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**Pierre Boulez's *Anthèmes I* for solo violin:
On the virtuosity**

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Abstract. The article explores the technical–performative aspect of Pierre Boulez's *Anthèmes I* (1991) for solo violin from a physiologically oriented perspective. This non-standard analytical approach is inspired by the reflections of Yehudi Menuhin—who commissioned the work for a violin competition—and aligns with the neuropathic image invoked by Boulez himself: ataxia,

a performer's loss of motor control. Viewed through this lens, the work's technical eccentricities emerge as the result of Boulez's intent to cultivate the violinist's reflexes. The article identifies instrumental features that testify to this focus on coordination: pitch contours that complicate conventional fingering patterns; deliberately unnatural bow strokes; abrupt, almost convulsive shifts in bow direction paired with finely calibrated irregular dynamic contrasts, among others. The accumulation of diverse technical demands, that often work against the instrument's natural mechanics, suggests that Boulez consciously modeled ataxia within the piece. By relying on the violinist's psychophysical capacities and agile musical thinking, he expanded the instrument's technical vocabulary and shaped a new type of virtuosic composition—one requiring, in Menuhin's words, "dexterity of mind as well as fingers." These overload and material resistance markers point to the dialectical relationship between the "composer's gesture" and the "performer's gesture." Virtuosity serves as the common ground that links them, which Boulez understood in a multifaceted way. The transdisciplinary essence of the performance techniques introduced in *Anthèmes I* helps illuminate the content of gesture in the piece and articulate its overarching compositional agenda.

Keywords: Pierre Boulez, *Anthèmes I*, Yehudi Menuhin, violin performance, virtuosity, ataxia, reflex

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Исполнительское искусство

Научная статья

***Anthèmes I* для скрипки соло П. Булеза:
к вопросу о виртуозности**

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Аннотация. В настоящей статье предлагается рассмотреть технологически-игровой аспект *Антемов I* Пьера Булеза (1991) для скрипки соло, исходя из предпосылок, ориентированных на физиологию. Необычный аналитический подход подсказан наблюдениями Иегуди Менухина, заказавшего Булезу произведение для конкурса скрипачей, и согласован с нейропатической ассоциацией композитора — атаксией, то есть потерей исполнителем двигательного контроля. Избранный ракурс способствует обоснованию технологической эксцентричности как следствия установки Булеза на выработку рефлексов у скрипача. В статье выделяются характерные инструментальные признаки, свидетельствующие о тренировке мышечной координации: вычурный звуковысотный контур, ограничивающий удобство подбора аппликатурных комбинаций,

нарочито неестественные штриховые решения, конвульсивные изменения направлений смычка в сочетании с детализированно иррегулярными динамическими контрастами и т. п. Присущая пьесе избыточность разноплановых технологических задач, зачастую идущих вразрез со скрипичной органикой, наводит на мысль о моделировании композитором атаксии в пьесе. Полагаясь на психофизическую оснащенность и мыслительную операциональность скрипача, композитор пополняет инструментальный тезаурус и формирует новый тип виртуозного произведения, требующий от исполнителя, по словам Менухина, «ловкости ума и пальцев». Отмеченные признаки перегруженности и сопротивления материала указывают на диалектику отношений в паре «жест композитора — жест исполнителя». Общей платформой, обеспечивающей их корреляцию, выступает виртуозность, понимаемая Булезом многозначно. Трансдисциплинарная подоснова оригинальных исполнительских приемов, введенных Булезом в *Антеммах I*, раскрывает содержательное наполнение жеста и декларирует, таким образом, композиционную сверхзадачу.

Ключевые слова: Пьер Булез, *Антеммы I*, Иегуди Менухин, скрипка, исполнительство, виртуозность, атаксия, рефлекс

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Introduction

The compositional legacy of Pierre Boulez, a leading figure of the post-war avant-garde, is entering a new phase of scholarly interpretation. Over recent decades, Western European musicology has yielded several comprehensive studies examining general aspects of Boulez's creative work—such as aesthetics, technique, and musical language [1; 2; 3]—as well as his individual pieces [4; 5]. Meanwhile, Russian musicology addresses the complex definitions of Boulez's style within the analytical essays of Nadezhda A. Petrusева [6] and Tatyana V. Tsaregradskaya [7; 8].

Remarkably, while focusing on Boulez's compositions—which are characterized by the highest level of performance complexity—many authors either overlook the realm of virtuosic writing or treat it as a secondary concern. At the same time, academic interest in this issue is growing steadily. This trend is reflected, in particular, in the 2016 symposium on virtuosity organized by the European Society for the Cognitive Sciences of Music (ESCOM) at the Liszt Ferenc Academy of Music in Budapest, as well as the recent publication of major works, including a monograph by David VanderHamm [9] and a collective volume edited by Louise Devenish and Cat Hope [10]. Summarizing the outcomes of the aforementioned 2016 symposium, László Stachó and Irène Deliège outlined the current issues encompassed by virtuosity. The phenomenon was examined through empirical observations, semantic interpretations, performance realization, and transdisciplinary approaches, which emphasize the interaction between “mental agility” and “sports science” [11, pp. 451–452].

Musicologist and pianist Francisco Monteiro explains the essence of this phenomenon from the perspective of embodiment. In his article “Virtuosity: Some (quasi phenomenological) thoughts,” he resorts to such vivid expressions as “the apotheoses of the body” and “prodigious works, composed in an intentional sadistic and devilish way, intended to be a torture” [12, p. 318].

The physiological factor largely determines the specific nature of virtuosity in Boulez's *Anthèmes I*, while also setting the vector for the piece's perception. It is no coincidence that Peter O'Hagan, a researcher and performer of contemporary piano repertoire, emphasizes the “mechanical virtuosity” of Boulez's solo works, which include *Anthèmes* [4].

Thus, the relevance of virtuosity as a phenomenological category is beyond doubt. The purpose of this study is to substantiate the physiological (motor-coordination and muscular) genesis of the original instrumental and performative-technical parameters in Boulez's *Anthèmes I*. The discussion focuses on the instrumental layer of this work for unaccompanied violin from a transdisciplinary perspective.

Types of Virtuosity According to Boulez

Virtuosity is one of the components of Boulez's creative worldview, repeatedly becoming the subject of his reflections. In his lectures of the early 1980s at the Collège de France, the composer concluded that the manifestations of this phenomenon in music are multifaceted. In his view, virtuosity has two dimensions: *performative* and *compositional*. True to his analytical approach, he further complicates this opposition by presenting each of its parts as a pair of subcategories. *Performative* virtuosity is embodied in the mastery of solo and collective playing. *Compositional* virtuosity, in turn, encompasses technological and instrumental types. The former shapes an immanently musical texture that does not depend on the nature of the instrument. It is given intervals chosen with flexible connections, using different scales, changing rhythmic connections, modified tempo, textural parallelisms, statistical grouping, etc. [13, p. 544]. The second type of compositional virtuosity points to the mastery of instrumental writing, that is, knowledge of the properties and potential of a specific instrument [13, pp. 545–546].

Virtuoso work in both fields—technological and instrumental—“transform compositional gesture” [14, p. 115]. In other words, it influences the composer's actions, which, as Tatyana V. Tsaregradskaya summarizes, either “possess a mediating function” or “themselves become a source of creative impulses” [8, p. 286]. From Boulez's own words, we also know that the composer's gesture can enter into complex dialectical relationships with the performer's gesture. Boulez allows for three scenarios of such relationships: 1) the gesture of the composer negates the gesture of the performer, 2) the gesture of the composer absorbs the gesture of the performer, and finally, 3) the gesture of the composer is dominated by the gesture of the performer [14, p. 117]. The French master illustrates exclusively the first case, referencing his own *Structures I*. We will focus on

how, in our view, the second model of relationships—the dominance of the composer’s gesture—is realized in Boulez’s *Anthèmes I*¹ for solo violin.

Anthèmes I: Technique and Reflexes

Anthèmes is more than a virtuosic compendium of violin techniques, and what ‘extended’ techniques there are in *Anthèmes* are used to confer a characteristic contour or colour to the musical figures it contains, in line with Boulez’s renewed interest in thematic writing [1, p. 160].

The author of the cited quote, Jonathan Goldman—one of the leading experts on Boulez’s oeuvre—managed to derive the compositional “formula” of *Anthèmes*, identifying the two most significant aspects of the work and pointing to their interdependence: thematic integration framed by virtuosity. It is no coincidence that Goldman uses the word “contour,” clearly aiming for a direct association with Boulez’s own term, *enveloppe*.²

The piece came into being in 1991 due to a coincidence of two circumstances: a request from Yehudi Menuhin to compose a mandatory work for a future violin competition over which he was to preside, and the upcoming anniversary that same year of Alfred Schlee, the head of Universal Edition. For Boulez, this was his first experience writing for unaccompanied violin. Although the commission of a competition piece established a high level of technical difficulty, this fact in itself does not confirm that *Anthèmes* belongs to the second type of gestural relationships between composer and performer. Nevertheless, in our opinion, it is precisely Boulez’s inventiveness that dictates and controls all steps of the instrumental execution. What, then, supports the view that the composer’s gesture dominates in this work?

To answer this challenging question, let us look to Yehudi Menuhin, who, in his correspondence with Boulez, characterized *Anthèmes I* as follows: “C’est une œuvre très originale présentant des problèmes techniques inusités” [2, p. 430]. Here, one must take into account Menuhin’s attitude toward the physiological

¹ Boulez, P. (1992). *Anthèmes 1: Pour violon seul* (UE 19992) [Violin score]. Universal Edition.

² The composer’s interest in the transformational nature of thematicism, in its broader interpretation, is declared in the very title of the work—*Anthèmes*. In his lectures delivered at the Collège de France between 1982 and 1985, Boulez resorts to the concepts of the infratheme and hypertheme, whose function is to structure thematic material: the infratheme carries the genetic (intervallic) code, while the hypertheme extends it over an extended temporal span.

aspect of violin playing. Recall Menuhin's post-war fascination with yoga, which directed his professional interest toward the problems of performance mechanics. In his memoirs, *Unfinished Journey*, the violinist admitted:

...the discovery of yoga and its contribution to understanding violin playing [15, p. 335];

The direction of the search established, every experience pushed me further: my own practice, exchanges with other violinists, the laws of physics, a passage to India, and of course and specifically yoga, which taught me lessons it would have taken years to elaborate for myself. All influences pointed toward less tension, more effective application of energy, the breaking down of resistance in every joint, the coordination of all motions into one motion; and illustrated the profound truth that strength comes not from strength but from the subtle comprehension of process, of proportion and balance [15, p. 250].

In other words, Menuhin had a profound sense of the violin's organic nature, as well as of any technical irregularities. He succinctly formulated the essence of the effect created by the research of *Anthèmes'* author as follows: "C'est une œuvre qui exerce autant les réflexes que la technique du violon en soi." [2, p. 428]. Emphasizing the virtuosity of Boulez's style, Menuhin captured the intentions of his creative will: within a concept as elusive as the composer's gesture, the virtuoso violinist discovered the dominance of the composer over the performer.

Menuhin's statement implies that the unusual writing in *Anthèmes* is driven by two aspects of virtuosity: the technical and the reflex-driven. We understand the technical aspect from the professional standpoint of a practicing performing musician—specifically, as a system of techniques mastered through years of practice and perceived as familiar. Conceptualizing reflexes is somewhat more complex, as this domain lies at a deeper physiological level of the unconscious and therefore cannot be part of routine self-analysis. Recall that a reflex is the primary form of nervous system activity in a living organism. Accordingly, technique depends on the variety of reflexes that predetermine the performer's technical proficiency. At the same time, the concept of a reflex is both broader and more multidimensional, whereas playing technique appears as a more highly specialized domain of knowledge. When Menuhin dissociates reflexes from technique, he most likely attributes to *Anthèmes* an extra-musical function: the training of the violinist's motor coordination.

It is highly remarkable that the training of the performer's physiological flexibility accompanying virtuosic playing resonates with the composer's associative

perception of the third, most eccentric variation of *Anthèmes*. In this section, according to Boulez's concept, it should create the impression that the violinist "ne contrôle plus ces mouvements."³ The composer compares this playing state to a clinical disorder—ataxia, that is, a disorder of muscular coordination.

Performance Aspects of the Third Variation

Turning directly to the text of the third variation of *Anthèmes* (Example 1), Boulez juxtaposes two types of textural patterns characterized by regular and irregular rhythmic pulsations, as indicated by the composer's performance marks. The variation opens with sixteenth-note durations, with each beat further subdivided into sixty-fourth notes. This extremely fine subdivision evidently serves a metric-stabilizing function, which Boulez denotes with the performance remark *régulier*. As soon as this subdivision disappears in the third bar along with the smooth dynamic pattern, the indication *très irrégulier* appears, and the new section of the variation becomes filled with spontaneous changes in dynamics and accents. The means of achieving irregularity are diverse and encompass several parameters. The unstable dynamic profile results from abrupt switching between loud and soft dynamics. Both gradations of volume have two variants: *f–ff* and *p–pp*, which is explained by practical considerations. The difference of a single nuance is determined by the varying pressure of the bow on the string during up-bow and down-bow movements: the up-bow movement is always weaker, whereas the down-bow movement, conversely, is stronger and more natural.

The dynamic specificity is significantly reinforced by the textural and rhythmic factors. As in the preceding regular section (*régulier*), the sixteenth note remains the unit of measurement. Performance complexity arises from the grace notes that are attached to some of the principal notes within the irregular (*irrégulier*) mode. Contrary to the string-bowing tradition, which dictates performing a grace note and its principal note in a single bow stroke (typically under a slur), Boulez separates them in every instance. Thereby, in this way, the violinist is required to acquire a new coordination-based performance skill. Regardless of how briefly the grace note sounds, it is subject to the same dynamic rule as the principal note: an up-bow is softer than a down-bow. At the same time, the grace note can be preceded

³ Goldman, J. (2001). *Understanding Pierre Boulez's Anthèmes: 'Creating a labyrinth out of another labyrinth'* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Université de Montréal, p. 122.

Example 1. *Anthèmes I*, third variation, bars 46–64

by a note featuring any of the four dynamic variants and bowing directions. Another bowing configuration includes several successive strokes in the same direction—either exclusively up-bow or exclusively down-bow. Here, a dynamic alternative also exists: either with a change in nuance or with its retention. The most paradoxical combination appears in bar 54 (*Example 2*), featuring two consecutive up-bow movements—first at a *piano* nuance (the principal note) and then at *forte* (the grace note)—as this combination appears to “disrupt” neural pathways and blocks playing inertia.

Example 2. *Anthèmes I*, bar 54

To this, two further observations concerning the interaction of sound production and dynamics may be added. In an additional performance note, Boulez requests the violinist to lengthen loud sounds and shorten soft ones in accordance with the required intensity. It is worth noting that the parameter of bowing itself is entirely irregular.

Based on the foregoing, three rules of rhythmic-dynamic relationships in the third variation of *Anthèmes* can be derived:

1. Notes performed successively with alternating bow directions always conform to the rule “an up-bow is softer than a down-bow.”
2. Notes performed at a *forte* dynamic must sound longer than notes at a *piano* nuance.
3. Principal notes played with a down-bow are always performed at a *fortissimo* dynamic.

These rules clearly demonstrate Boulez’s consistently rational approach to shaping the dynamic-articulation profile. By managing the violinist’s actions, the composer models ataxia so authentically that the visual impression of the performance evokes suggestions of involuntary, spasmodic playing movements by the musician. By fully embracing the operational logic prescribed by Boulez, the violinist undoubtedly transforms their own motor apparatus.

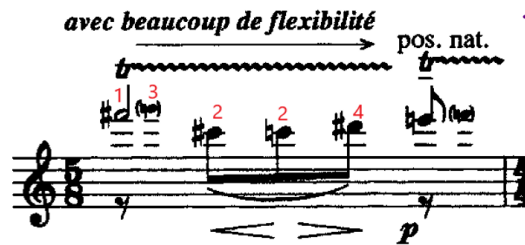
Specific Compositional Tasks

In *Anthèmes*, Menuhin notes, among other things, the scrupulously detailed and verified writing, characterizing it with the oxymoronic expression “Je n’ai jamais vu ‘stable’ instable” [2, p. 429]. Undoubtedly, Boulez provided grounds for such an ironic turn of phrase: for instance, his performance remark in bar 92, *assez irrégulier, mais rythmique*, also did not escape Menuhin’s attention. It seems that in the case of *Anthèmes I*, the abundance of performance indications in the score restricts the virtuoso performer’s freedom so severely that it oppresses their will, challenging the competition violinist with sophisticated “assignments.” In other words, the composer’s gesture in *Anthèmes* is primary in relation to the performer’s gesture.

One of the prominent characteristics of *Anthèmes* is the awkwardness of learning it. This is all the more surprising given that the piece’s repertoire of techniques and technical difficulties is limited and even quite traditional. It comprises *legato*,

staccato, *ricochet*, as well as trills, chords, and passagework. The timbral palette is enriched by the localized use of *glissando* and *sul ponticello* techniques. In *Anthèmes*, one will find neither microtonality nor extended techniques. Nevertheless, at times the piece resembles a complex puzzle, which is precisely what likely fascinates the violinist.

The pitch layer demands no less careful reading and analytical immersion. The issue of fingering selection lies not in the realm of performance preferences, as is typical—namely, string timbre, articulation quality, convenience, or beauty of intonation—but rather in the very possibility of realizing the musical text, its “playability.” Let us demonstrate this with a specific example. In the aforementioned third variation, there is a two-voice element consisting of a long trill and a three-note slurred motif. The continuity of the melodic line forces the performer to execute the trill using a fingering that is highly unusual in violin practice—skipping a finger. Meanwhile, the omitted finger must smoothly articulate the melody. This element is accompanied by Boulez’s performance note *avec beaucoup de flexibilité*, which, besides agogics, may also hint at the literal flexibility of the fingers (*Example 3*).



Example 3. *Anthèmes I*, bar 58 (fingering by the author)

What is this if not the formation of a new reflex? Regarding a similar awkwardness in the first variation, Yehudi Menuhin wrote: “il y a des doubles-notes presque impossibles à soutenir, déjà à la mesure 3 c’est compliqué – à moins que vous permettiez des petites interruptions dans le chant des voix.” [2, p. 430]. It is noteworthy that the described fragments are variable not only in terms of pitch and register. Crucially, this variability is observed at the level of fingering: on this occasion, the finger combination must be altered during the course of the trill.

Let us supplement the list of the puzzling characteristics of *Anthèmes* with another observation by Menuhin, this time concerning the second—pizzicato—variation of the piece (*Example 4*). Because of the relatively muted sonority of violin *pizzicato*, it is not a self-sufficient technique, despite its idiomatic character. In virtuoso pieces of the Romantic era, it is typically combined with other techniques. One need only recall a few examples of this technique’s application within the Romantic violin repertoire: the virtuoso variation from Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst’s arrangement of the Irish song *The Last Rose of Summer*, where the theme, presented *pizzicato*, is accompanied by an arpeggiated bow-drawn accompaniment; or fragments from Niccolò Paganini’s *Introduzione e Variazioni sul tema “Nel cor più non mi sento”*, derived from Giovanni Paisiello’s opera *La molinara*. Menuhin considers an essential condition for plucking sound production in the *pizzicato* variation of *Anthèmes* to be the search for a resonance resembling a “d’un ‘cimbalon’ [sic] hongrois.”⁴

Rapide ♩ = 156, très rythmique, rigide

15 pizz. mf f sempre

22 mf

31 mf f ff mf f

36 ff mf mf f sempre

43 Libre arco ppp > pppp gliss. pas trop lent sim. ppp > pppp ppp > pppp

Example 4. *Anthèmes I*, second variation

⁴ Presumably, this refers to the Hungarian cimbalom.

Achieving a loud dynamic nuance at a fast tempo is evidently possible only through such an approach. The clarity of the *pizzicato* attack and the fullness of sonority depend on specific left-hand positional choices—namely, limiting the height of the position and selecting more resonant strings.

Conclusion

Menuhin famously bestowed the title of “sacred monster” [16, p. 148] upon the figure of the virtuoso. Applied to *Anthèmes*, it can be argued that romantic virtuosity—understood as “the boundless capacities of the man-machine, displaying ever newer and ever more fabulous technical possibilities without the slightest effort...” [17, p. 117]—is effectively negated, rendering the concept of stage prowess meaningless. The effect of “taming” the material, which simultaneously evokes sympathy and empathy from the audience, fails to occur. The once-prevalent notion of sublime virtuosity as the “fusion of the performer with the instrument”⁵ undergoes critical re-evaluation. The composer transcends the boundaries of the “sublime,” prompting the performer toward dissonant stage behavior. If it can no longer be justified through artistic flawlessness or audience sympathy, what, then, legitimizes the new virtuosity of *Anthèmes*?

The technical arguments presented above confirm the piece’s angularity and difficulty. Undoubtedly, performance complexities serve as a means to expand the domain of virtuosity. First, they foster an immersive experience into novel playing states. Second, they enrich the violinist’s reflex spectrum through rapid, frequent shifts in technique. These shifts are unpredictable and exceptionally difficult to memorize. Unsurprisingly, Menuhin doubted the piece would ever be performed from memory. Third, they offer the violinist a journey through surprises and discoveries. As Menuhin summarized, the piece demands “une agilité d’esprit et des doigts très grande” [2, p. 430]. Yet, the composer’s vision of his work appears entirely different. An audio recording of his masterclass reveals a striking naturalness.⁶ This is evidenced by his effortless humming of passages from a purely

⁵ VanderHamm, D. (2017). *The social construction of virtuosity: musical labor and the valuation of skill in the age of electronic media* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of North Carolina, p. 9. <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/downloads/47429922r?locale=en>

⁶ ClaudiaSchaerViolin. (2017, January 5). *Pierre Boulez discusses Anthèmes I, with violinist Claudia Schaer* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/shgFRqx2-sA?si=YKNpNqIvIoKEowdW>

instrumental part. The organic ease with which Boulez does this sets a new benchmark for virtuosity. It simultaneously instills hope that reaching this standard is indeed possible.

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