COMMENTS

PIERRE BOULEZ
Born March 26, 1925, Montbrison, France.
Currently resides in Paris, France.

Messagesquissé for Seven Cellos
Boulez composed Messagesquissé in 1976. It was first performed at the cello competition in La Rochelle, France, in 1977. The work is scored for solo cello and six cellos. Performance time is approximately seven minutes.

These are the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first performances of Messagesquissé. The Orchestra first performed music by Pierre Boulez at subscription concerts on February 27 and 28, 1969, when the composer himself conducted Livres pour cordes. Our most recent performance on a subscription concert of Boulez’s music was the world premiere of Dérive 3, a fanfare written in honor of Sir Georg Solti’s eightieth birthday, performed on November 21, 1992, and conducted by the composer.

It is difficult for concertgoers today to identify the Pierre Boulez who was once the enfant terrible of contemporary music with the gentle man who now conducts our orchestra each year in twentieth-century classics. Yet in the early 1950s Boulez quickly became notorious: he made outspoken comments about destroying all the art of the past and burning the world’s opera houses; he publicly booed a concert of Stravinsky’s music. His inflammatory polemic “Schoenberg is dead,” which dismissed the composer for being too attached to the rhythms and forms of the past, appeared only months after Schoenberg’s death. Boulez has always held in highest regard only the music that risks everything in order to be truly new. Nothing made that clearer than his breakthrough composition Le marteau sans maître (The hammer without a master), an exotic, dazzling, and rigorously complex work for voice and a gamelanlike ensemble. Le marteau sans maître, first performed in 1955, asserted Boulez’s stature as one of our century’s most influential composers; overnight a door had been opened on a new view of the future.

Boulez is now nearly seventy—the Chicago Symphony plans a celebration for his birthday in March—and he is no longer mistaken for a wild man of the avant-garde. But his compositions continue to stretch our ears and they challenge our understanding of music’s sonic and expressive potential as much as anything being written today.

Messagesquissé is a small work. Like every piece in the Boulez canon, it is meticulously composed, intricate and detailed, and lovingly polished. Despite its title—esquisse is French for sketch—it is a taut and fully finished miniature. The piece was composed on commission from Mstislav Rostropovich—for the La Rochelle cello competition—in 1976, the same year Boulez formed his ground-breaking Ensemble InterContemporain in Paris and conducted a controversial new production of Wagner’s Ring in Bayreuth. It is preceded in Boulez’s output by Rituels, written in memory of the conductor and composer Bruno Maderna. The year after composing Messagesquissé Boulez began the or-

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chestrall version of *Notations*, twelve brief piano pieces he had not touched in forty-five years. (Daniel Barenboim conducted the premiere of *Notations* 1-4 in 1980 in Paris; he will conduct the first performances of *Notations* 5-8 with the Chicago Symphony in May.)

Ferruccio Busoni once compared music to a vast garden in which each composer can "survey, handle, and display only a fraction of the complete flora of the earth, a tiny fragment of that paradise-garden which covers the planets." Boulez has often roamed freely through the landscape selecting precisely what he needs to create his vast and complex sound world, but in *Messagesqvisse* he makes only one choice—the cello—and then explores it from every conceivable angle. Two hundred and fifty years after Bach's six famous unaccompanied suites exposed the cello's potential, *Messagesqvisse* makes further discoveries. Boulez's lifelong concern for exquisitely nuanced sound and timbre focuses on seven cellos—one solo cello and an ensemble of six others.

*Messagesqvisse* is a tribute to Paul Sacher, the Swiss conductor who has commissioned or directed the first performances of more twentieth-century classics than any other musician. (With his Basel Chamber Orchestra, Sacher introduced scores by Stravinsky, Bartók—*Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* was written for the orchestra's tenth anniversary—, Strauss, Britten, Honegger, Henze, Hindemith, and Tippett, among others.) It was Sacher who invited Boulez to teach in Basel in the early sixties; they became friends as well as colleagues, and Sacher eventually was named president of the IRCAM Foundation (the Paris laboratory for the investigation of musical sound that Boulez launched in the mid-seventies).

*Messagesqvisse* is based on six notes, corresponding to letters in Sacher's name. The solo cello introduces the six notes; each note, in turn, is then echoed and sustained by one of the six cellos. The opening is like an X-ray of a single chord, which is the signature of the piece. Throughout *Messagesqvisse* the relationship between the solo cello and the ensemble evolves. At first the six players offer a deferential backdrop; later all seven play as one. The heart of the piece is a breakneck solo—an unbroken string of rapid sixteenth notes for ninety-one measures—accompanied by surging waves of activity, tiny specks of sound, even gaps of silence. Near the end, the solo cello has a fantastic cadenza. A coda for all seven—Boulez suggests a tempo "as rapid as possible"—concludes this brief but substantive message from one musical adventurer to another.

**IGOR STRAVINSKY**
Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.
Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

**Concerto in D for Violin and Orchestra**
Stravinsky composed the violin concerto in 1931 and conducted the first performance on October 23, 1931, in Berlin. The orchestra consists of two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and E-Flat clarinet, three bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.