

André Boucourechliev (1925-1997): Overview of Writings

André Boucourechliev left a dozen books, a hundred or so articles, concert and recording reviews, interviews, and correspondence. He liked to call himself a “music writer”, explaining: “By which I mean that I write books on music, but the word *musicology* seems inadequate to me, because it connotes a science, a career, a profession which are not mine. The term seems to delimit my role, which is ambitious on another level: these are the writings of a composer on music”. From this dual perspective, welcomed by numerous press organs, Boucourechliev waged a militant campaign on behalf of contemporary music amongst his colleagues, his performers, and more broadly all knowledgeable and/or sensitive listeners, without restricting himself to specialists.

Like any number of composers of his generation—Luciano Berio, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Iannis Xenakis, Henri Pousseur, Pierre Boulez—Boucourechliev left a vast corpus of writings. Born in Sofia, he arrived in Paris in 1949 as a virtuoso pianist. Raised in a Francophile milieu, he took French nationality in 1956. Starting from this same year, with the death of Walter Gieseking who had served as his mentor, he devoted himself to composition, without however submitting to any orthodoxy (serialism included), and simultaneously began to publish. His literary activity paralleled his career as a pianist and then composer and reflects more generally his position as a discerning and indispensable observer of the musical life of his times. The first work retained in his catalogue, *Étude 1* (1956) for magnetic tape, realised at the Studio di fonologia in Milan, is exactly contemporary with his [Schumann](#), which, on the author’s own account, is the work of a pianist, whereas his [Beethoven](#) (1963) is already that of a composer. Altogether, his oeuvre (musical and about music) spans four decades. His final composition, *Trois fragments de Michel-Ange* (1995) shortly preceded [Regards sur Chopin](#) (1996), his final book published during his lifetime, followed by the unfinished and posthumously published [Debussy, la révolution subtile](#) (1998). One last volume bears his signature: entitled [À l’écoute](#) (2006), it gathers together published and unpublished essays selected and presented by Jean Ducharme.

Since their publication, several of Boucourechliev’s works have enjoyed lasting success and been translated. See among others the fourth edition of [Schumann](#) (1995), augmented by a selection of essays and a catalogue of works; [Igor Stravinsky](#) (1982, reissued 1989); [Regards sur Chopin](#), translated into Japanese and English; or indeed the first [Beethoven](#) (2020), recently reissued with a new preface by the Quatuor Ébène.

A comprehensive knowledge of Boucourechliev’s published writings is made possible by the work of Jean Ducharme who, in addition to a chronological bibliography, offers an exhaustive roster of the articles published in the *Nouvelle revue française* and in *Preuves* (see below: “Pour aller plus loin”). The unpublished writings are conserved at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, in the Fonds André Boucourechliev (created 2012) and, for the correspondence, in various other collections.

Boucourechliev devoted his first articles to the effervescent musical life of his times. As he explains it: “Contemporary music was much attacked and very little known; I had the opportunity to write in order to passionately defend it”. His position as a composer made him an *engagé* critic. He tended to admire Berio, Stockhausen, and Boulez more than Nono, Cage, or Giacinto Scelsi. He did long service as a critic and chronicler for Le Domaine musical, the Semaines musicales internationales de Paris, and the festivals of Venice, Royan, and Donaueschingen. He contributed to the magazine *Esprit* from January 1957, with his very first article, “La musique électronique”. The same year he succeeded Boris de Schloezer at the *Nouvelle revue française*, to which he contributed regularly (1957–69 and 1983–92). From 1962 to

1969, he wrote for *Preuves*, with among other things a vast survey of “La musique sérielle aujourd’hui” (1965–6). He also published articles in *Harmonie*, *Réforme*, and *L’Arc* (two on Beethoven in 1970) and of course various other outlets exclusively dedicated to music: *Musique en jeu* (1971 and 1975) and *L’Avant-scène Opéra* with four major contributions on Wagner (1976–7). In *Entretiens*, a periodicals founded by several devoted students of his, he published the article “Le *Ring*, forme ou programme” (1988).

As for his books, they take a new look (analytical, aesthetic, historical) at great figures of the past or of early twentieth-century modernity to whom he felt attached as a pianist and/or composer: Schumann, Beethoven, Chopin, then Debussy and Stravinsky. Even the Romantic subjects are “deliberately invested with a modern poetics and modern concepts”, he explains in *Dire la musique*. These monographs retain their authority. His attachment to Beethoven resulted in various articles and two different books. To the 1963 *Beethoven*, reissued and expanded several times as late as 1994, he added an *Essai sur Beethoven* in 1991 which has nothing in common with its predecessor.

His essay *Le langage musical* (1993) takes a different approach. Here Boucourechliev offers “a synthetic work on the musical language and its action, one that proposes models applicable to all idioms and eras”. Such an ambition, he insists, “justifies the not inconsiderable risk of being attempted in our day”. Here his source base is a long history (from *L’Orfeo* to *Lulu* for opera) conceptualised as a dynamic process articulated in broad stages, with an eye for “the strategies of the composer revealed in the work”. In the same years, the composer collected, *Dire la musique* (1995), twenty-odd articles from the 1980s and ’90s on subjects close to his heart.

Recurring themes in his writings include the musical work, the musical language, the relation between composer and performer and between performer and public, programme music and form, the theme and variation, the sonata and its authority, and the vestiges left by serialism after the passing away of its grammar. A tireless “questioner of the musical language”, he keeps an open ear as he strives to define what is music itself, for instance, or musical time.

Alain Poirier underlines his constant concern for “contemporanisation”, as seen in “Beethoven dans notre temps” (1970), “Debussy aujourd’hui” (1972), “Wagner aujourd’hui” (1963), or the vast inquest conducted for *Preuves*, “La musique sérielle aujourd’hui” (1965). As a “thinker of music” (in François Nicolas’s phrase), Boucourechliev conceptualises “history as permanence”, as he affirms in his *Igor Stravinsky*.

Just as, in *Archipel* (five pieces for soloists created up to 1970), he delegates interpretative choices to his performers, so he seeks to elicit from his readers, insofar as they are listeners, an active musical listening that makes them into “operators”—a reference to Mallarmé, shared with other composers of his generation. He additionally calls for a “profound concordance between two actions”, those of composing and listening. “To listen is not to receive, but to act: to be confronted incessantly with this other universe”. The listener, thus “put to work”, is in effect called to become the true performer of the work. “You are your senses”, he affirms, in line with the reflections of Barthes (whom he taught piano) on the “unwritable”, and also those of Umberto Eco (whose *Opera aperta* he helped translate).

Béatrice RAMAUT-CHEVASSUS

01/09/2022

Trans. Tadhg Sauvey

Further reading:

Alain Poirier (ed.), *André Boucourechliev*, Paris, Fayard, 2002, « L'écrivain de musique », contributions d'Alain Poirier, Jean Ducharme et François Nicolas, p. 225-265 et « Bibliographie » établie par J. Ducharme, 399-407.

<http://www.boucourechliev.com/html/bibliohtml.htm>, site des Amis de Boucourechliev, onglet « bibliographie ».

To quote this article: Béatrice Ramaut-Chevassus, "André Boucourechliev (1925-1997): Overview of Writings", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 09/01/2023, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/person/40331>.