

Switzerland's Most Wanted

(Winter 2001)

Pierre Boulez (1925–), perhaps the most highly esteemed postwar composer, has finally achieved what he wanted. Throughout his long career, Boulez has done his best to provoke and intimidate the bourgeois establishment. Unfortunately for him, the general public has contentedly ignored him, and his influence has been significant only among the most abstruse composers and theorists of the ivory tower. Consequently, his cultural power has been largely limited to a circle of French art institutions (such as the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique) that would perish faster than a Peugeot in a Minnesota winter without generous government subsidies.

Now, just as government has kept his career afloat, it has finally granted Boulez his lifelong wish to be declared a threat to bourgeois peace. On December 4, 2001, the BBC reports, Swiss police arrested Boulez on suspicion of being a terrorist. It seems that Swiss intelligence discovered some of Boulez's writings from the 1960s, vituperative monographs that included attacks on the opera industry for unconscionably continuing to present works people enjoyed. Boulez declared that opera houses were "full of dust and shit" and (perhaps most interesting to the authorities) "should all be blown up." In the post-9/11 atmosphere of heightened security, Boulez was put on Switzerland's "most-wanted terrorists" list, and, when he returned to Switzerland, he was stripped of his passport and detained. He was released when the Swiss realized Boulez was a threat only to the ticket sales of any venue that tried to present his music.

In the New York Times, columnist Bob Herbert cited the Boulez case as an example of the absurd lengths to which security concerns have been taken. On second thought, though, applying the label "terrorist" to Boulez might not be as foolish as it seems. As a musician, his primary goal was destruction: trampling out all vestiges of what ordinary people find to be pleasant, accessible, or comfortable in music, and sneering at them for desiring it. While his call to destroy opera houses might have startled Swiss police, it was consistent with his musical goal of destroying the edifices and foundations of our musical tradition.

Of course, describing Boulez as a musical terrorist trivializes the experiences of all who have recently suffered from genuine terrorism. At the same time, however, a person who wages a nihilistic war on the arts is a credible threat to an important dimension of our way of life. He is not deserving of handcuffs, but neither is he deserving of sympathy.