



Pierre  
**BOULEZ**

**Piano Works**

**Thème et variations pour la main gauche**  
**Trois Psalmodies • Incises • Fragment d'une ébauche**

**Ralph van Raat, Piano**



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**BOULEZ**  
(1925–2016)  
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<b>Thème et variations pour la main gauche (1945)</b>	<b>24:13</b>
1 Thème: Très lent	1:05
2 Variation 1: Lent	1:34
3 Variation 2: Lent	1:51
4 Variation 3: Pas trop vite	0:40
5 Variation 4: Modéré	0:47
6 Variation 5: Scherzando	2:02
7 Variation 6: Très agité	1:16
8 Variation 7: Très égal et assez lent – Dans un grand crescendo	2:18
9 Variation 8: Intermède: Très léger et assez vif – net. avec virtuosité et brio	0:23
10 Variation 9: Modéré, très brusque	1:53
11 Variation 10: Modéré – avec de violentes oppositions	3:06
12 Variation 11: Assez vif, strident et exaspéré	2:37
13 Variation 12: Très modéré, presque Lent	3:27
14 Variation 13: Très lent, simple	1:14
<b>Trois Psalmodies (1945)</b>	<b>28:25</b>
15 Psalmodie 1: Très modéré	7:28
16 Psalmodie 2: Vite, sans traîner	9:02
17 Psalmodie 3: Très lent	11:55
18 <b>Fragment d'une ébauche (1987)</b>	<b>0:33</b>
19 <b>Incises (1994, revised version 2001)</b>	<b>10:03</b>

## Pierre Boulez (1925–2016)

### Piano Works

'The aim of music is not to express feelings but to express music' is a quote often attributed to Pierre Boulez. Yet a quick look at the performance instructions in the scores of his early piano music featured on this album reveals a visceral sense of urgency – words like 'with intensity and expression', 'brutal' and 'with violent contrasts' point to a deeply personal surging of emotion. These dynamic markings were not mere aesthetic flourishes but the seeds of an innovative sound world that conveyed an unmistakable, explosive fervour right from the start.

Young Boulez's disappointment at not being admitted to the Paris Conservatoire in 1943, where he hoped to perfect his pianistic skills with the goal of becoming a concert pianist, must have fuelled his inspiration to write mostly piano music as a highly gifted composition student at the same institution. It was only within a time span of hardly a year that he composed three especially substantial piano works: *Prélude, Toccata et Scherzo* (1944–45), *Thème et variations* (1945) and thereafter, *Trois Psalmodies* (1945). In April 1944, Boulez had just commenced his studies in counterpoint with Andrée Vaurabourg-Honegger (1894–1980), the wife of composer Arthur Honegger, and in July 1944 he also started studying harmony with one of his most important early influences, Olivier Messiaen (1908–1992). Other crucial events at that time were his lessons in ethnomusicology, where he first learned about Indonesian gamelan music and African percussion music, and getting acquainted with the percussion music of Edgard Varèse (1883–1965). On top of that, he was exposed for the first time to the twelve-tone or serial music of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), where the pitches of a composition were organised by series of all twelve tones within the octave, and within which no other pitch was to be repeated until all other eleven had sounded.

All these influences came together in Boulez's first attempt at a serial work for the left hand only: *Thème et Variations*. Boulez imposed this physical limitation as an extra challenge to the work both from the performer's and composer's points of view. The work is extremely lively and inventive, and the series is already treated in a way that foreshadows the later methods of Boulez: unlike Schoenberg, Boulez subdivided multiple independent series into different cells of four notes, enabling much more variety in the combination of pitches. After the series have been stated in the theme in a lyrical manner reminiscent of the works by Alban Berg (1885–1935), which Boulez was introduced to by Messiaen, 13 variations follow, greatly contrasting in mood, articulation, tempo and dynamics. Striking elements are the abundant use of the interval of an augmented fourth in the very first variation – this is an interval that was used typically by his teacher Messiaen. The second variation has a similar mood to Schoenberg's second of the *Drei Klavierstücke, Op. 11*, including the use of an ostinato motif, which was one of the first works Boulez had heard by that composer. *Variations 2, 8 and 12* especially seem to be exercises in creating a strong illusion of polyphony with one hand only, through the use of register and fugal writing. *Variations 3, 5, 7, 9 and 10* mainly feature a play of contrasts: interrogation and answer, through fast leaps over the keyboard. The influence of non-Western percussion music is very evident in the sonorous tam tam-like effects in *Variations 6 and 10*. Messiaen's rhythmical inventions such as 'valeurs ajoutées', where a note duration is extended to avoid regularity, is featured especially in *Variation 11*. The closing variation forms a return to the simplest exposition of the initial theme.

Despite the influences, this work already shows a remarkably individuality and strong musical identity: this is no dry or academic serialism, but a playful showpiece for which great dexterity of fingers is required, as well as infinite ways of touch and phrasing. There are sportive jumps in all registers, including the highest registers of the piano which are physically far away and thus challenging for the left hand, thereby creating a distinct timing. Many elements of this work would come back in strongly condensed forms in his *Douze Notations* (1945), and the exuberance found here was the seed for his later works.

Immediately after completing *Thème et Variations*, Boulez embarked on his next project, *Trois Psalmodies*, utilising both pianist's hands again. It was a culmination work of his harmony class; the young composer did make revisions to the work afterwards though, as a testimony to its importance to him at that time. The title reveals Messiaen's influence quite directly; Boulez had heard his *Trois petites Liturgies de la Présence Divine*, of which the third movement is called *Psalmodie* (the term for liturgical chanting), shortly before starting on this work. Characteristic of especially the first movement of his teacher's composition was the contrast between very rhapsodic, quasi-improvised piano solo passages and rhythmically very strict ones in the vocal and ensemble parts. This duality would play a large role in many of Boulez's future works as well, and it is prominently featured in the first of his three *Psalmodies*. Here, a free-sounding melody reminiscent of a psalm chant is interrupted progressively more often by percussive sections, until the latter form a great chordal climax using all twelve tones of the chromatic scale. In the second *Psalmodie*, incisively repeated F sharps, to be played 'like a gamelan', are alternated by brisk and rhythmic canonic passages in two voices, which foreshadow later works such as the *Sonatine pour flûte et piano* (1946) and *Première Sonate pour piano* (1946). Once again, climaxes are created by notes growing into crashing, bell-like chords of all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Extensive trills are introduced; an element that also would become an important element in Boulez's later compositions. The third *Psalmodie* is, arguably, the most dramatic of the three: the main counterpoint motif builds into a huge climax through alternating passages of strict counterpoint and more Impressionist textures, featuring tolling bell-like note repetitions. The motif is here played in bold octaves, with heavy cluster-like drumming in the bass notes. The melodic motif is most likely a quote from a work by his counterpoint teacher's husband, Arthur Honegger: *Lamento* from the cantata *La Danse des morts* (1938), possibly highlighting the spiritual connotation of the work.

After working on his three sonatas for piano solo between 1946 and 1963, Boulez hardly returned to the piano as a solo instrument for decades. In 1987 he composed the extremely short and furiously fast *Fragment d'une ébauche* as a dedication to Jean-Marie Lehn, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist. The title, which translates to 'Fragment of a Sketch', isn't meant to suggest an unfinished or incomplete work; Boulez was fascinated by the idea that a fragment – a kernel of an idea – can be a work of art as powerful and self-contained as any fully developed composition. Although this work is typically grounded in rigorous composition methods through aspects of serial organisation, as with Boulez's early music, the fragment bursts with an impression of spontaneity through its rhythmic layering, flashy accents and virtuosity.

It was not until 1994 that a double commission was the driving force for what would ultimately become a substantial work for the piano in 2001: the Umberto Micheli Piano Competition of Milan asked for a short compulsory work to be performed in 1994, and Boulez was committed to write a new work for his friend Paul Sacher's birthday in 1996. The initial version of this work, *Incises*, as performed during the competition, only lasted a few minutes. The notes of the piece were mainly derived from transpositions of the symbolic pitch collection S–A–C–H–E–R (E flat, A, C, B natural, E and Ré/D). In 2001, Boulez not only increased the metronome speed of the already fast-paced piece considerably, but he also added another large section, bringing the duration of the work to about ten minutes. Besides the long 'melodic' lines, after a rather free introduction, the incisive interruptions of short, repeated chords are striking, and reminiscent of his early works; the title refers to these, as well as to the similarly named rhythmic units of several notes analogous to a motif. Also very striking are the dark and heavy chords in the sections that Boulez had added after 1994. These chords are held by the pianist through the middle pedal. Even the 'melodic' sections have transformed into a frenzy of, once again, alternating rubato and strictly timed passages, almost being in a state of delirium. The explanation for this mood change might be attributed to the death of Sacher in 1999: halfway through the work, the character seems, correspondingly, to shift from breath-taking and icy to foreboding, with, once again similar to *Trois Psalmodies* of half a century ago, the grim tolling of bells. Even as Boulez's language evolved and the overt markers of 'expression' receded, his late piano works highlight the fact that the fierce, innovative ideas and spirit of his early works continued to echo throughout his later compositions, proving that his musical core remained indelibly intact.

**Ralph van Raat**



Photo: Heather Pinkham

## Ralph van Raat



Photo: Heather Pinkham

Ralph van Raat has been completely fascinated by 20th- and 21st-century classical music since the age of 14. Although his repertoire ranges from Bach to Boulez, his primary focus has always been on composers dating from Debussy, Bartók and Ives to present day masters. His aim is to convince his audiences of the immense beauty and diversity of music of our own time through solo recitals, lecture-recitals, concerto performances, album releases and special projects. He is the recipient of a substantial number of national and international awards. Many composers, ranging from Louis Andriessen and Gavin Bryars to Frederic Rzewski and Tan Dun, have written solo works for him, and he has performed over 60 piano concertos with orchestras worldwide such as the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Koninklijk Concertgebouworkest and BBC Symphony Orchestra. He has recorded over 35 albums. Van Raat also is a frequent speaker and performer on radio and television shows, and he teaches at both the Conservatorium van Amsterdam and the Accademia di Musica di Pinerolo (Turin). He was named a Steinway Artist in 2003.

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Pierre Boulez's early ambitions to become a concert pianist provided the impetus to write piano music as a composition student at the Paris Conservatoire. The *Thème et variations pour la main gauche* and *Trois Psalmodies* reveal his extraordinary talent in their compelling mix of energy, drama and playfulness. Presenting these works alongside two later compositions provides a unique glimpse into the full arc of Boulez's musical journey. These pieces are powerful, their emotions raw and unfiltered, offering listeners a chance to experience the early foundations and mature reflections of a master composer.

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**\*WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING**

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A detailed track list can be found inside the booklet.

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