

Hungarian Variations on *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*: Zoltán Jeney's Early Reception of Pierre Boulez' Music

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Abstract: Hungarian composers, who were searching for new sounds in their music after the political and cultural seclusion of the 1950's, reacted with enthusiasm to the three *Improvisations sur Mallarmé* by Pierre Boulez in the mid-1960's. As serialism was alien to them, they turned toward the "neo-impressionistic" orchestration technique of Boulez, which resembled the music of Debussy. The melodic shape of Boulez' three songs enabled the Hungarian composers to break with the typical melodic turns and prosody of the Bartók-Kodály tradition, and the procedure of the transitional tempi opened the gate to the use of aleatory. Zoltán Jeney (1943), who represented the youngest generation of Hungarian composers in the sixties, however, had two different phases of Boulez-reception. The second, serial phase, which is unique in the history of Hungarian composition, was inspired by Boulez' book, *Penser la musique aujourd'hui* (ed. 1964), which Jeney read in Rome, and can be traced in his works written between 1968 and 1972 (*wei wu wei*, *Rimembranze*, *Alef*). This paper, however, studies the first phase, analysing Jeney's first mature composition, his diploma work for Budapest, *Omaggio alla notte* (1966), through which the characteristic features of the Hungarian Boulez-reception and the local interpretation of avant-garde music can be shown paradigmatically.

The Hungarian composer, Zoltán Jeney, finished his orchestral composition, *Alef. Hommage à Schönberg* in 1972. Jeney assessed his work as an overture to his new creative period at this time. The title of the piece, *Alef*, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, refers to the beginning of something. The composer planned two other orchestral pieces, *Mem* and *Shin*, which together with *Alef* would have shown the composer's path from serialism to complete aleatory. "While I was writing it," Jeney later said, "I was fully aware that I found my own way at last."¹ In fact, *Alef* ended Jeney's first creative period, or rather, the years of his studies in Budapest and Rome. The piece is dedicated to Goffredo Petrassi, his professor at the Santa Cecilia Accademia in Rome, where he spent two years in 1967 and 1968. It is an homage to Schoenberg, as it is built on a twelve tone chord from the third movement (*Farben*) of Schoenberg's Five Orchestral Pieces (op. 16).

1960	Szvit (Suite)
1961	Három zongoradarab (Three Piano Pieces)
1962	Öt zongoradarab (Five Piano Pieces) Három dal Appollinaire verseire (Three Songs to Appollinaire's Poems) Vier Lieder Rainer Maria Rilke verseire (Four Songs to Rainer Maria Rilke's Poems)
1963	Öt dal József Attila verseire (Five Songs to Attila József's Poems)
1964	Virelai, Ballade, Rondeau
1965	Az áramlás szobra (The Statue of the Stream)
1966	Omaggio alla notte
1967	Arítmie-Ritmiche Soliloquium No. 1
1968	wei wu wei Rimembranze
1971	Ladislaus de Madae világi énekeiből (From the Secular Songs of Ladislaus de Madae)
1972	Alef

Table 1. Zoltán Jeney's compositions written between 1960 and 1972

Alef is, as one can perceive at first hearing, music out of action. Still, much happens in this stationary music. Jeney uses a huge orchestra: divided strings, numerous wind instruments, electric organ, and Hammond organ to create a constantly modified musical mass in which counterpoint, together with effects created by tremolos, frullatos, crescendi and decrescendi produce the feeling of slow change. It is music without any references to music history, there aren't any stylistic connections to hang on to, there isn't a wish to express something, to tend towards a conclusion. As Zoltán Jeney put it, his only aim was to answer the question which was raised by Pierre Boulez in his book, *Penser la musique aujourd'hui*² read by Jeney in Rome: "how can a pre-planned serial system be altered so that the composer could have the freedom of choices. That is that I can look at the system as if it would have been a set of checkpoints, and not a task which has to be executed dogmatically."³

Jeney himself turned against dogmatic serialism after his orchestral piece, when he became acquainted with John Cage's music and musical philosophy, and this led him to a radical turn in 1972/1973.⁴ But Jeney, even as a serialist, seemed to be very radical in Hungary at the end of the sixties. Actually, he was the only composer who tried to work with serial technique in Hungary, not only in *Alef*, but even earlier, in *wei wu wei* for chamber ensemble (1968), and in his unfinished diploma work for Rome, *Rimembranze*, from the same year. Moreover, he must have been the only one who, studying it from Boulez book, not only fully comprehended the concept of the Darmstadtian avant-garde of the fifties, but who was able to take part in the compositional discourse about it. As his above quoted statement proves, he touched on one of the central questions of serialism, which was analyzed thoroughly for example by György Ligeti in his study *Entscheidung und Automatik in der Structure Ia von Pierre Boulez* (from 1957):⁵ is a computer able to compose a serial piece, or do we need a composer, whose creative activity influences the shape and the quality of a masterpiece?

It is unquestionable that following the political seclusion of the fifties, Hungarian cultural policy shifted to allow a new openness toward Western-European avant-garde movements in the sixties. As Péter Eötvös later put it, it was possible to become acquainted with the newest music in Budapest, not only with the oeuvre of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, whose music seemed to be very new for Hungarian composers at this time also, but with the compositions of Boulez, Nono and Stockhausen, as well as the envied Polish contemporaries.⁶ When Eötvös travelled to Cologne to study with Stockhausen in 1966, he already knew all the works of his future mentor.⁷ The most important sources for new music in Budapest were not only the Library of the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music, which consciously collected the documents of contemporary music, or the public concert life,⁸ but the opportunity to travel to Darmstadt and, what turned out to be much more influential, to Warsaw. Jeney himself visited Warsaw as a student twice, in 1964 and 1965.⁹

Of course, a kind of belatedness in the new music reception of Hungarian composers can be noticed. They started to react to the works of the Darmstadtian avant-garde of the fifties relatively late, at a time, when Darmstadt, influenced by John Cage, began to change, and the idea of serialism lost its priority.¹⁰ But Hungarian composers didn't feel these changes: one can say that their reception of the Darmstadtian avant-garde is built on misunderstandings or rather misinterpretations.¹¹

This can be proved first of all by the reception of the compositions of Pierre Boulez, whose music had considerable influence on the sound of the music of Hungarian composers. The generation of Boulez and Stockhausen in Hungary strived for the renewal of their musical language in the sixties, and György Ligeti's presence in Darmstadt helped the flow of information. However, their statements make it clear that they didn't analyse the notes and scores they got from Darmstadt or Warsaw, and for this reason they weren't touched by the serial thinking. Rather, they were listening to Boulez' music, and were delighted with its sound.¹² Even music critics spoke about the richness of colours in his music, one of them

wrote that the *Improvisations sur Mallarmé* show "a real orgy of colours in the meaning of Debussy's impressionism."¹³ Their interest in Boulez' *Improvisations* coincided with one of the French composer's compositional aims concerning the instrumentation: the mixing of the "fixed-pitch" instruments with instruments, "whose sonorities are close to the noise category", as Boulez put it in 1961.¹⁴

That means that the music of Boulez represented for older Hungarian composers, who searched for new musical sounds, a kind of neo-impressionism: they heard those features from it which proved to be useful for their experiments with new music. They wanted to create a new "Euphony", to quote the title of three orchestral pieces by Rudolf Maros,¹⁵ who was one of Ligeti's closest friends in Hungary. It is true, that even Boulez shows a preference for Debussy's clarity ("clarté"), but only, as he said in an interview, mixed with Webern's lucidity ("Fasslichkeit").¹⁶ The reference to Debussy via Boulez meant for Hungarian composers, on the other hand, the possibility to link their new French modernity with the Hungarian tradition. In other words, the inspiration of Boulez could be compared to Bartók's and Kodály's discovery of Debussy's music sixty five years earlier. Boulez' use of percussion instruments, piano, celesta and harp in his three *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, which evoke a kind of noise music, resembled for Hungarian composers another Bartókian type of music, *The Night Music* from his piano cycle *Szabadban* (Out of Doors) from 1926, which served as a starting point for many Hungarian composers when experimenting with new sounds since 1959.¹⁷

The younger generation of Hungarian composers born in the thirties and at the beginning of the forties, like Jeney, connected a new element to the idea of this noisy "Euphony", namely the use of florid melodies. Zoltán Jeney later mentioned two sources for this kind of shaping of melodies: Boulez' *Improvisations sur Mallarmé* and Zsolt Durkó's two orchestral pieces, *Organismi* (written in 1964) and *Fioriture ungherese* (written in 1966).¹⁸ Durkó was nine years older than Jeney, and he also studied with Petrassi in Rome in 1962-1963. When Durkó returned from Rome, he represented a kind of compositional attitude, a new compositional thinking which was unknown to Hungarian composers at that time. He didn't care about thematic-motivic work ("thematische-motivische Arbeit") or classical forms, which stand in the centre of the thinking of the traditionally trained Hungarian composers, but he set out from real compositional problems, which coincided with Boulez' aims in the three *Improvisations*,¹⁹ like the investigation of the borders between free and fixed music, and the dissolving of the traditional pulsation of music. Nevertheless, the ornamented melodiousness was the most attractive feature of his pieces for Jeney, in which minor and major seconds play the central role. Moreover these seconds can be transformed to sevenths, which means that Durkó could use two melody types related to each other. The one is a compressed line, built on minor and major seconds, the other is built on a wide ambitus, which helps the composer to move away from the characteristic melodic formulas, and, in the case of vocal music, the prosody of Hungarian folksongs, which determined the shaping of melodies of Bartók, Kodály and their followers in Hungary (1. music example).

Jeney was fully aware of the origin and function of Durkó's shaping of melodies. He had worked on freeing himself from the model of the Bartókian melodic formulas since 1963, and Durkó's music encouraged him to follow this direction. Actually, Durkó's compositions enabled Jeney to look at the music of Boulez, especially at the three *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, which were undoubtedly Durkó's sources of inspiration also, in another way. He studied from the scores of Boulez not only the mode of a new impressionistic orchestration, in which different percussion instruments, the piano, the harp, and the celesta play an important role, but to use two types of melody lines, one with a syllabic declamation and one with a wide range which is full of melismas and ornaments (2. music example).

(Cont. il Flauto)
rubato

Vl. solo

mf cresc. poco a poco - - - - - *ff*

Tam-tam profondo

Gr. C.

pp morbido

ppp (arp.)

tornando - - - - - al - - - - -

Vl. solo

molto *pp*

p dolciss.

$T = \infty$ = il più presto possibile
 ∞ = il più lento possibile

1. music example Zsolt Durkó: *Organismi*, extract from the solo violin part

Voix

mf

U - ne den - - - - -

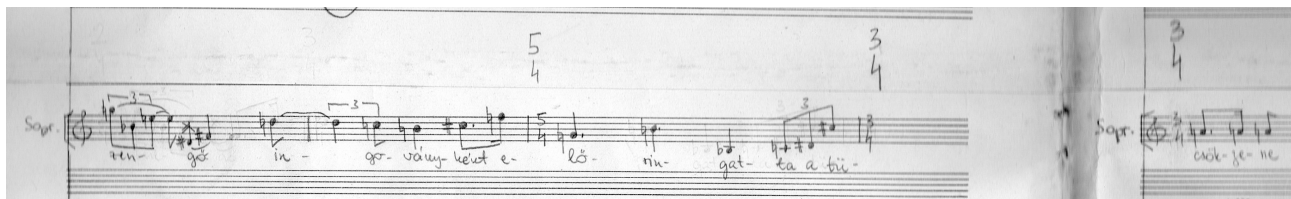
tel - - - - - le s'a - - - - - bo - - - - - lit

2. music example Pierre Boulez: *Une dentelle s'abolit* (*Improvisations sur Mallarmé II*), the beginning of the vocal part

Jeney's diploma work, the orchestral song *Omaggio alla Notte* written to the impressionistic poem, *Éjszaka* (Night) by Lőrinc Szabó (1900–1957) from 1966, proves Jeney's compositional reception of the *Improvisations sur Mallarmé* of Pierre Boulez. It is a paradigmatic composition – not only in the young Zoltán Jeney's oeuvre, but in the context of the new Hungarian music of the sixties, as: 1) its orchestration represents the concept of the new impressionism of Hungarian composers, 2) it uses narrow and wide range ornamental melodies, and 3) as its title implies (*Omaggio alla Notte*), it reflects on the Night music tradition of the sixties: Lőrinc Szabó's poem describes the little noises of a garden in the night. Furthermore it is the most significant composition which gives proof of Boulez' compositional reception in Hungary.

László Somfai, in writing about the *Omaggio* in 1968, set apart from the vocal line, which "is moving in the formulas of the phraseology of Berg, Webern and Boulez", the orchestral part, which is "colourful, luxuriant and coloristic."²⁰ The primary function of the big orchestra is undoubtedly to depict the pictures and the content of the poetic text. The orchestra evokes noises, rustling, buzzing, the echo of the splashing of the brook, the blowing of the wind, the music of the crickets, or the creaking of the branches. The percussion instruments play an important role in this noisy microworld, but not only they take part in the making of noises. Jeney disguises the voices of other instruments also: the keys of the piano are depressed mutely, that means, that the other instruments make the strings of the piano vibrate, the strings play *sul tasto*, *sul ponticello*, *pizzicato* and *col legno*, and they use tremolos with *sordino*, and the wind instruments use *glissandi*, *frullatos*, *crescendo-decrescendo* effects and trills. Jeney tries to apply Boulez' orchestration devices of the three *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, which were written for chamber ensemble, to a big orchestra.

The vocal line begins with a recitativo, but the melody changes into a syllabic melodic line which is built on large intervallic leaps. This syllabic style dissolves in the melismatic melody shaping of Boulez (3. music example). Jeney uses two different types of melodies: the soprano sings wide range ornamental melodies, which resemble Boulez' *Improvisations*, while different groups of instruments play five or six narrow melodies simultaneously. The ornaments of the soprano and the parallels of narrow melodies are connected to words or phrases which speak about the moments of the noises. Moreover the instrumental version with the narrow melodies, which recalls the picture of an ant hill, turns into a determining thematic element. It subtly indicates the borders between the different sections of a form, which runs its course in the shape of one large curve.



3. music example Zoltán Jeney: *Omaggio alla notte*, extract from the vocal line

There are no spectacular cesuras in the piece: one can notice only tiny gaspings for breath, which function as upbeats for the new section, but at the same time they fade into the end of the previous section. These upbeats are played by the orchestra: the soprano gasps for breath de facto at these moments. The lack of cesuras is bound up with the peculiarity of the *Omaggio*, that the piece harps on the question about the border between restriction and freedom. There are time signatures in the *Omaggio*, but they change from bar to bar, so we cannot feel a rhythmical pulsation. György Ligeti spoke about this kind of "oscillation of tempi" or "transitional tempi" precisely in connection with the three *Improvisations sur Mallarmé*, which show the most characteristic feature of the post-serial composition, namely that the composers try to dissolve the function of the barlines, which traditionally determine the pulsation, to create free musical processes.²¹ Nevertheless, the *Omaggio* is a well-formed composition, since it is built on nadirs and culminations. The most effective culmination point can be found at the end of the piece, where the orchestra is silent while the soprano sings "I am not alone, and I won't be alone even in the grave."

Zoltán Jeney's *Omaggio* summarizes the most important questions of Hungarian composition of the sixties: the ideal of the neo-impressionistic orchestration, the new shaping of melodies, and the application of transitional tempi. From this point of view, we can understand Jeney's choice of the title: *Omaggio*. It is not only an homage to the mighty and wonderful night, but it is an homage to the new music of the 20th century: to Bartók, to the Hungarian avant-garde composers, to Zolt Durkó and most of all to Boulez. But *Omaggio alla notte* already hides within itself the germs of Jeney's later interest in aleatory. After his serial phase, which began in Rome and ended with *Alef*, Jeney turned toward aleatory. The place of the principle of the transitional tempi of Pierre Boulez was taken over by the reception of John Cage's experimentalism.

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Notes

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- 2 Pierre Boulez, *Penser la musique aoujourd'hui* (Genève: Gonthier, 1964).
- 3 Farkas, loc. cit.
- 4 Tünde Szitha, *Zoltán Jeney* (Budapest: Mágus, 2003), 13-4.
- 5 György Ligeti. "Entscheidung und Automatik in der *Structure Ia* von Pierre Boulez," in György Ligeti: *Gesammelte Schriften Band 1.*, ed. Monika Lichtenfeld (Mainz: Schott, 2007), 413–46.
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- 7 Op.cit.
- 8 Anna Dalos, "Új zenei repertoár Magyarországon (1956–1967)," [New Music Repertoire in Hungary (1956–1967)] *Magyar Zene* 1 (2007): 29-35.

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- 19 Boulez, op. cit., 302.
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