twentieth-century music 1/1, 65–80 © 2004 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S1478572204000064 Printed in the United Kingdom

'Unbounded Visions': Boulez, Mallarmé and Modern Classicism

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Abstract

Pli selon pli is Boulez's richest encounter with Mallarmé. As a 'portrait' of the poet which sets three of his sonnets, it can be associated not only with other composers – Ravel, Debussy – who set Mallarmé, but also with the poet's own views on music, and his radical yet tradition-conscious formal practices. Structural and poetic aspects of the fourth movement of the work, 'Improvisation III', are examined in detail, highlighting Boulez's increasing concern with matters of formal coherence. This suggests a strengthening resistance to modernism as fragmentation and the embrace of a modern classicism which shuns the fixed hierarchies of tonal classicism as well as the parodistic juxtapositions of neoclassicism. At the same time, however, the multiple resonances on which modern classicism depends for its coherence ensure that certain aspects of Mallarmé-inspired narrative – concerning shipwrecks and sirens, among other things – cannot be entirely suppressed in present-day critical commentary.

I

In comments on his *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913), Maurice Ravel wrote of Mallarmé's 'immaterial' poetry, with its 'unbounded visions, yet precise in design, enclosed in a mystery of sombre abstractions – an art where all the elements are so intimately bound up together that one cannot analyze, but only sense, its effect': and Ravel added that he wished 'to transpose Mallarmé's poetry into music, especially that preciosity so full of meaning and so characteristic of him'.[1] More than forty years later, in *Pli selon pli*, Pierre Boulez began his most extensive engagement with Mallarmé's special blend of mystery and precision, and declared an interest in 'the idea of finding a musical equivalent, both poetic and formal, to Mallarmé's poetry'.[2] Boulez had first aimed to associate Mallarmé with his music in the late 1940s: the 'idea of a *Livre* for string quartet, which, right from the start, was to be made up of detachable movements, came to me in 1948/9, probably while reading *Igitur* and *Le* [*sic*] *Coup de dés*':[3] and in 1951 he considered the possibility of a work for chorus and large orchestra called *Un coup de dés*, after Mallarmé's most radical poetic enterprise. There remains some uncertainty about the extent to which the aleatory format of the Piano Sonata No. 3 (1956–7) reflects Boulez's knowledge of Mallarmé's *Livre*, which was not published until March 1957. But in any case the 'portrait de Mallarmé' which began to take shape in

1 Cited by Kaminsky in 'Vocal Music and the Lures of Exoticism and Irony', 171–2.
2 Boulez, *Conversations*, 94. See also *Jalons*, 133–4.
3 Boulez, *Conversations*, 51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572204000064 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1957 emphasized rather different texts – primarily the three sonnets 'Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd'hui' (1885), 'Une dentelle s'abolit' (1887), and 'A la nue accablante tu' (1895).

The first 'definitive' version of *Pli selon pli*, conducted by Boulez at Donaueschingen on 20 October 1962, in which the three sonnet-based 'Improvisations' were framed by 'Don' and 'Tombeau', emerged during a particularly productive period. Since the première of *Le Marteau sans maître* in 1955 he had completed the first version of *Doubles* for large orchestra, as well as working on the Piano Sonata No. 3, playing a version at Darmstadt in September 1957: and apart from the first two Mallarmé 'Improvisations' (1957) he also composed *Poésie pour pouvoir* (involving a spoken text by Henri Michaux on tape) in 1958. In 1959 came the third 'Improvisation sur Mallarmé' (later much revised), and a seven-minute version of 'Tombeau', inscribed to the late Prince Max von Fürstenberg. There had also been tape music for a film called *Symphonie mécanique* in 1955 and incidental music for a radio play in 1957, from which material gravitated to the 'Improvisations'. Meanwhile, in January 1959 Boulez abandoned France for Germany – Baden-Baden – asserting a few years later, with typical asperity, that he had left Paris 'because, on the organizational level of musical life, stupidity was even more prevalent there than elsewhere'.[4] In such circumstances, it might seem surprising to find him choosing to organize a large-scale composition around the texts of a French writer. But Mallarmé, in Boulez's eyes, evidently stood for everything opposed to those present-day stupidities, in which France had 'completely lost its importance: there was no progress'.[5] To celebrate Mallarmé was therefore to reproach his compatriots while showing them what should be done, and could be done – if only, for a time, from outside France itself.

II

Mallarmé's own extensive engagement with music (Wagner, in particular) has encouraged the exploration of alignments between poet and composers – even those who never set his texts. For example, Carlo Caballero brings Fauré and Mallarmé together on the grounds that Fauré's 'attempts to eliminate from his music time, places, or preordained images whose precision would allow it to signify manifest his concern, independent of Mallarmé's but parallel to it, to abolish the creator's elocutionary persona from the finished work'.[6] In this reading, Fauré's aesthetic complements the poet's recognition that 'if music seems capable of offering the contemplative modes of lyricism without the anecdotal presence of a speaking author, it does so through a "language" which is not language, a distinctively musical syntax' (253). Caballero claims that 'what is most musical (and Fauréan) about Mallarmé's ideal is its preference for words – rather than rhetoric, narrative, or description – as a vehicle for a personal sensibility', for although 'Mallarmé's poetics would not forgo all subjectivity' they would 'evade mimesis, and particularly the elaborate naturalism of his contemporaries' (254). Caballero therefore concludes that 'whereas Fauré had the advantage of being a musician who wished to compose music, Mallarmé was a poet who wished to do much more

4 Jameux, *Pierre Boulez*, 113, citing a conversation with Jean-Louis de Rambures in *Realités* (April 1965).
5 Jameux, *Boulez*, 113.
6 Carlo Caballero, *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*, 253. Subsequent page references in text.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572204000064 Published online by Cambridge University Press

than write verse. He set himself the task of rendering music back to its original domain, as it had been on Mount Parnassus, by subsuming its most abstract expressive abilities in Poetry, the supreme Music' (255).

The fact that Fauré never set any Mallarmé, as if to acknowledge that those poems 'did not need more music than the poet already gave them', distinguishes him from Debussy and Ravel, who were 'not so reluctant to meet listeners further down the path of communication and offered them hints and allusions to spark, if not satisfy, their imaginations' (255–6). Boulez was not a contemporary of Fauré, and Caballero does not attempt to associate him with this lack of reluctance. But in an earlier section of his book – 'Boulez: gesture, idea, realization' – Caballero considers the ways in which Boulez's writings about composition evolve from iconoclastic formalism towards a more subjective orientation on such a matter (very pertinent to Mallarmé) as stylistic homogeneity: 'we cannot separate technical work from personal expression in Boulez's philosophy of composition without betraying his thought. For him the ''unique synthesis'' embodied in a great work entails both technical progress and something irreducibly personal at once' (123), and for Caballero this associates Boulez with French writers on composition from earlier in the twentieth century: for example, Paul Dukas and Louis Laloy. 'There is some merit to looking upon Dukas as Boulez's spiritual grandfather', even though 'the continuity is oblique' (124): and it might be argued that it is Mallarmé, rather than Char or Michaux, who has the strongest claim to be Boulez's other 'spiritual grandfather'. When Boulez declared, in his essay around the Third Sonata, ' ''Sonate, que me veux tu''?', that 'in fact my present mode of thought derives from my reflections on literature rather than on music',[7] it was Mallarmé who stood for the kind of literature he most valued: and while Boulez dismissed 'mimesis' and 'elaborate naturalism' no less vigorously than Mallarmé himself, he found in the poet's sonnets a discipline that opened up the prospect of a modernism whose purity did as much to reinvent classicism as to reject it, and which would ultimately lead him away from texts altogether.

As a portrait of Mallarmé, *Pli selon pli* might be expected to affirm the concept of modernism acknowledged by Boulez, if a touch quizzically, in an essay from 1956, 'La Corruption dans les encensoirs': 'Should we then set up a Debussy–Cézanne–Mallarmé axis as the root of all modernism? If it were not too chauvinistic, one could happily do so.'[8] And Boulez immediately added, rather coyly (no names are mentioned): 'since these three luminaries, others have appeared and created more spectacular upheavals'. 'What can they' – the members of the 'axis' – 'teach us?' he then enquired. 'Perhaps this: that revolution must be dreamt, not just constructed' (21); and later in this essay Boulez linked Debussy to Baudelaire's definition of modernism as 'the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, one half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable' (24).

Pli selon pli as a whole might indeed seem designed to offer musical 'upheavals' more 'spectacular' than any emanating from Debussy, in conjunction with Baudelaire, Mallarmé, or anyone else, and thereby to affirm Boulez's own personal, avant-garde commitment to

7 Boulez, *Orientations*, 143.

8 Boulez, *Stocktakings*, 20. Subsequent page references in text.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572204000064 Published online by Cambridge University Press

post-war modernism. Alternatively, it could be that responding to the particulars of Mallarmé's poetics over a number of years strengthened Boulez's predisposition to something less disruptive, an unstable yet organic modern classicism in which tendencies to formal and expressive 'upheavals' were resisted, if not triumphantly resolved out in an integrating synthesis after the model of pure classicism. If this is so, a degree of Boulezian affinity with Debussy's – and even Fauré's – engagement with Mallarmé might not be as implausible as at first appears, especially if it is combined with his response to an aspect of the Debussian aesthetic. As Robert Piencikowski argues, Debussy, in learning from Satie's innovations, 'enormously enriched them with a formal logic, giving them stylistic coherence and true aesthetic direction. In this way Debussy's taste was infinitely more organic than Satie's'.[9]

Recent studies by Rosemary Lloyd and Marie Rolf have given proper emphasis to 'the profound influence of the poet on the composer';[10] and with her references to the 'dreamy calm' and 'shimmering texture' at the start of 'Apparition' (185), with 'tonality . . . implied rather than explicitly stated' for much of the time (190), and to the 'harmonic stasis' of 'Soupir', 'a perfect musical analogue to the inert state-of-being represented by the poem' (199), Rolf seeks out the common aims. 'Just as Mallarmé's goal was to purify poetry, to refine it to an experience freely traced by the mind between what exists – our experience of the world, outer or inner – and what does not exist, passing through all the gradations of dream', so did Debussy (in 1913) call for a new purity in music: 'Epurons notre musique. Appliquons nous à la décongestionner. Cherchons à obtenir une musique plus nue.'[11] Lloyd makes the analogy even more concrete:

> Mallarmé and Debussy were never close friends, but their aesthetics were very much in harmony, as the settings of the poems, and especially the response to the 'Faune' reveal. As artists, they offer a striking vignette of the fin de siècle's fascination with suggestion, evocation, and allusion. . . . As the poet's little quatrain for Debussy suggests, the musicality of Mallarmé's poetry finds a remarkable match in the radiance of Debussy's music.[12]

Is there a comparable match, a parallel radiance, dream-like purity, nakedness even, in Boulez's Mallarmé-music? Is this another case of far-reaching aesthetic 'harmony', of a fascination with 'suggestion, evocation, and allusion' which has extended well beyond the *fin de siècle*? Recent literary studies of Mallarmé, in underlining the poet's reservations about the nature of music, provide the basis for an analysis of Boulez concerned as much with 'counterpoint' as with 'harmony'. Nevertheless, to the extent that such studies also reinforce the inescapability of a semantic, conceptual dimension in Mallarmé's poetry, despite that 'distinctively musical syntax' as Caballero defines it, they do not discourage the exploration

9 Piencikowski, '. . .iacta est', in *Pierre Boulez, John Cage: Correspondance et Documents*, 48. The special importance of coherence as a formal concept to Boulez himself is evident throughout *Jalons* (1989).

10 Rolf, 'Semantic and Structural Issues', 174. Subsequent page references in text.

11 Rolf, 'Semantic and Structural Issues', 200, citing Debussy, *Monsieur Croche et autres écrits*, ed F. Lesure, rev. edn (Paris, 1987), 247.

12 Lloyd, 'Debussy, Mallarmé, and "Les Mardis" ', 267–8. Mallarmé's quatrain (1894) is 'Sylvain d'haleine première / Si ta flûte a réussi / Ouïs toute la lumière / qu'y soufflera Debussy'.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572204000064 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of analogies between Debussy and Boulez, especially when common poetic themes, like that of a siren's song, can be inferred.

III

'Mallarmé believed that music falls short of language in its inability to name things. Thus music needs language to complement it, whereas language has no need of the physical accompaniment of music since it can incorporate the rhythms and "sinuosity" of music within its own performance.'[13] As Roger Pearson claims, therefore, *Un Coup de dés* was actually a radical attempt to demonstrate language's independence of, and superiority to, music: it 'shows Mallarmé's attempt to write literary "music" brought to its highest level of sophistication'. It was in keeping with this view of music's limitations that Mallarmé should find fault with Wagner, whose 'music dramas glorify, and persuade the audience to believe in, the existence of (other-than-human) supreme beings. . . . Wagner's art excites the crowds into believing that through opera they can gain access to a transcendent, metaphysical Ideal – whereas for Mallarmé that role could only be assigned to literature as he conceived it'.

Mallarmé's view of Wagner, however questionable it seems today, reinforces the uneasy relation between word and tone which clearly troubled the poet greatly, and which provided one particular, seductive, image whose shadow lies over works by both Debussy and Boulez. The poet who tries hard to make music with words, Roger Pearson declares, is 'seeking to create a siren song: a form of harmonious beauty that is both mythical in its elusiveness and dangerous in its luring of the poet's craft onto the rocks of irregularity and towards the consequent shipwreck of ordinary poetic pattern'.[14] Pearson's comments concern the sonnet – 'À la nue accablante tu' – around which Boulez constructs 'Improvisation III', the fourth movement of *Pli selon pli*. On the one hand, this text conforms to traditional sonnet principles with its fourteen lines divided 4+4+3+3 and its regular metre and unambiguous rhyme scheme. On the other hand, the absence of that narrative element that the presence of an 'elocutionary persona' might furnish encourages critical interpretation to shift away from meaning and back to form, and especially to the resonant recurrences of vowel sounds and assonant associations extending well beyond the end-rhymes of the individual lines.

A la nue accablante tu
Basse de basalte et de laves
A même les échos esclaves
Par une trompe sans vertu

Quel sépulchral naufrage (tu
le sais, écume, mais y baves)
Suprême une entre les épaves
Abolit le mât dévêtu

13 Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 242 (source also of subsequent quotations in this paragraph). See also the comments on Mallarmé and Wagner in Vilain, 'Wagner's Children'. For other relevant materials not cited here see the Bibliography under Bucknell, McCalla, Shaw, and van Orden.

14 Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 252.

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Ou cela que furibond faute
De quelque perdition haute
Tout l'abîme vain éployé

Dans le si blanc cheveu qui traîne
Avarement aura noyé
Le flanc enfant d'une sirène.

Just as Mallarmé's 'music' – his word-play – compensates for lack of 'sense' and draws coherence out of pervasive correspondences of pure sound, so Boulez's music compensates for its rejection of traditional harmonic processes by emphasizing other kinds of relationships, notably the melodic heterophony and homogeneous timbral interactions which promote flexible consistency and fragile but sustained coherence, in both structure and atmosphere.

Some such essentially formal context for 'Improvisation III' might be inferred from Boulez's assent to Deliège's claim that whereas with the settings of Mallarmé by Debussy and Ravel 'there was a search for an atmospheric, a poetic correspondence . . . there was not this attempt at structural correlation between music and text that was your preoccupation'. The most Boulez will concede is that among 'various levels of convergence' between music and text 'the simplest and most emotional is the poetic one which I tried to achieve by using certain equivalent sonorities. Thus when Mallarmé uses words like "green", "white", "absence", and so on, there is a certain sonority in the music that is directly associated with such ideas'. The implication is that while such equivalences are 'emotional' they are not pictorial, as when 'certain extremely long-held, extremely tense sounds . . . form part of this universe that is not so much frozen as extraordinarily "vitrified" '.[15] Boulez, it seems, is happy to associate tension in both form and material with what he feels to be the vitreous transparency of Mallarmé's poetic world. This glassy quality is the result of a formal procedure – the sequence of sounds in an assonance-rich sonnet like 'A la nue' – and is nothing to do with stories about sirens and shipwrecks. At the same time, however, the vocabulary used in the sonnet suggests contrasts between solid and liquid, the rocks and the sea, which converge on images of depth and resonance, and a music in which flowing flux or resonating stasis is preferred to febrile or aggressive gesticulation, glassy shimmerings to brittle shatterings, homogeneity of colour and rhythm to polyphonic divergence.

There is undoubtedly a certain degree of convergence between Mallarmé's poetic tissue of phonemic echoes and analogies and the balanced sequence of resonances in Boulez's play with heterophonic and homogeneous textures and materials. It also seems clear that, at this level of synthesis between form and mood, Boulez is responding to Mallarmé's aesthetic of modernism in his own potentially classicizing terms. In a perceptive commentary, Mary Breatnach writes of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés* that 'the immediate dissatisfaction and discomfort to which such fragmented writing gives rise raises to a new level of consciousness

15 Boulez, *Conversations*, 94.

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the reader's desire for coherence and heightens his sensitivity to processes within the poem which promise to satisfy this desire';[16] and the modernist dialectic inherent in this aesthetic response is reinforced by Breatnach's subsequent observation that 'while the fragmentation of the text permits, or, more precisely, begets, a multiplicity of combinative possibilities, that multiplicity endows the combinatory mode with a special disjunctive capacity' (64). May there therefore be a sense in which Boulez thinks of the sonnets he sets in *Pli selon pli* as sharing the radical qualities of *Un Coup de dés*? Or does Mallarmé's view of music as 'the totality of relationships existing between everything' – what Breatnach calls 'an assertion of the supreme, indeed exclusive, importance of relationality' (65) – promote that modern-classical shift to subordinating disjunction to combination which is, I believe, allusively anticipated in the currently definitive version of 'Improvisation III' and comes to fruition in Boulez's major IRCAM works, *Répons*, *. . .explosante/fixe . . .*, and *Sur Incises*?

Breatnach seems to believe that *Pli selon pli* as a whole matches the Mallarméan state in which 'identity and disparity co-exist in a state of equilibrium' (87), and she says of 'Tombeau' that 'throughout the piece, Boulez uses compositional devices which embody the contradictory notions of finiteness and durability' (109). Yet 'Improvisation III', whose first version was written after the other four movements, and whose revisions have been most extensive, offers some evidence for a shift of emphasis away from an equilibrium between contradictory qualities towards an emphasis on 'interrelatedness and interdependency' of a kind which, in connection with the ending of 'Tombeau', Breatnach regards as 'the primary characteristics of this sound-world' (112). Since Boulez, even at his most openly modernistic, never wholeheartedly embraced the frank disjunctions of the much-depised 'collage', David Gable is correct to associate the composer with a concern to 'not so much transcend tradition as transform it'.[17] And Gable brings the narrative of convergence back to Debussy: 'Debussy and Boulez share more than one paradox. At the heart of their aesthetic is the conception of a music at once static and developmental.' For Gable, 'it was ultimately Debussy who inspired Boulez's generation to take the Webernian fragments up into a more sweeping, flexible, continuum',[18] and this trend to modern classicism in matters of form keeps open the possibility for a convergence of poetic character as well. However much Boulez might have sought to prevent the 'emotional' and the 'poetic' from turning into the pictorial – even the programmatic – Mallarmé's own ambivalence with respect to subjectivity leaves traces in Boulez's 'vitrified' yet resonant music.

Taken at face value, Boulez's comments on Mallarmé amount to an attempt to drain the poetry of all non-formal content. But this is not supported by commentators on 'Improvisation III', who invariably come closer to the kind of reading best represented in Roger Pearson's commentary.

16 Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, 62. Subsequent page references in text.

17 Gable, 'Boulez's Two Cultures', 427.

18 Gable, 'Boulez's Two Cultures', 429. For a particularly stimulating consideration of the need to progress from fragmentation to a more 'flexible . . . continuum', see Boulez's extensive discussion of Webern and formal processes in *Jalons*.

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> The poem appears to ask (with a silent and invisible question mark) whether the swirl of text and empty page betokens that some ship/vessel/linguistic container has been wrecked, or whether some siren has suddenly vanished beneath the waves. Or both? Perhaps a ship has foundered because its Master listened to the song of a siren, an elusive creature now slipping like a young mermaid beneath the waves. . . . Does the shipwreck of language simply mean the death of the 'real', or may it perhaps afford the tantalizing glimpse of something beyond the real? This poem offers us the song of the 'siren': no less deceitful perhaps, being . . . a beguiling and mellifluous orchestration of linguistic sounds, but offering us beauty – and a warning! For a 'sirène', too, is a means of signalling danger by sound; and this poem, by its own unique sign system, is signalling the dangers of univocal reading.[19]

In similar vein to the first part of Pearson's analysis, Susan Bradshaw declares that 'the poet portrays nature as menacing and oppressive' and that 'this oppression pervades the music through its unyielding harmonic succession, as well as through the choice of orchestral colour',[20] while Paul Griffiths writes that 'the scene is a "sepulchral shipwreck" beneath clouds and black cliffs, and the music correspondingly widens and deepens'.[21] But Pearson digs deeper, and devises his own strikingly resonant imagery, which takes the poem's image of 'danger by sound' as the basis for the most concrete association between structure and subject:

> perhaps, like Ulysses, we must lash ourselves to its mast with the ropes (or cables) of this poetic text if we are not to be destroyed by the song of the siren and left floundering in the watery wastes of the unintelligible. For the poem is also the siren herself; a Petrarchan sonnet with the two breasts of its octave surmounting the forked tail of its sestet. . . . The 'sirène' is at once an agent of death and a means of renewal and salvation: and the poem as a siren song both destroys everyday language and offers the prospect of poetic beauty.[22]

On the face of it, it would be flying in the face of everything Boulez stands for to follow Pearson and claim that 'Improvisation III' is also 'the siren herself'. Yet Pearson's argument that the image of the siren embodies within it the opposing qualities of beauty and destruction can certainly be felt to resonate with a musical fabric predicated, as Breatnach argues, on notions of 'finiteness and durability' which can be made to represent contradiction, but are used by Boulez to create the possibility of 'interrelatedness and interdependency' becoming 'the primary characteristics' of his 'sound-world'.[23]

19 Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 226–7.
20 Bradshaw, 'The Instrumental and Vocal Music', 186.
21 Griffiths, 'Pli selon pli', in *Celebrating Pierre*, 49.
22 Pearson, *Unfolding Mallarmé*, 228–9.
23 Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, 109, 112.

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IV

As *Pli selon pli* currently stands, its five movements demonstrate three generic types: vocal movements centering on complete settings of sonnets by Mallarmé (Improvisations I and II): orchestral movements in which shards of text are inserted ('Don' and 'Tombeau'): and 'Improvisation III', a complete setting of a sonnet preceding instrumental music during which the voice appears from time to time, singing the first four lines of the sonnet again (differently set), and with two separated passages of wordless vocalise coming between lines 2 and 3.

This version of 'Improvisation III' is scored for soprano and an ensemble of twenty-six players: trombone and four flutes; three harps; five cellos and three double basses; a trio comprising mandolin, guitar, and celesta; and an extensive collection of percussion, requiring seven players, in which two xylophones are particularly significant, providing as they do a type of sonority distant from that of the singing voice. On the formal level, this version of 'Improvisation III' is notable for its rejection of the aleatory element, 'removing the complicated options of ordering' originally applied to various instrumental segments, but – Griffiths declares – 'without damage to the work's fluidity'.[24]

It is no doubt possible to explain many aspects of 'Improvisation III' in terms of how it has evolved since 1959: thus, the complete sonnet setting comes first because Boulez revised the vocalise with which his earlier version began, rather than providing completely new music as a 'prelude' to existing material. But the effect of the present sequence of events is to create a form of special sophistication and ambiguity, as acknowledged in the composer's remark that 'these *Improvisations* become an analysis of the sonnet structure, in a more and more detailed and more and more profound way'.[25] Boulez has used the idea of 'commentary' and 'double' in earlier works to suggest correspondences between separate parts of a composition (most notably in *Le Marteau*) and one response to 'Improvisation III' would be to regard the later stages as commentary on, or 'double' of, the sonnet setting. Indeed, given the episode of purely instrumental music between the initial sonnet setting (ending at Fig. 14) and the return of the voice with Mallarmé's first line (Fig. 21), the ghostly model of the da capo aria might be sensed, overlaid by a return to text which not only has different rather than repeated music but which proceeds to sink, or drown the poetry which had floated through the earlier aria section.

As noted above, Boulez's comments to Deliège on *Pli selon pli* implicitly resist any implication of musical word-painting or mimesis. Nevertheless, a commentator as perceptive as Susan Bradshaw, writing primarily about the original version of 'Improvisation III', shows that the composer's then-declared aim – 'to make the sonnet *become* the music'[26] – can be discussed not only in terms of form, which Bradshaw calls 'external shape' and 'grammatical structure' (implying a kind of associative flexibility independent of traditional syntactic 'sense', or its nearest musical equivalent, tonal 'grammar'), but also of 'mood'. As Bradshaw (quoted earlier) reads Mallarmé, 'the poet portrays nature as menacing and

24 Griffiths, 'Pli selon pli', in CD booklet, 7.
25 Boulez, *Conversations*, 94.
26 Bradshaw, 'Instrumental and Vocal Music', 186.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572204000064 Published online by Cambridge University Press

oppressive – the overwhelming pressure of clouds and rocks gives rise to the nightmare image of falling into a bottomless abyss, of drowning in "the trailing whiteness of a siren's hair". This oppression pervades the music through its unyielding harmonic succession, as well as through the choice of orchestral colour', and Bradshaw concludes that 'timbre takes on a quasi-structural role as a means of suggesting initial conflict . . . and eventual resolution'.[27]

Bradshaw's narrative certainly does not lose all relevance when the later version of the 'Improvisation' is considered, even though her own comments on this are confined to matters of instrumentation: 'the somewhat clangorous soloistic contrasts of the original have now been shaded into the surrounding orchestral colours and the result is much more coherent in its textural unity, despite the continuing violence of its dynamic contrasts. It is also gentler and more decorative in its overall effect.'[28] This shows a lively sense of the tensions and ambiguities of mood which the later reworkings enhance, and which are – not surprisingly – even more directly evident in the treatment of text and voice. A slightly fuller commentary now follows.[29]

V

The first main section of 'Improvisation III', the complete sonnet setting which extends to Fig. 14, has the least 'frozen' music, and only relatively brief anticipations, in instrumental episodes, of the harder, more 'solid' sonorities and material to be deployed later. The vocal character of the sonnet setting retains the fluid contours of the original vocalise, and looks back to the florid style of *Le Marteau*. The tone is seductive, enchanting, and certainly not inconsistent with a siren song – though Boulez (avoiding Messiaen-like explicitness) gives no instructions concerning vocal expression beyond the need for flexible rhythm and the constant shading of dynamics.

During the setting of the sonnet's first eight lines homogeneity of texture is reinforced by the consistent presence of the four flutes, heterophonically doubling and elaborating vocal pitches which are often microtonally inflected. The placement of the setting of the very first line (Figs 2–3) within the first of two contrasted instrumental segments seems to promise a more immediate and active dialogue between different types of material and tone colours in Section 1 than actually occurs. But the more substantial instrumental episode between Figs 8 and 12 confirms the organic, evolutionary nature of the first section's ternary substructure by the way the second of its four segments (Figs 9–10) comprises a variant of the very first segment of all, with its upwardly-inflected B♭ pedal note in the trombone (now flutter-tongued, and with rather more active embellishment in the harps). Just before this (Figs 8–9), the instrumental segment that has immediately followed the vocal setting of line 8 introduces the icy sound of the two xylophones, and with it the drama of resistance to the siren song – even, as it might be, agitated fear of shipwreck, or a depiction of the looming solidity of volcanic rocks.

27 Bradshaw, 'Instrumental and Vocal Music', 186.
28 Bradshaw, 'Instrumental and Vocal Music', 223–4.
29 Readers without access to the published score of 'Improvisation III' (UE 19 521, 1982) might pass over section V.

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Although the vocal setting of the sonnet's last six lines (Figs 12–14) has a fluid character similar to that of lines 1–8, the instrumental material is more stratified, with a mixture of convergence and divergence which erodes the distinct family groupings emphasized so far. At first flute 1, cellos 3–5 and harp 3 are aligned with the voice, the flute with a counter-melody initially less concerned than previously to act as a supple heterophonic counterpoint, but eventually shadowing the voice more closely. From Fig. 13 – for the sonnet's last three lines – flutes 2–4 (playing piccolos, and reinforcing the 'background' harmonies of the cellos), three double basses, and the rest of the percussion join the coordinated group, with cello 1 (for the most part) adding a further strand of melodic commentary. The resulting textural elaboration has an appropriately cumulative quality, and as Section 1 of the movement comes to an end it is possible to imagine the instruments representing a variety of more or less mesmerized reactions to the song, none of them outright resistance to – or fear of – its character and content. Nevertheless, 'danger by sound' remains real.

The purely instrumental Section 2 (Figs 14–21) begins with a segment (Figs 14–15) that continues the emphasis on relatively soft sonorities and fluid material at moderate tempo. But at Fig. 15 the tempo suddenly quickens (from 'Modéré', crotchet 90, to 'Rapide', crotchet=120) and the xylophones spring to agitated life again. Against sustained background chords in wind and strings a dialogue ensues between the harps (whose material was not originally coordinated within the prevailing 4/4 metre) and the remaining, xylophone-led ensemble. To the extent that this is scarcely a dialogue of equals, the harp material might be felt to represent either a weakened desire to yield to the siren and succumb to shipwreck, or a no-less enfeebled attempt to continue resistance. During these xylophone-led segments the dominant mood grows increasingly turbulent, as more brittle, unstable material in mandolin, guitar, and celesta is introduced, and a sense of menace intensifies. Then, in the last segment before the voice returns (Figs 20–21), the 'Modéré' tempo is restored, and the xylophones fall silent, as the much less ornamental style of Section 3 is prefigured.

It is as if Boulez retains the original version's more austere treatment of the text here to complement the seductive spirit of Section 1. There is certainly a solemnity in the prominence given to bells and resonating percussion and to the more long-breathed melodic writing for flutes, as well as voice, which serves to counter any suspicions that the 'drowning' of Mallarmé's text is meant to be understood as the literal depiction of shipwreck, a Berliozian portrait of descent into the abyss of perdition. Perhaps the clearest indication of the convergence, if not the synthesis, of balancing modes of articulation comes from Fig. 27: here the trombone pedal B♭ returns, as part of a processional chordal style whose substance and solidity replace the earlier fluidity. A degree of contrast, even of reminiscence, remains, however. The setting of the sonnet's second line moves back to a more florid mode of expression, a disparity which prompts one of Boulez's most overtly 'operatic' moments (Fig. 28) as the flute choir projects a melodic line which, while of positively expressionistic intensity, does not disrupt the prevailing homogeneity of the musical fabric.

The music from Fig. 29 onwards is primarily instrumental, with the often wordless voice an occasional obbligato, and while the harmony has an undeniably 'centred' quality (the bass B♭s it is difficult to feel that a simple progression of the kind Bradshaw seems to propose,

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from 'initial conflict' to 'eventual resolution', is being played out. A sense of uneasiness, of latent menace, remains within the more stable and gentle materials of the later stages. Punctuation between segments includes a fragile celesta cadenza (Fig. 34), and there is a more 'fractured' feel to the texture after Fig. 36, as with the suddenly more rapid tempo at Fig. 39. This impetus is broken off at Fig. 45, by another celesta cadenza. Then the slow processional resumes, for the voice's unelaborated setting of the sonnet's fourth line. Did Boulez ever envisage continuing this process of alternating vocal and instrumental strophes to complete a second setting of the whole poem? It seems unlikely, since from the moment that he decided to begin the movement with a complete setting, and to continue it in elaborative, contrastive mode, its proportions could have been distorted by making that elaboration still more extended – especially in the context of *Pli selon pli* as a whole.

The point could be to ensure that the concluding instrumental music – evanescent musings for mandolin/guitar, then celesta, over a gently vibrating B♭/D♭ pedal (harps, and xylophones, finally with bells) – seems as provisional as it does conclusive. Nevertheless, this assonant echoing of the movement's five-bar instrumental introduction reinforces the sense of a structural process focusing on balance and complementation: as Mary Breatnach observes, 'an echo is a conjunction of important aspects of connectedness',[30] and not least because such connections are found in Mallarmé as well as in Boulez. The sonnet has 'become' music, as Boulez intended, and that music, replacing seductive song with ritual ceremonial, has formal and atmospheric qualities which are very much its own, while also being open to alignment with the more 'classical' Debussy.

VI

David Gable does not discuss 'Improvisation III': however, like Breatnach, he emphasizes the integration and consistency of 'Tombeau', where 'an extraordinary monolithic accumulation of activity . . . parallels the smooth dynamic of its local processes. With the static timelessness of its language and the serene implacability of its form, "Tombeau" gives vent to an ethos reflecting Boulez's experience of oriental musics'.[31] Integration and consistency do not imply a traditional kind of rooted harmonic stability, of course, and Gable notes that 'Boulez's rhythms often float on an unstable flux' (437), in a continuum 'expressing' a 'single, controlling harmony' (444). This harmonic control is not to be confused with classical progression and goal-directedness:

> Boulez's language does not imply harmonic form, traditionally conceived, but the unfolding of a perpetual present. Form may be said to radiate from a static core: . . . we pursue a process of continuous change. Attention is focused less on patterns revealed from attack point to attack point . . . than on continuous and instantaneous change occurring in the present'. [452–3]

30 Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, 102.

31 Gable, 'Boulez's Two Cultures', 434. Subsequent page references in text.

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Put in such terms, there is a fragile but definite continuum between the Debussian flux, as Boulez conceived it, which still connects with tonal traditions, and the Boulezian flux which abandons those traditions. One might even propose Debussy's 'Sirènes' (probably inspired by Henri de Régnier or Swinburne, not Mallarmé) as a specific precursor of 'Improvisation III'. For Boulez, in 1958, 'the *Nocturnes* retain a freshness and beauty of inspiration which place them in the very forefront of the modern repertoire', and he quotes Debussy's own description of 'Sirènes': 'the sea and its incalculable rhythm, then, amid the moon-silvered waves, the mysterious song of the sirens is heard passing, laughing'.[32] But Richard Parks brings the third *Nocturne* into the orbit of modern classicism. He finds a blend of innovation and conservation, and makes much of the 'purposeful fluctuation of changes evident within various musical parameters', even though 'formal pacing on the surface . . . is unusually regular and two-bar units constitute the norm'.[33] More to the point, however, is the sense of Debussy's suppression of the more turbulent and complex qualities of Mallarmé's thinking and poetic technique (as underlined by Pearson), which might have given Boulez a sense of unfulfilled potential as he moved away from contemporary radical poets like René Char and Henri Michaux, who, as he told Deliège, 'were hardly obsessed with formal preoccupations'.[34]

Echo as resonance is a quality of Boulezian modern-classicism which comes into its own in the electro-acoustic enterprises of the 1980s and 90s. Here, those 'compositional devices which embody the contradictory notions of finiteness and durability'[35] that Breatnach attaches to *Pli selon pli* are enriched and intensified, showing how an essentially classical attitude can be elaborated in ways that acknowledge the abiding significance of a modernist poetics of the fragment without simply seeking to perpetuate it. In 'Improvisation III', therefore, there is more than a hint of that organic quality that Boulez identified in his much later comment: 'I need, or work, with a lot of accidents, but within a structure that has an overall trajectory – and that, for me, is the definition of what is organic.'[36] In isolation, an 'overall trajectory' could represent the classical ideal of goal-directed tonal structures, but Boulez evidently regards organicism more biologically, as a musical process 'in which the cells develop in an organic way' (36). From the perspective of the 1990s his preferred literary analogy for the organicism of the spirals and mosaics he associates with the IRCAM works is Proust:

> I want to get rid of the idea of compartments in a work . . . similar to Proust, where you find that the narration is continuous. You have, of course, chapters in Proust, but the work has to be read in one go. That for me is one of my main goals in music (for large works). I don't want any breaks in the music, but you can introduce new ideas and abandon some other ideas, like the characters in a novel. [70]

32 Boulez, *Stocktakings*, 269.
33 Parks, *The Music of Claude Debussy*, 252.
34 Boulez, *Conversations*, 93.
35 Breatnach, *Boulez and Mallarmé*, 109.
36 Di Pietro, *Dialogues with Boulez*, 25. Subsequent page references in text. Boulez considers matters of formal process and coherence at much greater length in *Jalons*, 426–34.

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Boulez's later talk of spirals and mosaics appears to underline his belief in the kind of evolving connectedness effected by the revisions to 'Improvisation III'. But when considering the trajectory of Boulez's work as a whole it is striking that setting of texts effectively vanished during the IRCAM years from the mid-1970s – certainly as far as new compositions were concerned. 'Voice' as the kind of linear melodism that might be linked, if only metaphorically, with a real human singer has disappeared – unless we choose to trace its echos in such monodies as provide *Dialogue de l'ombre double* and *Anthèmes 2* with their basic materials. For text to have, in a sense, died out seems to fit with Boulez's assent (in comments included with the 2001 recording of *Pli selon pli*) to the proposition that 'after Mallarmé there was as good as no further formal development, at least not in the direction that Mallarmé himself followed. That represents an extreme position, one which is unsurpassable', and this assessment is reinforced with the declaration that 'the 19th century aspect of Mallarmé is of no importance to me and is completely relegated to the background. He quite transcends this period'.[37] If Mallarmé represents an 'unsurpassable' ending, therefore, *Pli selon pli* might be felt to say the last musical word about that ending, with *Cummings ist der Dichter* (1968–70, rev. 1986) a small-scale echo rather than the establishment of any new direction.

VII

There is the possibility of one further correspondence in Boulez's thinking, in which notions of otherness, and the 'phantom', link up with the genre and atmosphere of the memorializing 'Tombeau'. Mallarmé disembodies or defamiliarizes syntax and signification, but because he does not invent a complete new language (or, as the sonnets show, completely new forms) there is an irresolvable tension which finds a parallel in Boulez's response to the differences and similarities that arise when acoustic and electro-acoustic sound combine.

The resonant, echoing interactions fundamental to Boulez's IRCAM compositions might even be linked to those explorations of the phantom and the uncanny by Debussy and Ravel discussed by Carolyn Abbate. Though Abbate tends to avoid extending her analyses into the world of contemporary art music, she does observe that

> the very issue of disembodiment and omnipresent yet invisible sound was a foundational issue for electronic music and *musique concrète*, as well as talking movies. Pierre Schaffer's *Traité des objets musicaux* first popularized the notion of sound from behind an 'acousmatic curtain', referring to *musique concrète* whose invisibility forced the listener to concentrate on the morphology of sounds rather than their origin.[38]

Is there a sense in which Mallarmé renders syntax and signification invisible, so that the morphology of his material moves from background to foreground, as that on which

37 Boulez, 'The Composer Talks About his Work', 9, 10, 11.

38 Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, 148. Subsequent page references in text.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572204000064 Published online by Cambridge University Press

listeners are 'forced . . . to concentrate'? Similarly, as is shown at its simplest in *Dialogue de l'ombre double* or *Anthèmes 2*, the listener (with both eyes wide open) at a live performance registers the disparity between what is both visible and audible and what is audible yet invisible. The combined effect is evidently the result of something mechanical, not magical: and yet the aesthetic effect can transcend mere mechanics, as that trace of magic refuses to be erased.

In her enquiry into 'what traces were left within music by the music machines', Abbate declares that 'in baroque music, they appear as tombeaux, instrumental pieces celebrating a dead master', and that 'in the twentieth century . . . they are everywhere' (188). Abbate herself only discusses Ravel, whose *Le Tombeau de Couperin* and *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* mirror 'all the unquiet tombs, automata, performer-puppets and devices for reproducing sound' (189). But at least one of her further comments, that the tombeau 'remembers someone who has died, reflecting on his artistic utterances by reproducing them in altered form' (190), might tentatively be aligned with Boulez's portrait of Mallarmé. 'Singing a mourning song means standing apart from the person being apostrophized': but, of course, Boulez is not concerned with 'musical works written to mimic mechanical music' (199) so much as with musical works in which mechanical and non-mechanical elements achieve productive dialogue. In 'Improvisation III', conceived at a time of disillusion with the prospects for musical automata, memorializing Mallarmé takes the form of mirroring his approach to syntax, and dissolving his actual text, while not attempting the impossible of excluding response to the signification which continues to haunt individual words or phrases, the confrontation between siren-like spirits attempting to lure humans to destruction and destruction-resisting humans enacting a timeless and unresolved *agon*. From the 1980s onwards, Boulez could call on machinery to facilitate the unstable integrations of works which embody modern classicism rather than 'pure' modernism. In the 1950s and 60s, Mallarmé's texts provided the ambiguous parallelism (text as music, music as mimesis) which governs *Pli selon pli*. There may even be a final element of the memorial in the sense that the voice of 'Improvisation III' can be heard as a Kundry-like would-be seducer who turns into an aggressive would-be wrecker. Even if this meant that Boulez was celebrating Mallarmé the commentator on Wagner rather than Wagner himself (and it could be that Mallarmé was an important influence in bringing Boulez to Wagner), the extra resonance, the extra echo, is a fitting one, if only because it helps to keep the interpretative circle turning, open to new possibilities.

At an earlier stage I suggested that a link between Debussy and Boulez might serve to support the continuation of a 'classical' strand in compositional technique. But what about musical atmosphere in this pair of siren songs? With its relative lack of contrast and dramatic tension, as well as the striking circumstance that it contains 'no real melody or theme. It consists, rather of a series of ostinati',[39] 'Sirènes' could be regarded as a good example of Debussian modern-classicism. Just as the whole point of the 'classic' story of the sirens is that Ulysses successfully resists their seductive song – avoiding actual shipwreck – so it might be argued that 'Improvisation III' evolves from a portrait of seductiveness (the complete sonnet

39 Parks, *Debussy*, 248.

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setting) by way of agitation and resistance, to a state in which the seductive is masked by solemnity, the florid by the elemental, to match the degree of formal distillation from plenitude to essence. Like Mallarmé's sonnet in Pearson's reading, 'Improvisation III' can be heard to embody 'a beguiling and mellifluous orchestration of linguistic' and musical 'sounds' – offering both beauty and a warning. There is little of this stratum of menace in Debussy, because there is apparently no Mallarmé; and in some respects, therefore, Boulez's later works grow closer to Debussian *jouissance* as they retreat from Mallarméan iciness. Mallarmé's 'visions' were not so 'unbounded' that they could save Boulez from succumbing to the siren call of a more 'spectral', less 'dangerous', modern classicism – and this rejection, or transcendence, of a purer modernism can already be sensed in the resonant yet clouded radiance of 'Improvisation III'.

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