

Hans Rudolf Zeller's "Mallarmé and Serialist Thought" Reconsidered. How Mallarmé Influenced the Serialist Thought? And Did He Influence It at All?

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Hans Rudolf Zeller attempts to find the sources of the serialism in Mallarmé's Le Livre, especially in connection with the Third Piano Sonata by Boulez. Mallarmé's idea, however, also left the traces in some of Boulez's theoretical concepts concerning the author's anonymity and withdrawal of all auctorial traces from the work/composition.

Keywords: literature and music / French poetry / Mallarmé, Stéphane: *Le livre* / Zeller, Hans Rudolf / Barthes, Roland / Boulez, Pierre / serialism / open form / work-in-progress

Hans Rudolf Zeller's text was originally published in German in 1960 and in English translation by Margaret Shenfield in 1964.¹ Zeller is not especially known as the theoretician of serial music. He edited the famous book by Dieter Schnebel (1972) and also wrote about John Cage (1978). It is obviously his interest in Stéphane Mallarmé, i. e. in his *Le Livre*-project that motivated him to look for the roots of serialism in Mallarmé's thought.

We cannot present in details the essence of Mallarmé's *Le Livre*-project but here are some comments on it that would help to understand the liaison between it and Zeller's notion of serialism. First, the announcement for Klaus Scherubel's presentation of this "book", published in 2004 by Printed Matter in New York:

For more than thirty years, French poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842 – 1898) was engaged with a highly ambitious project that he called, simply, *Le Livre* (The Book). He envisioned The Book as a cosmic text-architecture: an extremely flexible structure that would reveal nothing short of "all existing relations between everything." This "Grand Oeuvre," wholly freed from the subjectivity of its author and con-

taining the sum of all books was, for Mallarmé, the essence of all literature and at the same time a “very ordinary” book. The realization of this “pure” work that he planned to publish in an edition of precisely 480,000 copies never progressed beyond its conception and a detailed analysis of structural and material questions relating to publication and presentation. Yet to Mallarmé, *The Book*, which was to found the “true cult of the modern era,” was by no means a failure. “It happens on its own,” he explained of *The Book*’s unique action in one of his final statements. (<http://www.e-flux.com/announcements/mallarme-the-book/>; 19. 12. 2014)

And here is another explanation of the project by Jacques Polieri:

Mallarmé attempted to write an absolute book, the quintessence of all literature and all reality – the Total Book. The world exists to arrive at a book, he said. This book would be proclaimed by a sacred ceremony of predetermined detail, a proof as well as a communion. The form of *The Book* can be described briefly: four books, which can be ordered as two pairs, make up *The Book*. Each book is subdivided into five volumes (not only interchangeable within each book, but also from book to book). Thus, Mallarmé envisions the mixing and exchange of the volumes of one book with those of another. Each volume of each book is made up of three groups of eight pages – 24 pages in all. Each page is discrete and may be further broken down, having 18 lines of 12 words. Thus, words, lines, pages, pagegroups, volumes, and books all may be shuffled into new combinations. This disposition offers a multitude of possible readings.

Mallarmé even proposes that each page be read not only in the normal horizontal way (within the page’s verticality), but backwards, or vertically, or in a selective order of omissions, or diagonally. Mallarmé imagines another important structural inversion in the reading of the total *Book*: the five volumes form a block. The reader looks through the pages, and reads according to depth. Each line of each page helps form a new vertical page. Paging is therefore three-dimensional. This absolute integrity of the container implies integral organization of the content. (Polieri, s.p.)

At Polieri’s suggestion Jacques Scherer also realized the scenic adaptation of *Le Livre* with the title *Quelque chose ou rien* (1977 X–XI; the whole text of the adaptation: 387–411)

And yet another – and last – information about Scherer’s 1977 edition of *Le Livre* which is partly taken from the back cover of this edition:

Some two hundred pages of the “Book” ... have profoundly affected mallarméen studies. They are one of the most extraordinary writings ever. According to Mallarmé all literature and all reality must end up in this total book. Through a metaphysical ballet, the “Book” combines, in a strange but fundamental approach, the research of structures and the research of poetry. Analysis of Jacques Scherer of Mallarmé’s text explains the organization of meetings, quasi-religious, where the poet was planning to review the work to assistants who assembled into a ceremony, with amazing financial base and, as far as possible, contribute to the birth

of images and myths in a coherent whole. This "book" has shocked many minds, because it is a limitation of the mind. Like God, like life, it is absurd, unthinkable; it exists without existing indeed like beings in literature. In fact, at the same time it is an assemblage of words, but also proclaimed foundation and summary of the world ... This book does not begin or end: at best it is pretending to do so. (Scherer *Le 'Livre'* s.p.; all citations were translated to English by the author.)

The references on Zeller's study are rather rare. I will quote just one by Mary Breatnach, which is even openly critical. Breatnach considers that "one of the most astonishing and regrettable errors committed by some of those who have dealt so far with the subject of Mallarmé's influence on contemporary music – [is] that of mistaking the poet for some sort of composer *manqué*" (21). Moreover, she puts here Zeller on the first place! (67 note 10).² But Zeller himself was obviously aware of it. He admits – almost at the very beginning of his study – that he is aware of the danger of "distorting" Mallarmé's work "by referring only to the contemporary musical situation [i. e. the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s – N. G.], and transforming Mallarmé [...] into a hitherto little recognised predecessor of 'serialists'. [...] In fact, the title of this article should really end with the question mark." (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 5)

But what is for Zeller "serialist thought" (or "das serielle Denken")? Before we try to define this important term from the context of Zeller's article, let us mention some definitions, which could serve us to compare their meaning with (eventual) Zeller's conception of serialism:

1. Ernst Krenek treats serialism as the prolongation of the Schoenberg's 12-tone method: "Since the 1950s when the serialization of additional parameters became common, the term *serialism* has been used to designate the application of serial technique [i. e. 12-tone method – N. G.] to more than the one parameter of pitch." (671)

2. For Robert P. Morgan "the term [serial music] is reserved for music that extends classical Schoenbergian twelve-tone pitch techniques and, especially, applies serial control to other musical elements, such as duration. Such music [...] is often distinguished from twelve-tone serialism as 'integral' or 'total' serialism. It is usually characterized by a high degree of pre-compositional planning and thus also of compositional determinacy." (742)

3. And for David H. Cope "serialization" is "the ordered and intellectual logic applied to any or all aspects of compositional technique. This term no longer applies only to twelve-tone mechanics." (*New Directions* 242)

These definitions of "serialism", "serial music", "serial thinking", "serial composition" etc. are here intentionally selected to refer to the time period when serialism appeared, primarily as a variant of Schoenberg's

12-tone technique (i. e. the beginning and the first half of the 1950s). In some relevant terminological researches the meaning of the term is not restricted at its usage in the fifties (cf. Noé 424; Blumröder 404ff – chapter III). The subtitle of the journal *Die Reihe*, which was published from 1955 to 1962 in German (from 1957 to 1968 in English), is *Information über serielle Musik*. But the term “serial music” has been avoided in American edition: *A periodical devoted to development in contemporary music*.

However, there are also broader meanings, not restricted to music only, like this one:

[S]erial thinking is the concept of creating artificial forms based on a special relationship between individuality (uniqueness) and similarity, focusing on avoiding repetition, aiming for completeness, tending toward permanent innovation in both theory and practice, and revolving around the idea of structural mediation between different quantities, qualities, types and classes of elements; more than enough for any artist to work with in a never-ending spiralling movement up to infinite progress. (Bandur 7)

It is interesting to note that Bandur does not mention Zeller’s study or Mallarmé. However, the “serialist thought” has in fact never been exactly defined by Zeller himself. He writes at the very beginning: “The music conventionally known as ‘serial’ with its determined struggle to evolve an absolute language, new principles of formation and a more suitable conception of musical work, has indeed more common with Mallarmé’s outlook than has contemporary literature, which is essentially preoccupied with reportage.” (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 5) He elaborates these “new principles of formation and a more suitable conception of musical work” as the “forms based on permutation-principle”, according to which “the formal layout of a work which can no longer be elucidated by means of a scheme which would only be valid for one of its performances” (18). And he also mentions “multi-polar musical forms” (24).

Both of these definitions (if we can take them as such) refer much more to *aleatoric practices* at the end of the fifties (to the “variable form” of Boulez’ *Third sonata* [1955–57; revised 1963] or to the “polyvalent” [“mehrdeutige”] form of Stockhausen’s *Klavierstück XI* (1956) for example [Gieseler 139–146]) as to *the “pure” serialism* which might be considered as the precedent of aleatoric practices.

But Mallarmé’s anticipation seems to be over-interpreted too: Except for Boulez’ liaison with Mallarmé, especially in his *Third sonata* and its striving to author’s anonymity (Boulez, “Sonate” 163), there is hardly a single “case” that can be treated as the concrete result of Mallarmé’s anticipations. This proves the chronological context between *Un coup de dés jamais*

n'abolira le hasard (1897) and *Le Livre*, the period between 1955 and 1957 in which Boulez began to work on his *Third sonata*. Boulez relates his *Sonata* directly to his reading of Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*. However, as he was still working on it (and – as we shall see later – it has never been completed), Jacques Scherer published in 1957 his study with Mallarmé's hitherto unknown notes for *Le Livre*. And Boulez was astonished by the structural similarities between Mallarmé's project and his own *Sonata* – although the *Sonata*, according to Boulez's own words, previously leaned on *Un Coup de dés* (Boulez, "Sonate" 155–156).

Actually in this well-known text about the *Third sonata* (Boulez, "Sonate")³ Boulez does not quote from *Un coup de dés* or, as Mary Breatnach remarks, gives any "indication of a direct relationship between the verbal structures on which it is based and the musical structures of the *Third Piano Sonata*. He does, however, quote at length from Mallarmé's preface and makes it clear that the general principles expressed there played a very important part in the evolution of his own creative thinking." (81) But it is anyhow very difficult to explain Mallarmé's ideas and concepts as the roots of the *Third sonata*. This is also proved by Iwanka Stoianowa's efforts to bind the *Third sonata* more with *Le Livre* than with *Un Coup de dés*: "La *Troisième sonate* [...] apparait comme une transposition musicale, une mise en musique des projets mallarméens du Livre." (*Pli selon Pli* 75);⁴ but her arguments seem to be left at the purely general level: "Toutes [...] particularités de la sonate de Boulez sont en réalité une 'mise en musique' des principes mallarméens." Or: "[L]'oeuvre essay [...] de se transformer en un 'lieu' [...] de production d'une signification toujours en expansion" (*Un Coup de dés* 10).

However, there is still another problem with the classification of the *Third sonata* according to the poetics of Mallarmé's *Le Livre*. The *Third sonata* is, according to G. W. Hopkins and Paul Griffiths, a "work in progress": "Only two of the sonata's movements have so far been published, the remainder having been withdrawn into the category of 'work in progress'." (100) It is however interesting to note that Griffiths alone never mentions "work in progress" in his numerous writings about Boulez and his *Third sonata*. The piece is simply left unfinished, it has remained as "torso" (Hirsbrunner 101). Although Josef Häusler places the "work in progress" at the border with the open form, because it allows to its author to continue the work on composition again after he stopped it once or more times (56 – many revisions of the pieces in opus by Boulez should therefore also belong to the "works in progress"), the *Third sonata* has – as a variable open form – a fixed elaboration of its parts (some of which are called "formants") and it remains a secret why Boulez did not compose them entirely and, of course, how he would have composed it. There is no need to point

out that *Le Livre* is real “work in progress” because it cannot be finished, it cannot be “closed”. It is no wonder that Zeller agrees with it, especially when he quotes as the motto of his study Paul Valéry’s (*Variété*, III [1936]) idea about “essentially infinite work” (“*une oeuvre essentiellement infinie*”, dont les oeuvres réalisées ou réalisable ne soient que les fragments, les essais, les études préparatoires. (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 5)

Mais celui-ci faisait impérieusement supposer tout un système de pensée rapportée à la poésie, traitée, exercée et reprise sans cesse *comme une oeuvre essentiellement infinie*, dont les oeuvres réalisées ou réalisable ne soient que les fragments, les essais, les études préparatoires. (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 5)

As it has often been observed, Mallarmé imagined *Le Livre* as the “work” that is completely free of its author’s subjectivity, its authorship should be anonymous. And at the end of his essay about the *Third sonata* Boulez writes:

Form is becoming autonomous and tending towards an absolute character hitherto unknown; purely personal accident is now rejected as intrusion. The great works of which I have been speaking – those of Mallarmé and Joyce – are the data for a new age in which texts are becoming, as it were, “anonymous”, “speaking for themselves without any author’s voice”. If I had to name the motive underlying the work that I have been trying to describe, it would be the search for “anonymity” [*anonymat*] of this kind. (Boulez, “Sonata” 163)

This statement should be discussed from three points of view:

1. As Zeller writes, “the tonal language became a dead language” (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 6) and composer’s duty is to find the language that could substitute this dead tonality. One of the ways is the striving towards anti-subjectivity, towards anonymous authorship of the musical piece. Zeller asks himself whether there is “any event in modern literature comparable with the decline of tonality” (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 7). He writes about “language crisis”, “language criticism” and “meta-language”. “And the basic turning-point concerned an express thematisation of language as the first and only ‘subject’ of poetic writing.” (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 7) Here we must admit that Mallarmé’s “thematization” in *Un Coup de dés* is entirely different from the “thematization” proposed (and questionably realized) in *Le Livre*. Not to mention Joyce, who is for Boulez the next inspiration in his search for anonymity. These three cases (*Un Coup de dés*, *Le Livre* and – let us say – *Finnegans Wake*) are so different as documents of “a language” that it is hardly possible to accept any concept of language as their common nominator.⁵

2. Should not the author’s anonymity be related to the *death of the author*? Commenting his view on the death of the author Roland Barthes refers just to Mallarmé and points out:

Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and to foresee in its full extent the necessity to substitute language itself for the person who until then had been supposed to be its owner. For him, for us too, it is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality (not at all to be confused with the castrating objectivity of the realist novelist), to reach that point where only language acts, "performs", and not "me". Mallarmé's entire poetics consists in suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is [...] to restore the place of the reader). (143)

3. This is obviously the reason why *Le Livre* could not be finished, closed, treated as a "work-object"; it is "work in progress" indeed. And here we come to the insurmountable obstacle if we want to name the counterpart of "the restored place of reader" in the music that apparently wants to follow Mallarmé's poetics. "Language crisis", "language criticism" and "meta-language" (to remind us of Zeller) obviously cannot be solved in music if we follow the coordinates of Mallarmé's poetics. They can be only challenges with unpredictable results!

What about the fate of these (utopian?) ideas today when we claim that the present age favours again the closure of the open, ambiguous works and looks for the possibility of expressing subjective, personal feelings? I cannot but agree with Lydia Goehr's "conceptual imperialism" which implies the favouring of only one type of (musical) work as relevant:

It all began around 1800 when musicians began to reconstruct musical history to make it look as if musicians had always thought about their activities in modern terms. Even if it was not believed that early musicians had thought explicitly in these terms, the assumption was that they would have, had circumstances allowed them to do so. Reconstructing or rewriting the past was and remains one of the most characteristic ways for persons to legitimate their present, for the process aids in the general forgetfulness that things could be different from how they presently are. (245)

It would be interesting to attempt to follow the fate of Mallarmé's project in literature only, independently of music.⁶ Although this would require the research that exceeds the aim of this study, it might be useful to remind of the following opinion by Nadežda Čačinović:

"The book" allows a different approach. Ambiguities can be artfully exploited. The figurative use of the "book" and new concepts of the book are sometimes difficult to distinguish, even in the broadest figures: "The Book of the World," "The Book of Nature." At the first level, it seems simple: the world is like a book; we can read it, and it makes sense. However, seen the other way; a book is like the world, it contains the world, it justifies the world: the world leads us to "The Book." Instead of such permutations, we are looking for the worldliness of books, their existing role, connected or not with what they are "about." (16)

But – to come to the question mark which should stay at the end of the title of Zeller’s article from a different angle – the leaning of music on poetry (or poetry on music) is always, to paraphrase Zeller, “separated by the glass partition [that] makes Mallarmé’s relevance difficult to understand in musical terms” (*Mallarmé and Serialist Thought* 5). Although this separation makes possible to music to look at the poetry (and poetry to look at the music), they can hardly technically amalgamate into a kind of something in which their individual differences would be unnoticeable. If it would be possible to remove this “glass partition”, the situation would be entirely different. But how would it be possible to remove it?

NOTES

¹ The translation is perfect except for the title. “Das Denken” in the original is understood as *the process* that produces the *thought*. Therefore, “Thinking” would be much better than the “Thought”.

² Breatnach also puts three studies by Iwanka Stoïanova in this “critical” category: see Stoïanova, “Pli selon pli”, “La Troisième” and “Boulez et Mallarmé”.

³ Boulez’s “Sonate” was published for the first time in 1964, after the German version (Boulez, “Zu meiner”) which is based on his lecture before the performance of the *Third sonata* at the International Courses for New Music in Darmstadt in 1959. The French version is a bit different from the German one and it is better to use it because it is the text prepared for the publishing and not for the lecture.

⁴ Cf. also Sonnenfeld 1998: “What matters to Boulez in Mallarmé’s ‘Le Livre’ is reading *as performance*.” (114)

⁵ Carpenter compares *Le Livre* with *Ulysses*, but without any concern with the language, although he also unconvincingly mentions *Finnegans Wake*, which is “patently the Mallarméan ‘Livre’, with its impersonal hero, [...] its supranational English, [...] its indefiniteness of time and space ...” (200)

⁶ Cf. for example Greer Cohn.

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»Mallarmé in serialistična misel« Hansa Rudolfa Zellerja na preizkušnji – Kako, če sploh, je Mallarmé vplival na serialistično misel?

Ključne besede: Hans Rudolf Zeller, Stephane Mallarmé, *Le Livre*, Roland Barthes, Pierre Boulez, serializem, odprta forma, delo v nastajanju

Zellerjev članek, izvorno objavljen leta 1960, v angleškem prevodu pa štiri leta pozneje, je bil dvomom podvržen že pri samem avtorju, ki je – skoraj na začetku – priznal, da se zaveda nevarnosti »uničenja« Mallarméjevega dela »s sklicevanjem zgolj na sodobno glasbeno situacijo [torej na konec 50. in začetek 60. let 20. stoletja] in spreminjanjem Mallarméja [...] v doslej malokrat priznanega predhodnika ‚serialistov‘. [...] Pravzaprav bi se moral naslov članka končati z vprašajem.« Poleg tega, tako Zeller, »instiktivna, naivna koncepcija glasbe in literature kot dveh področij umetniške dejavnosti, ki ju ločuje vitraž, otežuje razumevanje Mallarméjevega pomena v glasbenih terminih«. Kakorkoli že – kot razlog, ki naj upraviči odsotnost vprašaja, Zeller kritizira literaturo, ki spremlja dobo serializma, saj da je bistveno preveč osredotočena na reportažnost, namesto da bi sledila Mallarméjevi več kot pol stoletja oddaljeni viziji. Za Zellerja je »serialna« glasba, ki se umešča v »odločno borbo za razvoj absolutnega jezika, novih principov in primernejšo koncepcijo glasbenega dela«. Ob tem se osredinja zlasti na Mallarméjevi deli, ki ustrezata njegovi teoriji, in sicer *Un Coup de Dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* in nedokončani (pa tudi nedokončljivi) projekt *Le Livre*, katerega vpliv izpričuje kompozicijska poetika Pierra Bouleza s konca 50. in začetka 60. let 20. stoletja. A njegova *Tretja klavirska sonata* je bližje *aleatoriki* kot *serializmu* v strogem pomenu besede. Odprtost kompozicije, ki predstavlja nekakšno delo v nastajanju, se morda opira na Mallarméjevo *Le Livre*, toda Boulez je delo začel komponirati, že preden se je seznanil z Mallarméjevo zamisljivo. Vseeno je ta zamisel pustila sled na nekaterih Boulezovih teoretskih konceptih, ki obravnavajo avtorjevo anonimnost in odpravljanje vseh avtorskih sledi iz tako imenovanega dela/kompozicije.

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