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MUSIC

Odd, challenging Boulez piece a serial thriller

By **TOM DI NARDO**
For the Daily News

French composer/conductor Pierre Boulez's "Le Marteau sans maitre" ("The hammer without a master"), is a controversial 20th-century musical milestone that few have heard.

Scored for alto flute, guitar, viola, xyloimba (or xylophone), vi-

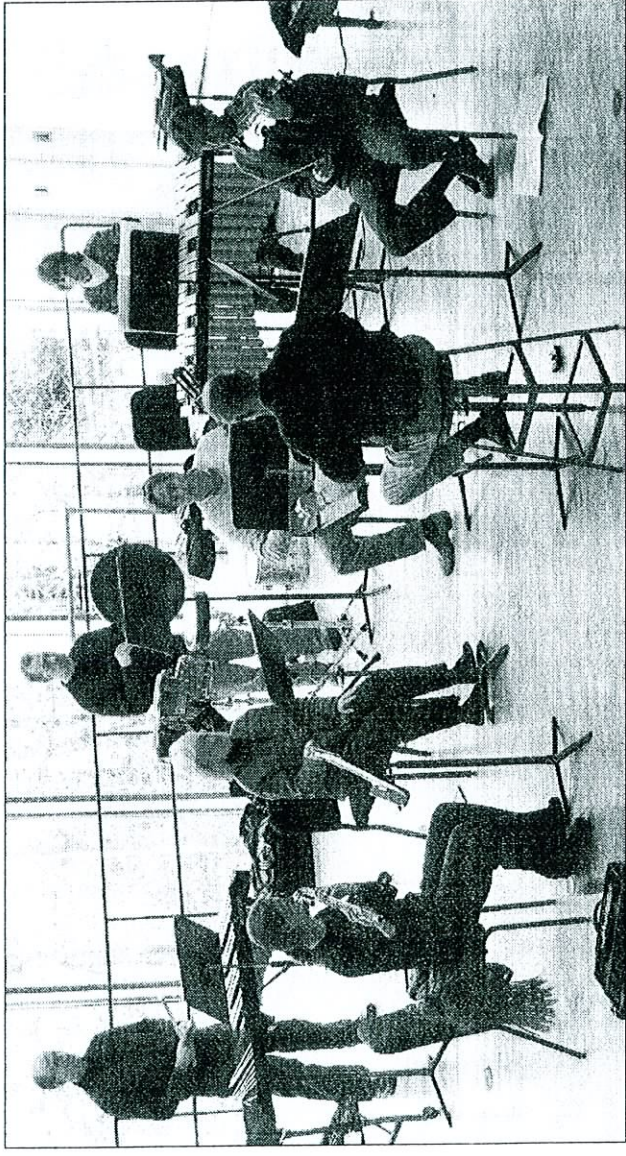
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piece to wrap your ears around. This writer remembers a first hearing of Boulez's recording, which sounded like completely random sounds. After five more recent run-throughs, his structural intentions still remain elusive.

But you can finally decide for yourself, thanks to a local premiere by the innovative contemporary music group **Orchestra 2001**. Last week, the ensemble's artistic director, **James Freeman**, traveled to Carnegie Hall to hear Boulez himself conduct the work with Swiss musicians, getting the composer's take on its interpretation.

Based on surrealist (mostly nonsensical) poems by Rene Char, the work was originally written in 1953-54, and revised in 1955 for its premiere. At its outset, Boulez (pronounced *Boo-LEZZ*) was heavily into serialism, a system in which each of the 12 tones are equally emphasized and composition be-



Orchestra 2001 will tackle Pierre Boulez's controversial "Le Marteau sans maitre" this weekend.

comes more of a creative mathematical puzzle.

Boulez is renowned for his founding of IRCAM, the cutting-edge center of experimental and electronic music at Paris' futuristic Pompidou Center. He brought many contemporary works to his programming as music director of the New York Philharmonic from 1971 to 1978.

The nine-movement "Marteau" was his break from strict serialism, though his complex patterns and rhythmic notation still stun audiences into a completely unique sound world. Boulez's imagination

and the originality of his concept have awarded it legendary status, but its difficulty only allows performances by daring and virtuosos groups like Orchestra 2001.

Freeman studied with Boulez for one semester at Harvard and was struck by the depth of his analyses, which covered whole walls with arrows and notes pertaining to one or two measures of Alban Berg's opera "Wozzeck."

"He was very engaging, and even drank beer at the local bar with us," recalled Freeman. "But I realized last week that the piece has more theater than he gives it

credit for, and that it's OK that I see it differently.

"I want to do it with a little more variety and flair, and a greater sense of drama, but it's frankly impossible to get a lot of it the first time. We've invited people to come to the 11 rehearsals this week at Swarthmore, in hopes they'll engage with it as much as possible.

"It's extremely difficult for the players, much harder than it is for me to conduct, because the tempo changes constantly, very strictly," he said.

"I remember teaching a class at Swarthmore a couple of years

back and preparing a student piece that was a total mishmash of sound, a dense sweep of chaotic music. I said I couldn't hear every note in this. A student yelled, 'Boulez could!'"

Mezzo-soprano Freda Herseht will sing the tricky vocal part, with the superb guitarist **Jason Vieux** the guest soloist in the Boulez as well as in "Innocence and Experience" by local guitarist/composer Allen Krantz.

The program also includes "The Golden Apples of the Sun" by hot composer **Kenji Bunch**, with the composer as viola soloist and **Marcantonio Barone** as guest conductor.

The other performers in this local milestone are vibist **Susan Jones**, xylophone player **Bill Kerrigan**, percussionist **David Nelson**, flutist **Christina Jennings** and violist **Matthew Dane**.

"I'm resisting being analytical about Boulez's music, which was terrifically important up until the '70s, when composers began to react to anything that seemed remotely cerebral," said Freeman. "[Composer] George Crumb is fond of saying, 'Boulez likes to write music so the performers are endangered.'" ★

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Independence Seaport Museum, 211 S. Columbus Blvd., 8 p.m. tomorrow, \$32, and Lang Concert Hall, Swarthmore College, 500 College Ave., Swarthmore, 7:30 p.m. Sunday, free, 215-922-2190, www.orchestra2001.org.