



A SCULPTOR OF SOUND: Celebrating Pierre Boulez's 100th Birthday

PIERRE BOULEZ WAS A LUMINARY OF 20TH-CENTURY MUSIC, inspiring generations of musicians and listeners as a composer, conductor, and pedagogue. He also spent a great deal of time with The Cleveland Orchestra, first as a guest conductor in the 1960s, then as musical advisor starting in 1970. The artistic relationship remained strong, with Boulez returning nearly annually to Cleveland to lead concerts and recording projects. With 2025 marking the 100th anniversary of Boulez's birth, we take a brief look at his five-decade relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra.

Boulez was born on March 26, 1925, in Montbrison, France. He entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1942 to study composition with **Olivier Messiaen**. After graduating, Boulez quickly identified with a group of young firebrand composers who believed that music ought to capture the anxiety of the moment and was not afraid to criticize the old guard of modernists when they fell short of that mark. He also found opportunities to spread his influence as a conductor as well as a composer.

Boulez's debut in Cleveland in 1965 was not his first time to appear in the United States, but it was his first time leading a major American orchestra.

Pierre Boulez fostered a remarkable five-decade relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra, which encompassed concerts at home, tours abroad, and numerous recording projects (five of which received Grammy Awards).

Over dinner in 1963, then-Music Director **George Szell** invited the rising European star to guest conduct The Cleveland Orchestra, an offer which Boulez graciously accepted. That first program the composer-conductor led at Severance featured a collection of modernist works, including one of his own compositions—the US premiere of *Figures—Doubles—Prismes*.

The performance was a great success and Szell invited him back in 1967. That same season, Boulez entered a five-year guest conducting agreement with the Orchestra, and in February 1969, he was appointed its first-ever principal guest conductor. The press release quotes Szell: "I feel sure that our community of artistic purpose and our mutually complementing musical backgrounds will greatly benefit The Cleveland Orchestra and its audiences."

On July 30, 1970, Boulez was conducting a concert at Blossom Music Center when word of Szell's untimely passing reached the Orchestra. Assistant Conductor **Louis Lane** delivered the news to Boulez at intermission, who promised to tell the musicians only after the concert. Soon after, Boulez agreed to serve as musical advisor to The Cleveland Orchestra for the following two seasons, ushering the organization through the upheaval in the wake of Szell's loss.

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—Franz Welser-Möst

It was during his stint as musical advisor that Boulez led a series of “Informal Evenings”—concerts of new music interspersed with lectures from the conductor. The musicians dressed in casual suits and the lights stayed up while Boulez walked the audience through seemingly inaccessible modernist pieces by Messiaen, **Varèse**, and others. **Robert Finn** of *The Plain Dealer* captured the crux of these experimental concerts: “While it did not sell many tickets, there is no question that it was an artistic triumph.”

In his years with an official appointment in Cleveland (1967–72), Boulez led the Orchestra in over 100 works spanning three centuries, including the Cleveland premieres of more than 30

pieces. He led the Orchestra at Severance, Blossom Music Center, and on regional runouts, in addition to joining the Orchestra on international tours to Montreal and Japan.

Boulez took time off from guest conducting in 1977 to found the Institute de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM). But beginning in 1991, Boulez returned to Cleveland once or twice a season to lead projects and went on tour with the

Orchestra in 1993 (Carnegie Hall), 1996 (Paris), and 1999 (Carnegie). Boulez remained active internationally into the early 2000s, when health concerns began to slow his musical activities.

Before Boulez's passing in 2016, The Cleveland Orchestra held three major birthday celebrations for him—for his 80th in 2005, his 85th in 2010, and his 90th in 2015—the first two of which he himself conducted. As a happy coincidence, these celebrations also corresponded with the 40th, 45th, and 50th anniversaries of Boulez's first appearance with the Orchestra in March 1965. Each of these programs featured quintessentially Boulez selections celebrating 20th-century music, including his own compositions.



To this day, Boulez holds the record for having the longest working relationship with The Cleveland Orchestra outside of its music directors. Since his first appearance in 1965, Boulez led the Orchestra in over 220 performances at home and on tour, and recorded more than 50 works with the Orchestra, winning five Grammy Awards. The Musical Arts Association honored him with the 2013–14 Distinguished Service Award.

In a video produced for Boulez's 90th birthday celebration in 2015, Music Director **Franz Welser-Möst** reflected on the lasting impact the conductor has had on the reputation and identity of The Cleveland Orchestra:

Music Director George Szell (right) first invited Boulez to conduct The Cleveland Orchestra in 1963. His debut appearance in 1965 would ultimately lead the Frenchman to be named the Orchestra's musical advisor after Szell's death in 1970.

I believe that Pierre Boulez has left his fingerprint on this Orchestra in a very strong way. He has conducted this orchestra [for] over 40 years with his very calm style of teaching the Orchestra the most complex scores. He has widened the horizon of all the players individually but also as a collective. ... The Cleveland Orchestra in our day is known actually for playing the music from the last 70 years with an ease which is unmatched in our world, and I think that is very much thanks to him.



February 2010 marked one of **Boulez's** final appearances in Cleveland, where he led the Orchestra and pianist **Pierre-Laurent Aimard** in Ravel's two piano concertos. These performances were recorded and subsequently released by Deutsche Grammophon.

The Orchestra and its members had an equal impact on Boulez, which one can see in the collection of hand-written thank-you notes preserved in the Orchestra's Archives. An undated photograph from the 1970s reads: "To the members of the Cleveland Orchestra with my deepest gratitude for the wonderful partnership we always had." More recently, the letter sent after his 85th birthday celebration reads:

Since 45 years—yes, forty five!—I have the privilege to conduct the Cleveland Orchestra. To all of its members I want to express my sincere gratitude for the wonderful memories I spent working with them, great moments of joy and of accomplishment. Such a rewarding experience has been and still is an extremely precious part of my musical life. My warmest thanks to all of you and to each of you. ♪

—Ellen Sauer Tanyeri

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