# Barbican’s Pierre Boulez centenary concert unveils bold new works despite sparse audience



In an evening marked by artistic innovation overshadowed by a lacklustre audience turnout, the Barbican's centenary celebration of the influential composer Pierre Boulez showcased the Ensemble intercontemporain and raised questions about contemporary engagement with avant-garde music. The ensemble, renowned for its commitment to new compositions, delivered a programme that, while dynamic and exciting, struggled to attract a significant crowd. This sentiment mirrored Boulez's own thoughts on audience engagement: “You always find 200 fanatics… What is important is to increase the number,” a reflection more relevant than ever in today’s fragmented cultural landscape.

The concert opened with Hannah Kendall’s "shouting forever into the receiver," a work that has already garnered acclaim, winning an Ivor Novello Award in 2023. Kendall’s composition is a poignant exploration of the concept of the “Plantation Machine,” articulated by the Cuban writer Antonio Benítez-Rojo. The piece uniquely incorporates elements of pitched white noise alongside fractured communication, using a mix of French and English dialogues delivered through walkie-talkies. The most striking moment came when the orchestration paused, leaving soft, mechanical music boxes and harmonicas to create an ethereal, haunting atmosphere—a musical commentary on the cyclical nature of history and memory.

Following Kendall's work was the much-anticipated world premiere of Cassie Kinoshi’s "[Untitled]." Kinoshi, a prominent figure in the contemporary music scene, brought an energetic flair to the evening, blending live turntablism, visuals from artist Julien Creuzet, and choreography from tyroneisaacstuart. The collaboration resulted in a piece that was both sonically rich and visually arresting. Critics noted its intricate layers, as the orchestra supported NikNak’s skillful scratching, creating a vibrant tapestry of sound. The work showed Kinoshi’s ambition to intertwine diverse musical elements, culminating in a thrilling climax where the orchestra fell silent, leaving only the dynamic loop patterns from the turntable.

Boulez's own work, "Sur Incises," provided a dramatic contrast after the interval. Conductor Nicolò Umberto Foron led the ensemble through passages that oscillated between precise rhythmic patterns and freefalling sonorities. While his music has often been associated with complex structures and intellectual rigor, this performance highlighted its emotional depth and textual richness, yet elicited mixed reactions from the audience—a reminder of Boulez’s complex legacy and the challenges facing contemporary classical music.

Despite the modest attendance, the evening was anything but ordinary. Critics have hailed the Barbican’s commitment to showcasing pioneering compositions and celebrating figures like Boulez, whose music continues to influence generations. The juxtaposition of powerful themes—historical memory in Kendall’s work and contemporary identity in Kinoshi's—suggests a vital discussion around the relevance of avant-garde music today.

As the Barbican continues its exploration of 20th-century musical legacies and contemporary interpretations, the challenge remains: how to draw in new audiences captivated by the complexities of modern composition. For now, it seems the fanatics will persist, holding onto their passion for challenging music in hopes of inspiring a broader community of listeners.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/28/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain-review-barbican-london), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/28/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain-review-barbican-london)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/28/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain-review-barbican-london), [[4]](https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/barbican-announces-spring-summer-2025-classical-music-season)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2025/event/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/13/ensemble-intercontemporain-bruno-mantovani-review)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/28/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain-review-barbican-london> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2025/may/28/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain-review-barbican-london> - A review of the Barbican's centenary celebration of Pierre Boulez, featuring Ensemble intercontemporain conducted by Nicolò Umberto Foron. The performance included Hannah Kendall's 'shouting forever into the receiver', Cassie Kinoshi's world premiere of '[Untitled]', and Boulez's 'Sur Incises'. The review highlights the innovative and thrilling nature of the programme, despite a modest audience turnout.
3. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2025/event/cassie-kinoshi-x-ensemble-intercontemporain> - An announcement of the Barbican's event on 27 May 2025, featuring Ensemble intercontemporain performing works by Pierre Boulez, including 'Sur Incises', and a new composition by Cassie Kinoshi. The programme explores themes of slavery and the Caribbean experience, incorporating dance, electronics, turntables, and visuals.
4. <https://www.barbican.org.uk/our-story/press-room/barbican-announces-spring-summer-2025-classical-music-season> - The Barbican's press release detailing its spring-summer 2025 classical music season, including the world premiere of Cassie Kinoshi's new work with Ensemble intercontemporain on 27 May 2025. The season also features other performances, such as Luke Styles' 'No Friend but the Mountains' with the London Symphony Orchestra.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/apr/29/ensemble-intercontemporain-pintscher-barbican-review-boulez> - A review of Ensemble intercontemporain's performance at the Barbican in April 2015, conducted by Matthias Pintscher. The concert celebrated Pierre Boulez's 90th birthday with a dynamic and dazzling programme, showcasing the ensemble's expertise and the sensuousness of Boulez's compositions.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/nov/13/ensemble-intercontemporain-bruno-mantovani-review> - A review of Ensemble intercontemporain's performance at Wigmore Hall in November 2014, conducted by Bruno Mantovani. The concert featured pieces by Mantovani, Schoenberg, and Dallapiccola, delivering a bracing and exhilarating evening of experimental energy.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/feb/23/ensemble-intercontemporain-review-wigmore-hall-london> - A review of Ensemble intercontemporain's performance at Wigmore Hall in February 2016, celebrating the 40th anniversary of the ensemble founded by Pierre Boulez. The concert featured modernist masterpieces played with authority and sparkle, including a new work by composer Aurélio Edler-Copes.