



Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Witts, Dick. 1977-1978. 'IRCAM: Le Marteau sans Matière?'. *Contact*, 18. pp. 16-19. ISSN 0308-5066.

IRCAM: Le Marteau sans Matière?

ON JUNE 7, the day on which some were celebrating the Silver Jubilee of George VI's death, I went to IRCAM to discover how I (or you or all of us) could get to work there. At the beginning of September I made a return visit to check out what I had learned three months before.

The Institute for Acoustical-Musical Research and Coordination¹ lives beneath central Paris, close to the Marais and hard by the prostitutes of Les Halles. It's officially one part of the Beaubourg Centre (or Pompidou Centre/Pompidouleum/'National Centre of Art and Culture, Georges Pompidou'), a huge and beautiful glass block building housing the National Museum of Modern Art, an Industrial Design Centre, a public library (a novelty in France), a restaurant (naturally) and a rooftop view of tourist Paris.

The Beaubourg Centre was officially opened in late January 1977 by President Giscard-d'Estaing who doesn't really want it. It's a monument to the French state obsession with prestige, intended to make Paris the cultural source of civilisation. This is not simply altruism at a huge cost. Beaubourg has another function: to regenerate the property market in an area rendered redundant by the transfer of the foodstuffs trade away from Les Halles, the domestic emigration to the suburbs and the slowdown of property investment in central Paris.² The State has to develop *new* property. British speculators failed by flooding Paris with a surplus of offices only, and so the French are stimulating a different, untapped high-quality market — from food to art. By the start of 1977, an available return of eight per cent on existing space around Beaubourg beat most of Europe. This figure is improving as Beaubourg is promoted.³

There's tremendous resentment against the Pompidouleum. Its dense concentration of resources and enormous cost drain places outside Paris. John Ardagh wrote in *The Times*:

The state's cultural budget for 1977, some 0.5 per cent of the total, is 1,865m francs, 13.5 per cent more than for 1976 ... Paris's share of the ministry's total budget is now 60 per cent, against 49 per cent in 1973. Three prestige bodies, the Opéra (138m francs), the Comédie Française (44m francs) and Beaubourg (132m francs), eat up nearly a quarter of the total working budget ... Another charge against the Beaubourg *opération de grandeur* is that it is accentuating the recent trend towards cultural recentralisation on Paris ... but is not Beaubourg's big subsidy causing cuts elsewhere? The ministry denies it ...⁴

Criticisms are also made by those who live in Paris, such as two city councillors quoted in *Le Monde*:

... a living ensemble of original artistic institutions should be set up to fulfill a serious lack. There will be objections that Beaubourg already answers this need. But it would be a mistake to give more credit to the Centre Pompidou than it deserves. People forget that Beaubourg — devoted primarily to the fine arts and to a public reference library — makes only a token nod in the direction of theatre and dance, pays little attention to the needs of children, and is more concerned with exhibiting existing works rather than with creating new ones.⁵

IRCAM is one element of Beaubourg, and all the resentment felt against the Centre falls onto the Institute too. But IRCAM is apart from rather than a part of Beaubourg. It lies under the pavement, a street away and thinly connected. It's claimed that an underground

institute aids acoustic stability. This may be true, but only discovered thanks to the Paris authorities who wouldn't allow IRCAM to obstruct the view of the St Merri Church, where Saint-Saens was organist. Pompidou tacked a sentence about music on the bottom of the initial plan of 1969, his personal interest being modern painting. Boulez, France's most prestigious conductor, was asked to turn this sentence into a centre.

Pompidou realised his dream through an architecture contest. Piano and Rogers (true!) won with a box divided into six horizontal layers, allowing flexible vertical division. This left no space for Boulez. And that's why IRCAM is tacked onto Beaubourg as though in parentheses.

*This institute will bring together musicians and scientists in a new interdisciplinary research area.*⁶

There has been a great deal of publicity for IRCAM, usually in connection with Boulez. An article by Peter Heyworth is the boldest British one that I've seen:

IRCAM will probably succeed in pushing out the frontiers of sound as drastically as the great explorers of the Renaissance succeeded in expanding man's knowledge of the Earth.

Though there is the following let-out clause:

If it fulfils Boulez's ambitions, it will be a milestone in the history of Western music as crucial as the advent of the aeroplane has been in the field of transport. If it fails, it will at least provide a further example of Boulez's extraordinary determination to confront the basic problems that face composers in the second half of the twentieth century.⁷

In a recent article⁸ outlining his attitude to music research, Boulez states that

... musical invention must bring about the creation of the musical material it needs; by its efforts, it will provide the necessary impulse for technology to respond functionally to its desires and imagination. This process will need to be flexible enough to avoid the extreme rigidity and impoverishment of an excessive determinism and to encompass the accidental or unforeseen, which must be ready later to integrate into a larger and richer conception. The long-term preparation of research and the instantaneous discovery must not be mutually exclusive, they must affirm the reciprocity of their respective spheres of action....

Research/invention, individual/collective, the multiple resources of this double dialectic are capable of engendering infinite possibilities. That invention is marked more particularly by the imprint of an individual, goes without saying; we must still prevent this involving us in humdrum, particular solutions which somehow remain the composer's personal property. What is absolutely necessary is that we should move towards global, generalizable solutions.

Commutable rhetoric. For all the clarity it contains, the statement could just as easily read:

Musical invention will need to be flexible enough to provide the reciprocity of this richer conception, etc.

At root it states that research needs association; invention needs privacy. Such articles reveal only that IRCAM is ideologically ambiguous. They say nothing about its place in real life. So I asked for facts, and was told the following.

Organisation Boulez is the principal director. ('I cannot

make [decisions] all myself, though the final responsibility on priorities and the budget will be mine.'⁹ There are five directors beneath him on three-year contracts: Gerald Bennett, Luciano Berio, Michel Decoust, Vinko Globokar and Jean-Claude Risset. There is at present an administrative and technical staff of around 30. When it's fully operational there will be 50. When will that be?

Perhaps October 1978 or 1979 or later, after the 'running-in' period: the opening date slips further back each time.¹⁰ It seems odd that such a publically-financed institution should be so unsure of its schedule. After all, its construction and equipment bill is at least eight million pounds, though it's hard to find out how much it actually has cost. Peter Heyworth quoted seven million pounds as the 1973 estimate,¹¹ a contemporary sterling equivalent of the 59 million francs quoted to me as *today's* figure. As the IRCAM building is behind schedule, and given steady inflation, it's remarkable that an estimate four years old stands today. What's the true figure? £10 million? £15 million?

Phone them and find out. And while you're talking, ask them about the annual subsidy. *The Observer* quoted two million pounds a year as the estimate of January 1973. I've phoned three times to check, and each time I was told the estimate, not a real-life figure.

Evidently Boulez has obtained a high degree of autonomy from State interference. The very creation of a State-aided research institute, not accountable by controlled assessments of proof or success or effectiveness, is itself quite an achievement. It's also vital for research requiring time and stability. As Andy Moorer of the computer department said, 'The thing sort of moves slowly. It's not going to be like in the movies, where somebody suddenly invents a cure for cancer.' Excellent too for IRCAM because it doesn't get involved in petty Gaullist wrangles between the presidential Giscardians led by Culture Minister d'Ornano and the Pompidou protégé Chirac, Mayor of Paris. The Ministry aids IRCAM which can also count on private funds, industrial and commercial foundations on the American model. Mayor Chirac deals only with IRCAM's dustbins.

For the first time data processing, electro-acoustics, instrumental and vocal research — research areas usually entirely separate — will be combined in the same place.

Research At present the computer and electronics are functioning. The computer department started work a year and a half ago, though their central computer, a (DEC) PDP 10, hasn't yet been installed. They've also purchased two peripheral PDP 11s. So their principal hardware is all-American as are several of the staff, such as Max Mathews, Andy Moorer and Gerald Bennett. IRCAM has a strong connection with Stanford University, California. Stanford staff, principally engineers and programmers, including Prof. Lowell Smith, visit and supervise 'tool-building' at IRCAM (Stanford-by-the-Seine). In 1975, Boulez spent some time at Stanford 'learning, learning, learning'.¹²

The French are currently pushing their own computer and telecommunications industries as a priority.¹³ The State has merged the industries around one dominant group: for computers, CII-Honeywell-Bull. It would seem likely that a new prestige state-aided research institute would use French-built equipment whenever possible, and that it would have a role in the development of such technology. But no. Practical autonomy allows IRCAM to buy American. Why?

It's not a matter of quality. It's because the services, documentation and software (programming) written for the PDP computers are readily available from a tradition of 15 years of work. They are using the established MUSIC V programming language.¹⁴ But why is their research to be tied to the technology and practices of the

mid-1960s, like sound-stale Stanford? Because the ideology behind IRCAM stems from that period. From the end of *Die Reihe*. The time when 'excessive determinism' and the 'accidental or unforeseen' were the hemispheres of avantgarde action. Just when developments that Boulez so much despises such as music-theatre, 'new tonality' and montage began to take a hold. The last period of relative stability before the decline of profit dipped to its first great crisis point. Just before Boulez touched middle age.

Now the major research operation at IRCAM is the construction of a digital synthesizer,¹⁵ an item vital to Berio's concept of 'sound sculpture' (extraction from a store of timbres, rather than building from sine-waves). The physical devices are scheduled for service after Summer 1978. Future research seems to lead on from the existence of the synthesizer which is directed towards three ends: (1) as the tail-end of a MUSIC V composition; (2) (as it's being built in several detachable sections) as a small on-stage instrument capable of modification in real-time; (3) in a recording studio, absorbing the functions of tape recorder and mixing desk, to eliminate tape hiss and manage thick overlays and great clarity. Fine, but this work has been or is being done elsewhere. For instance Stanford and the University of Utah have already had good results from the third project. IRCAM seems happy to duplicate the achievements of US campuses. Perhaps, I was told, because Boulez and his workers are seeking to merge the benefits offered by American technology with those of fresh French bread. Ohm sickness.

Who can work at IRCAM? In principle, anyone. But only 'some people who have shown great interest' are allowed to make contact with the studios.¹⁶ And can you guess who, out of the entire music and age range available, they might be? Yes, up-and-coming Stockhausen, Pousseur and Ligeti. Anyone under 48? The young British composer Stanley Haynes was mentioned, known over here for his pioneer promotion of works by Jean-Claude Risset and colleagues (not that I'm implying a connection with his invitation to IRCAM!).

This prestigious institution does not, and will not, have places for students (well, at some future date, perhaps one or two especially gifted ones, I was told) or courses of instruction.¹⁷ You may submit a project to the relevant director, and if he finds it interesting, and the facilities are available, and it's convenient, then you may be invited. But you'll have to pay your own way.¹⁸ IRCAM may put you in touch with a sympathetic foundation. It may not.

Now, in Paris, I was told of a composer who had submitted a suitable if complicated project involving computer and lasers. It was rejected, he thinks, because the directors are preoccupied with supervising their own work, and can't accommodate 'inconvenient' use of the studios. (The real advantage of IRCAM should be the possibility of working in real-time, and discarding all time-sharing problems of university facilities.) It transpired that personal affinity and 'old music-school tie' took priority over valid proposals; write in the Boulio house-style and you may stand a chance.

IRCAM does, however, hold short symposia. For example, a three-day one on psycho-acoustics (July 11-13, 1977). Advertised in psychological and physics journals, it drew around a hundred replies. From this they selected 45 papers for reference during the sessions: 18 from the USA, none from Britain. They didn't have details of future symposia or short courses, though there may be one on the digital synthesizer. Well, that's one way to get your foot in the door, scoured specialist journals permitting. Incidentally, even if you contribute a paper, you have to pay the 100F registration fee. The symposium leaflet gives accurate information on the IRCAM support services:

Lodging: Paris is an extremely popular tourist attraction

and the hotels are typically quite full in July.

Meals: Many fine and reasonably priced restaurants are in the vicinity of the Centre.

Symposia held to keep up contacts in the profession, but they're basically a researchers' recital, a display. Critics of the institute told me that this is all they expect from it: it's a haut couture boutique, a fashion parade for the grandes dames of Darmstadt, Boulez the Pierre Cardin of music.

The pure researcher, the professional, the composer, instrumentalist, acoustic specialist and scientist belonging to these different disciplines will cooperate in research that is both theoretical and practical.

Public The law passed on January 3, 1975, giving IRCAM its legal status sets out its obligations.

It contributes to the enrichment of the cultural heritage of the Nation, to the information and the education of the public, to the spread of artistic creation and to social communication. It offers advice on request . . .

The publicity also talks of contacting and servicing the public. Naturally.

In the main Beaubourg building the maps delineate an IRCAM information centre. I went there. It doesn't exist. I asked later at IRCAM about it. 'Ah, yes, we don't know what to do with that space.' I was told.

Notices around Beaubourg explain that the institute is open to the public each afternoon (except Tuesdays). In June, the entrance to IRCAM, across the street, is a door of the old municipal baths. The door is locked. To get in, you press a buzzer, shout your name and purpose of visit to The Voice At The Other End. IRCAM admits only that the public aren't welcome. In September, a new entrance, with steps leading below ground. Open to the public? Yes, and locked up. Naturally.

But there are the concerts and workshops, collectively labelled in their opening season of 1977, 'Passage du XXe siècle'. Boulez has prefaced the concert leaflet with a statement of intent, full of tub-thumping rhetoric.

Let's look together
at the passing of this century
with its certainties that it has abundantly meted out,
with its uncertainties that have been no less manifest:
to confront both of these will help us
to outline our project publically
to describe its necessity daily.

We want constantly
the *transition*
of the work (becoming) as model
to the resolute and adventurous experience.

(You can almost hear a 'Vive la France!' at the end.) The 1977 series contains 54 events (30 in the January to July period, 24 during September to December), in three groups: 13 orchestral, 17 Ensemble Intercontemporain events,¹⁹ and 24 chamber recitals or workshops.

We're familiar with finely planned programmes from the Boulez domain, manifest here also by nine performances of self-penned pieces,²⁰ plus the 60 per cent of orchestral concerts he conducts. We're also familiar with the way he rewrites history, witness the non-appearance of neo-classicism. Music-theatre finds no place, nor do 'systems' pieces, 'new tonality' or improvisation (except on Mallarmé). La Monte Young, Wolff and Lucier are missing from a sequence of Franco-American concerts. I was given the defence that perhaps the directors found these elements to be of sociological significance only. How could Boulez, with so many commitments, find time to check out what was happening elsewhere in today's music? No answer.

Only the trombonist Vinko Globokar seems to show a more open mind.²¹ He set up a week of recitals in March, 'The Contemporary Soloist'. Six rooms were laid aside in the Paris Conservatoire for 15 jet-set soloists to do their stuff. But he also gave time to two pianist-composers: Jürg Wyttenbach with his Kagelesque instrument-theatre

pieces, and Frederic Rzewski who composed his *Instrumental Studies* for the Ensemble Intercontemporain.

To be fair, a one week spectacle of improvisation groups was organised for February. Feedback Studio, GERM, Musica Elettronica Viva, Neue Horizonte, Extended Vocal Techniques and New Phonic Art were invited (mandated, according to one group). However, the concert budget was cut, and improvisation being expendable, the show was postponed until July 1978. I hope some Ircamite knows that at least two of the groups are dead.

Lastly, and to demonstrate the sincere wish of IRCAM for public contact, Michel Decoust has arranged four 'Weekends d'Information'.

Availability: These weekends are open to all, and in particular to:
— employees in state education
— staff of the Cultural Centre for Youth
— music amateurs.

Number limit: 15 people.

Applications: Write by letter with explanations of motives, activities of particular interest.

Open to all. (Well, 15 who can justify their interest, neatly.)

This research is bound to lead to a better understanding of musical phenomena and to lead musical composition into new and unexplored regions.

From the facts: IRCAM is an exclusive, centralist institution, in the manner of the Ecole Nationale d'Administration²² (where, attracted by prestige and elegance, competent minds are pressed into the State's service).²³ It sustains a selective club of composers of similar age, background and conceptions, with those closely sympathetic ('the comfortable avantgarde'). This is to be expected.

But IRCAM is a symptom of a more foolish process, appearing throughout the contemporary music world, namely the rift between promotion and reality. IRCAM is for us all ... but only a few. It serves the public ... but won't tolerate them. It embraces the advancing spectrum of new music ... aside from the silly bits. It is democratic ... ally controlled by Boulez. A new global grammar will be secured collaboratively ... external to society. We are socialists ... wealthy ones.²⁴

This schizophrenia is endemic in the sympathetic critic's fear of writing reviews or analyses (an account of reality) rather than previews (promotion); in the romanticised announcements of projects; in the formation of newsworthy rather than exciting music; in the promotion of concerts where all is promised and nothing given. It's above all the bourgeois fear of clarity. They adore secrecy and ambiguity ('richness' they call it, just as they call exploitation 'freedom'). Bourgeois creativity seeks always to hide the reality surrounding it. That's why, by asking practical questions, IRCAM seems to dissolve. It can only survive in an artificial world where 'global, generalizable solutions' can be assessed external to social change.

Boulez has written:

In material as in method, a constant flow must be established between modes of thought and types of action, a continual exchange between giving and receiving. Future experiments, in all probability, will be set up in accordance with this permanent dialogue. Will there be many of us to undertake it?²⁵

Not if Boulez has his way.

NOTES:

¹ Institut de recherche et coordination acoustique/musique, 31 rue Saint-Merri, 75004 PARIS; tel. 010 331 277 1233.

² See Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *France: OECD Economic Surveys*, February 1977, pp. 9-10.

³ See Anne Singleton, 'Culture' in 'Financial Times Survey: France', *Financial Times*, July 27, 1977, p. 26.

⁴ John Ardagh, 'Culture money may be easier promised than found' in 'France: A Special Report', *The Times*, May 31, 1977, p. VIII.

⁵ Quoted in *The Guardian/Le Monde Weekly*, Sunday August 7, 1977, p.14.

⁶ Quotes in italics are from the official brochure on Beaubourg.

⁷ Peter Heyworth, leader article in *Observer Review*, July 27, 1975, p. 17.

⁸ Pierre Boulez, 'Technology and the composer', *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 6, 1977, pp. 570-571, a translation of the lecture quoted in *Passage du XXe siècle, Ire partie, janvier/juillet 1977*, published by IRCAM. The TLS article was followed by a reply from Alexander Goehr (June 10, 1977, p. 703) in which he made the point that despite technical research, the musical problems remain. Robin Maconie then produced an article about these two items for *The Times Educational Supplement* (August 26, 1977, p. 11). Neither the Goehr nor the Maconie have much to offer other than cynicism.

⁹ Peter Heyworth, op. cit.

¹⁰ Boulez: 'The centre will be ready by December 1975.' See interview with Adrian Jack, 'Boulez answers some questions', *Music and Musicians*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (November 1973), p. 36.

¹¹ Op. cit.

¹² *New York Times*, August 8, 1975, p. 10.

¹³ Andrew Webber, 'Computers' in 'Financial Times Survey: France', *Financial Times*, June 27, 1977, p. 25.

¹⁴ They've developed a MUSIC 10 programming language written in PDD 10 machine code, easier for composers to handle, though it has its disadvantages. The MUSIC V language has also been modified. I'm grateful to Kevin Jones for this information.

¹⁵ Berio: 'We are developing with Professor di Giugno [Naples University] a new system which you can control manually or digitally with a mini-computer.' See interview with Simon Emmerson, 'Luciano Berio', *Music and Musicians*, Vol. 24, No. 6 (February 1976), p. 28.

¹⁶ 'The facility will house 30 to 35 artists and scientists whose mandate it is to study "the physical, theoretical and creative parts of music as a team," Mr Boulez said.' *New York Times*, loc. cit.

¹⁷ Asked by Adrian Jack if IRCAM would have courses of instruction, Boulez replied, 'After the first two years, yes ... First when the material is outdated we will put it in the pedagogic department so that people can learn on it without it mattering whether it is spoilt. Then we will have a constant flow of assistants. Assistant will be the first step.' (Adrian Jack, op. cit., p. 36.)

¹⁸ The British Council have no funds to support this kind of activity. The Cultural Service of the French Embassy, London have two general music grants a year available from the French Government which may be applicable, depending on competing claims.

¹⁹ The Ensemble Intercontemporain is a 29-strong chamber orchestra on salaries paid by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. Two-thirds of their time is spent with IRCAM, the remainder spent as each member prefers (teaching, outside engagements, etc.).

²⁰ 116 composers are listed as being represented in the 'Passage' series. Most of them receive one performance. A listing of composers represented by several works is revealing: Schoenberg 16 items; Webern 14; Ligeti 10; Berg, Berio, Boulez and Carter 9 each; Stockhausen 8; Xenakis 5; Stravinsky 4.

²¹ In June the rumour was circulating that Globokar was resigning from his IRCAM post. By September the rumour was the Globokar had resigned.

²² Compare Boulez' statements on assistants in footnote 17 with the following on the Ecole Nationale d'Administration. 'Both the *polytechniciens* (known as X) and the recruits to the ENA (the *énarques*) are predominantly of solid bourgeois background, often from the Paris region. As students, *énarques* get a junior civil servant's pay, the X those of a junior officer. Both enjoy higher prestige than university students, as well as the secure knowledge of good jobs ahead. Their material and psychological advantages are enormous compared with that of a university student ... Their weakness is their remoteness from the common man.' Margot Lyon, 'Inquiry reflects volte-face in education ministry' in 'France: A Special Report', *The Times*, November 25, 1975, p. VIII.

²³ IRCAM forms one part of Pompidou's reactionary education reforms. 'The reform gave priority to reducing an unemployable diplomatiariat, to promoting technical training at all levels and to restructuring the teaching corps accordingly...the French education system nourishes privilege. French education is said to perpetuate the division in French society between technical training for worker children and intellectual work for the bourgeoisie.' Jonathan Story, 'Education reform moves meet with criticism' in 'Financial Times Survey: France', *Financial Times*, June 25, 1974, p. 26.

²⁴ Boulez: 'You cannot make a revolution with anarchists. There I am three hundred per cent Leninist.' Peter Heyworth, op. cit. Berio is a member of the Italian Communist Party, though in effect that means little more than that he's not a fascist. It's a pity that these composers use their public responsibilities to misrepresent communism.

²⁵ *Times Literary Supplement*, loc. cit.

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