

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Michael Barenboim: Boulez & Electronics

Sunday 12 October 2025, 3pm | Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Boulez <i>Anthèmes 1</i> for violin	10'	Pierre Boulez' adventures with the solo violin began in 1991, when he was asked for a test piece for the Yehudi Menuhin Competition and came up with <i>Anthèmes 1</i> . However, this dredges much deeper into his output and his life. Its immediate source was a composition kit he made in 1971, <i>...explosante-fixe...</i> , itself based on a melody that went all the way back to one of his piano <i>Notations</i> of 1946, while the title was one of several in which he recalled his time as a choirboy. At the same time, the title is a pun, on <i>en thèmes</i> (in themes), the thematic material being that old melody. After making a spectacular entry, the violin spins through a sequence of fantastical variations, playing for a little under ten minutes.
Benjamin Attahir <i>Retour à Tipasa</i> for violin & electronics	10'	
Philippe Manoury <i>Partita II</i> for violin & electronics	20'	
<i>Interval</i>		
Layale Chaker <i>Before bloom</i> for solo viola	6'	Benjamin Attahir, who studied with Boulez, answers his teacher in <i>Retour à Tipasa</i> (2010) with a piece of similar length that also boasts an opening startle and a sequence of melodic variations. The title refers to an essay by Camus evoking his return to Tipasa, an ancient Algerian port-city where cultures from Carthage to Byzantium have left a vast field of ruins. 'We come into a world of yellow and blue', writes Camus. 'All the stones are hot.'
Kareem Roustom <i>Pavane (pour les enfants défuntés)</i> for viola & live electronics (UK premiere)	14'	
Boulez <i>Anthèmes 2</i> for violin & live electronics	20'	

Performers

Michael Barenboim *violin, viola*
Gilbert Nouno *live electronics*

Camus' words provide Attahir with an invitation to explore, as he so often does, cultural correspondence and fusion. The electronics snatch up fragments from the violin and convert them into a stream of echo and memory. The violin's melodic elaborations, as if improvised, contain their own echoes, of traditional music. If, to British ears, the reference sometimes seems as much Scottish as North African, that is because we are the same people in the same world.

With Philippe Manoury we reach a composer Boulez knew well and several of whose works he conducted. Manoury's melodic language, like Boulez' in this regard, is relatively abstract but perhaps more frankly expressive, with grand, sweeping gestures for the violin in this *Partita II* (2012), which plays for a little over 20 minutes.

Active in computer music since the 1980s, Manoury has been striving to make the digital partner as responsive as a live musician would be, so that there might be the feeling of real

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

interplay. Yet this is not to lose the particular qualities of the computer, which include the capacity to immediately transform what it 'hears' far beyond the possibilities available to any live instrumentalist; early in the piece, for example, we are treated to magical auras. The computer can also keep to mechanical time, clock time, as it does here, in contrast with the violin's fluidity. 'I have explored', Manoury writes, 'different ways in which the violin can generate autonomous electronic structures to which it can then add commentary or counterpoint, and which it can modify. Various independent sonic levels unfold simultaneously, in different tempos, the violin navigating among them.'

The work is in three continuous movements, which the printed edition, following the composer's manuscript, presents as 'Praeludium' (lasting for almost two-thirds of the whole), 'Nocturno' and 'Perpetuum mobile'. However, the recording by Hae-Sun Kang, who gave the first performance, reverses the order of the last two.

Returning to the generation of Boulez' musical grandchildren, Layale Chaker, like Attahir, was born in France to a family with roots in Lebanon. Her six-minute *Before bloom* (2021) was commissioned for The Primavera Project, a series of solo cello pieces taking off from Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* and Charline von Heyl's *Primavera 2020*. Chaker's adaptation for viola came soon after and finds another register for lament, again brushing traditional music in quasi-improvisatory fashion.

'As an echo', she writes, 'to the chiaroscuro reflected in the dark yet vivid details of the flora [in *Primavera*], this piece weaves a resonance between Botticelli's leaves and the flora of the land that has been a silent yet present witness since millennia, watching upon the people's suffering, yet continuing to bloom at the start of every spring, in defiance and resilience – the way nature always and unfailingly can.'

Kareem Roustom, who was born in Damascus but who moved with his family to the US as a teenager, similarly composes as one with roots in two cultures. This evening's work he wrote last year for Michael Barenboim and Gilbert Nouno, in response to the former's request for 'something for the children of Gaza'. Thinking therefore of laments, Roustom came to Ravel's *Pavane pour une infante défunte* (Pavane for a Dead Princess), which has nothing to do with dead infantas and not much to do with pavaues as they were danced in former times. That very absurdity, however, gave him an approach to a subject itself violently absurd, utterly senseless.

The piece is in two sections, the first developed from a short rising phrase that passes through a gnawing tritone. 'This gesture', to continue with the composer's note, 'develops and builds towards a frenetic mid-point, both in the viola and the electronics, after which a sort of calm pervades. The final

section uses the rhythm of Ravel's faux *Pavane*. In my work it is heard on a slightly detuned and processed "piano" patch, while the viola weeps above with a descending chromatic and microtonal figure. This passage is marked, *con espressione di patimento* (with mournful or plaintive expression).'

The programme ends with an extension of the piece we heard at the beginning. In 1994, three years after completing that study, Boulez set out on amplifying it to produce *Anthèmes 2* for violin and digital response. His creative partner was Andrew Gerzso, who devised a digital setup that can follow the musician's performance and react immediately according to the score. Various kinds of modification are possible. The spectrum of the sound can be transformed, creating a different harmony or colour. A figure can be repeated in one or more different versions, creating a counterpoint around the live sound. And the sound can be projected spatially, through a circle of eight loudspeakers. As these techniques were developed in the studio, so Boulez reworked and expanded his violin piece to take advantage of them.

The work's form, alternating between very long single notes and continuous sequences, recalled to Boulez his time as a choirboy singing the Lamentations of Jeremiah, in which a Hebrew letter precedes each verse. The violin's 'Hebrew letter' is its habitual home: D. As to the intervening sequences, Boulez remarked: 'I am now convinced that music must be based on recognisable musical objects. These are not themes in the classical sense, but rather entities which, even though they constantly change their form, have certain characteristics which are so identifiable that they cannot be confused with any other entity.'

Boulez' entities are small groups of notes that may be perpetually rearranged, giving each sequence a fluctuating modality. His new thematicism brings a rapprochement not with Beethoven but rather with Asian traditions – North Indian, especially – within which string instruments were born. A link thus appears with the music of the much younger composers we have been hearing from.

Everywhere is sameness, everywhere difference. To quote the composer once more: 'You are lost in a labyrinth of sound.'

Programme notes © Paul Griffiths, 2025

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The guitarist guides us through three spaces within the Queen Elizabeth Hall in a journey through forgotten works for lute, classical guitar and electric guitar.