forestier, as well as from my interview with Forestier, confirms Boulez's desire to create a computer version of the work, as he was never satisfied with the electronic part designed by Haller, which used exclusively analog gear, namely a device invented by Haller: the halaphone.

A new technician, André Richard, took over from Haller as head of the Heinrich Strobel experimental studio in 1989, and according to Forestier, migrated all of the electronic effects to computer software to create a digital version of ...*explosante-fixe*... A performance on September 5, 1990 in Lucerne was the premiere of this new version, which also included very specific changes to the effects that Boulez requested in collaboration with André Richard. According to Forestier, this was the first time Boulez was directly involved in the decision-making process on how to shape the electronic part. After this performance Boulez was still not completely satisfied and would continually write to Forestier about plans to finalize the electronic part.

These plans would unfortunately never materialize. His busy conducting schedule and other compositional priorities never allowed him the sabbatical that he needed to properly complete the work with Forestier. The correspondence reveals that Boulez hoped to complete an ambitious work for solo vibraphone with a sophisticated electronic part that, in addition to timbral and spatial transformations of the vibraphone, would include the triggering of MIDI samples of additional musical material that would expand the vibraphone beyond its limited range of three octaves. All the information about the electronic for this version suggest clear corollaries to the approach he used in writing *Anthèmes II*, the work for solo violin and live electronics that premiered in 1997 and was created from the same open matrix score that he used to write the other versions of ...*explosante-fixe*.... In one letter, Boulez even says that once the vibraphone solo is done, he will give it another name, like he did for *Anthèmes II*. Boulez repeatedly expresses his desire to finish the piece through the 1990s and even into the early 2000s, without ever managing to find the time to properly work on it. The last mention of the piece appears in a letter to Forestier dated from 2006.

Although the correspondence at the Sacher Foundation was an invaluable resource, it also led me to a meeting with Jean-Claude Forestier, as well as making contact with André Richard. André Richard was kind enough to send me copies of the technical documentation of the electronics part that he had worked on with Boulez. That, combined with the interview with Forestier, has been invaluable to unlocking many of the details behind the creation of this lost work. This research trip has also uncovered two additional movements that Boulez wrote, but were never performed or given any kind of electronic treatment. Below shows a layout of the order of movements in the first performed version, and then the version that Boulez hoped to complete:

- 1986 version:**
1. *Transitoire VI*
 2. *Transitoire IV*
 3. *Originel A*
 4. *Transitoire V*
 5. *Originel B*
 6. *Transitoire VII*

- Full version:**
1. *Transitoire VI*
 2. *Transitoire IV*
 3. *Originel A*
 4. *Transitoire V*
 5. *Originel B*
 6. *Transitoire VII*
 7. *Transitoire II*

8. *Transitoire III*

Conclusion

Between the correspondence, scores, interview with Jean-Claude Forestier, and documents from André Richard, I was able to glean more than enough material to complete my thesis, which aims to reconstruct this version of ...*explosante-fixe*... as well as thoroughly document the history of its conception and the various reasons that it was never finished. This project will enable a lost work by Boulez to be heard again in performance, and also fill a lacuna in the rich history of the ...*explosante-fixe*... family of works, as well as Boulez's characteristically fraught relationship with technology, and this research exchange at the Paul Sacher Foundation was an essential step in completing this project.