The world of classical music lost two significant composers this year. Sir Peter Maxwell Davies died on the 14th March aged 81 and Pierre Boulez passed away on the 6th January at the age of 90. This year’s SOUND Festival decided to celebrate the contribution of both men to music. On the 20th October, the opening concert of the Festival featuring Rolf Hind paid tribute to the piano music of Maxwell Davies while on the 5th November - the final Saturday of the Festival was devoted to a whole day of events in various city centre venues celebrating the life and music of Pierre Boulez. The first of these events took place in the Belmont Film House where Dr Edward Campbell, head of Aberdeen University Music gave an introductory talk before the screening of a film by Roger Graef entitled Who is Pierre Boulez? The film included a full performance of Éclat.

Dr Campbell’s excellent talk was centred on the composer’s life and work also dispelling many common preconceptions regarding Boulez. He talked about the period in the composer’s life when he spent more time as a major conductor putting composition on the back burner even if he did not give it up entirely. On the cinema screen we could see the covers of numerous recordings of music which Boulez conducted across an amazingly wide repertoire. He spoke about the relationship between Boulez and Messiaen; how he broke off studies with Messiaen and went to study with Leibowitz instead. Being a man of strong principles and opinions, it was not long before Boulez fell out of sympathy with Leibowitz as well. Boulez’s connections with composers like Stockhausen and John Cage were also discussed. Boulez always remained his own man, though later on he was often very generous in his support of younger musicians.

In 1946, Boulez was appointed musical director of Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renaud’s Paris Theatre Company. We saw pictures of them together on the screen. It was at this time that Boulez gained a firm grounding in the principals of conducting which was to be very helpful later on, both in his work with the great composers and in keeping a firm hold on the complexities of his own music. We were to see many examples of that in the two films screened on Saturday. Other areas of art exerted major influences on Boulez’s music, the paintings and drawings of Paul Klee for example or the poetry of Mallarmé. These were important as was theatre, film and even architecture – something that was touched on in the second film later in the day. The warmth and enthusiasm of Edward Campbell’s presentation made it seem that I had almost got to know Boulez personally.
The performance of Éclat in the first film gave us deep insight into the composer’s working methods with his performers as they performed this exciting piece. The rhythms, colours and timbres of Boulez’s music came through with startling clarity and immediacy on the bigger screen.

From the Belmont Film House it was on to the upstairs studio in the Lemon Tree where pianist Peter O’Hagan welcomed us in to the sounds of piano music by J. S. Bach. He explained that Bach was a favourite composer with Boulez. Before a performance of what exists of the Third Piano Sonata of Boulez, Peter O’Hagan explained the backgrounds to his composition of the piano music, how he worked on it and what it looked like on the page. He gave us a brief tour of Formant 2, Trope, talking about the spiral structure of the music that even matched the binding of the Universal edition. Dealing with Constellation and its all important resonances O’Hagan spoke about the gestures and drama of this music. His performance of the Sonata had all of that along with dazzling crispness and clarity. I was particularly intrigued by his pedal work and how it was such an important part of the overall structure of the music as it was employed to extend or clip short the resonances of the music. The impression O’Hagan’s performance gave was one of total control over everything - the music itself, the instrument and even the sound ambience of the venue. I am sure that Boulez himself who in the film performances we saw seemed to want to be in total control of every detail of the music would have been delighted with O’Hagan’s performance. After the Sonata, we were sent joyfully on our way to the strains of Bach’s music once more. It was off to The Society of Advocates Library for a concert featuring long-time festival favourite, flautist Richard Craig – more about that in a separate review however. From there it was a bit of a rush to get to the Salvation Army Citadel in time to hear two more important Boulez chamber compositions: Dialogue de l’Ombre Double for saxophone played by Richard Ingram with sound diffusion of pre-recorded saxophone music controlled by Pete Stollery followed by Anthèmes II for solo violin played by Mieko Kanno teamed with electroacoustics derived from violin sounds controlled by Tim Cooper.

Richard Ingram used two saxophones for his performance lending an extra level of colour to different sections of the work. The initial live saxophone playing carried the full impact of Boulez’s rhythms although within a smoothly flowing line. There was a more spiky section nearer the end although it was accomplished with an amazingly long held note to finish. The pre-recorded saxophone sounds came at us from all directions but for the most part these were separate from the live solo allowing Ingram to swap instruments or have sips of water. Towards the end of the work both the live and recorded parts came nicely together.

Anthèmes II was quite different. Here the electronic sounds operated almost like an orchestral backing often mirroring Meiko Kanno’s virtuoso playing or the other way round. Meiko’s precision response to the electronics was absolutely brilliant making for a thoroughly exciting performance.

From the Citadel, it was back to the Belmont Film House where we saw Barrie Gavin’s 1983 film Arena – Boulez Now. It concentrated in marvellous detail on rehearsals of Répons in the experimental studio in the Pompidou Centre in Paris. We say Boulez’s techniques of providing cues for his different solo musicians using numbered finger signs because he said they were too far away to deal with more complex conducting signs. At one point Boulez said, “No that will not do. There were some serious mistakes and yes Alain, you were wrong too”. However all that was done in a kindly way not at all like Klemperer who I once saw roaring furiously at a musician in a BBC film about conductors.
We had plenty of time after the second film before going on down Belmont Street to Seventeen, where Dr Campbell and Peter O’Hagan talked together about the launch of their new book Pierre Boulez – Studies. This allowed for an interesting discussion to develop among the music enthusiasts who were there including several contemporary composers and performers. I’m sure that given the chance and forgetting about parking wardens we would all still be there. It was a compelling end to a fantastic day.