

Cleveland Orchestra: U.S. premiere of Kurtág piece to honor Pierre Boulez

by Daniel Hathaway



To honor the memory of composer and conductor Pierre Boulez, Franz Welser-Möst will lead The Cleveland Orchestra in the U.S. premiere of György Kurtág's *Petite musique solennelle - En hommage à Pierre Boulez 90* on Thursday and Saturday evenings, March 24 and 26 at Severance Hall. The performances will also feature Norwegian cellist Truls Mørk

in the Schumann concerto, and Anton Bruckner's *Symphony No. 6*.

Kurtág (pictured above in 2007), who worked with Boulez and the Ensemble InterContemporain in Paris from 1999-2001, wrote *Petite musique solennelle* to honor Boulez on his 90th birthday, a landmark that was also observed by The Cleveland Orchestra in a special concert in January of 2015. (Boulez died almost exactly one year later.)

In an interview for a [preview](#) of that event on *ClevelandClassical.com*, TCO principal keyboardist Joela Jones said, "To me it's amazing that somebody who was so great, so brilliant, and so gifted, could also be so humble and modest. He just made you feel comfortable, like you were his equal, which of course you were not. And, if you had enough intelligence you knew that."

Jones's fond impressions of Boulez were shared by musicians across the globe, but were perhaps nowhere so warmly celebrated as at the 2015 Lucerne Festival. That festival devoted an entire day of eight concerts to Boulez, who had founded the Lucerne Festival Academy in 2004 to train young musicians in the performance of contemporary music.

“A Day for Pierre Boulez” included the first performance of Kurtág’s *Petite musique solennelle* by the Academy Orchestra, led by Matthias Pintscher. The musicians performed wearing Pierre Boulez t-shirts. Sadly, Pierre Boulez was unable to attend due to illness.



Thanks to modern technology, Kurtág’s 7-minute tribute piece can be heard on [YouTube](#) and a perusal copy of the 18-page score can be downloaded from the [Editio Musica Budapest](#) website. Writing about its premiere in Lucerne, *Musicalamerica.com* described it as “a processional, meditative work driven by a bold use of color.” A review on *Bachtrack* mentioned its shimmering sound clusters and quoted Boulez on “the lavish abundance of ideas” that he had admired in Kurtág’s writing over many years.



Kurtág’s piece calls for a large orchestra of 5 flutes (including piccolo, alto, and bass flutes), 2 oboes and English horn, 2 clarinets and bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, tuba, strings, harp, celesta, piano (an upright piano with mute pedal), cimbalom (Hungarian hammered dulcimer), and a large percussion section that includes vibraphone, bells, steel drum, timpani, crotales,

piatti (cymbals), gong, and bass drum, plus Bayan (a chromatic button accordion).

Pierre Boulez conducted The Cleveland Orchestra over a span of nearly fifty years. Since making his debut with the Orchestra in 1965, he led them in more than 220 concerts. He was appointed the Orchestra’s first Principal Guest Conductor in 1969 and

served as Musical Advisor for two seasons beginning shortly after George Szell's death in 1970. Boulez made several recordings with the Orchestra, and won five Grammy Awards. In 2014 he received the Orchestra's Distinguished Service Award.

To mark the death of its longtime collaborator, The Cleveland Orchestra released a [video tribute](#) in January of 2016 featuring personal recollections of Boulez's impact on the ensemble's musicians. But among the most affecting memories is one that Joela Jones related in our January, 2015 interview:



“On one of the occasions that Mr. Boulez returned to conduct, *Petrushka* was on the program. As you know, it is common for the conductor to give the pianist a solo bow at the end. After the Thursday night performance he only asked the entire orchestra to stand, and orchestra members were looking back wondering why he didn't ask me to take a bow. I figured he had a lot on his mind and he just forgot. I didn't care and I wasn't devastated.

“Later that night around 11:30 the phone rang. It was NancyBell Coe, who at the time was one of the managers. She told me that at the reception, Pierre Boulez was talking to some people and all of a sudden blurted out, ‘Oh no, I forgot to have Joela stand up,’ and he wanted to apologize. I said, for goodness sake, Pierre Boulez does not need to apologize to me. But Nancy said he was very upset with himself, and he wanted to be sure it was OK for him to call me at 10:00 tomorrow. I said absolutely. So I waited by the phone, and of course he called at 10:00 on the dot. He said, ‘I am so sorry — how could I be so stupid to forget to have you stand up?’ Of course I was melting on the other side of the phone. There was no need for him to do that, but that is the kind of person he

was. He cared about everyone, and that's what I will always remember him for. As well as for his musical genius as a conductor and a composer.”

Photos of Pierre Boulez and Joela Jones by Roger Mastroianni.

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