

Ana Stefanović

***Pet pesama Stefana Malarmea (Five Poems of Stéphane Mallarmé) by Vlastimir Trajković***

**Abstract**

The article analyses new work by Vlastimir Trajković for solo voice and orchestra, inspired by five poems of French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé. The network of some of the key concepts of Mallarmé's poetry and poetic philosophy, on which a semantic plan of the work and its dramaturgy are based, is revealed through the placement of specific songs within the cycle. The following elements are examined in the article: vocal expression concerning the relation between the music and the text whereby baroque rhetoric stimuli are revealed, the linguistic orientation of the cycle based on the double postulate – both impressionistic and expressionistic, as well as elements of homage to style and *mélodies* of Debussy and Ravel. They are realized through citations of style and citations of text, in such a way that they, embedded into modernistic linguistic context, introduce element of poetics of post-modernism into Trajković's cycle and into the genre of the Serbian song for solo voice.

**Key words**

Solo-song, *mélodies*, symbolism, impressionism, baroque, expressionism, recitative, *affetto*, homage, citation

Vlastimir Trajković composed the *Pet pesama Stefana Malarmea (Five Poems of Stéphane Mallarmé)* for voice and orchestra<sup>1</sup> in 2005, but the first three songs of the cycle appeared earlier, in 2003, in a chamber version for the voice, flute and piano. The selected poetic texts include three sonnets written in the alexandrine: *Renouveau/Preporod (Renewal)*(song 1), *Angoisse/Zebnja (Anguish)* (song 2) and *Ses purs ongles trës haut.../Čistih noktij' s' višnjih... (Her pure nails on high...)*(song 4), as well as two loosely structured songs in free octosyllabic verse: *Feuillet d'album/Listak iz albuma (Album Leaf)*(song 3) and a sonnet *Une dentelle s'abolit/Jedna čipka se para (Lace passes into nothingness)*(song 5). The composer arranged these verses<sup>2</sup> of Mallarmé in a poetic sequence with a metrically and semantically uneven configuration.

The arrangement of the songs is such that at its two ends there seems to be tension between two central motives of Mallarmé's poetry, and this tension shapes the relations and contours of the work. The first song of the cycle, *Preporod*, opens up, on the semantic level, a network of motives of Mallarmé's poetry which are, in different dispositions, always tangled and disentangled differently; assuming that one can speak of "disentanglement" in a poetry which is simultaneously likened, with such cogency, to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Seven solo wind instruments, harp, harpsichord, piano and a chamber string ensemble.

<sup>2</sup> The songs were composed to the French original and can also be performed in Serbian translation of the composer himself, who in part relied on Kolja Mićević's rendering: Stefan Malarme, *Poezija*, Beograd, Nolit, 1985.

epochs of representation, “le grand oeuvre”, “le livre unique” as focuses of poetic endeavours, and to the epoch of “ideals” as a symptom of redefining the status and function of the sign in poetic discourse. There is one key word – identified in the first song but present in all the others – around which all the central Mallarmean meanings revolve - *ennui*: weakness, anxiety and pain, aimless waiting and languor, accumulated despair and endless tedium; it is, in fact, Mallarmé’s debt to Baudelairean *spleen*<sup>3</sup>. “Avenge boredom”<sup>4</sup>, as Steiner refers to this state of the antihero, the dandy consumed by nostalgia – for, after the scent of revolution has stormed through, the bourgeois milieu resembles a prison – as a mood characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century culture, a long, post-revolutionary epoch of reaction and immobility. Its characteristics in the first song are also manifest in the traces of the Parnassian straightforward representation, which, however, is at variance with the completely altered perspective on reality: the enfeebled, sickly things of the world. The image of the *sickly spring* (*le printemps maladif*), as the focus of this song’s semantic field, in the characteristically Mallarmean, ironic treatment of its title, is precisely the expression of disappointment with “unbearable reality”. (From where one can either escape “there” [*Fuir! Lr-bas fuir! Je sens que les oiseaux sont ivres/D’être parmi l’écume inconnue et les cieux!... Un Ennui, désolé par les cruels espoirs,/Croit encore à l’adieu suprême des mouchoirs! /Brise marine*]<sup>5</sup> – Off, then, to where I glimpse through spray and squall/Strange birds delighting in their unknown skies!... How strange that Boredom, all its hopes run dry,/Still dreams of handkerchiefs that wave good-bye! /*Sea Breeze*/ – **N.B.** translation by Richard Wilbur), or turn to the abstract powers of the language, “pure idea”, “absolute poetry”). *Ennui* in the centre of the atmosphere of “sickly spring” correlates with the motif of nothingness (*le néant*) that permeates the last song in the cycle: *Une dentelle s’abolit*. This motif is compounded by the poet’s constant “metaphysical anxiety” and the idea of self-cancellation – the realization and outcome of a poetic utterance. As Sartre himself asserts in his outstanding essay: “It is no accident that Mallarmé wrote the word ‘Nothing’<sup>6</sup> at the beginning of his *Complete poetic works*”.<sup>7</sup> In this text, the author of *Being and Nothingness* reveals Mallarmé’s dialectic, that is, his “negative logic”: Therefore nothingness is a truth that *originated* from these songs... we know that lace, under his pen,

<sup>3</sup> Benjamin’s comment on the connection between *idéal* and *spleen* in the title of the first cycle of Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du mal* is indicative of the synchronism of “contradictory” terms *ennui* and *idéal* in Mallarmé’s poetry: “In *spleen* he recognizes the last in the series of metamorphoses of ideal – to him ideal seems to be the first in the series of expressions of *spleen*. In this title, in which the reader is presented with what is the newest possible as that which is the oldest possible, Baudelaire has given the most distinct form of his concept of the modern”, in: Valter Benjamin, *Paris, capitale du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1939), Paris, Allia, 2005, 36.

<sup>4</sup> George Steiner, *Dans le château de Barbe-Bleu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973, 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cf.: Stéphane Mallarmé, *Poésies* (26<sup>ème</sup> édition), Paris, NRF, s.a. (*Pobeć! Tamo pobeć! Slutim ptice pjane / što između pene i neba ih ima... Čama, rastužena okrutnim nadama / veruje poslednjem pozdravu marama!*), in: Mallarmé, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> The poem in question is *Salut* (*Toast*), which begins with the line *Rien, cette écume, vierge vers* (*Nothing, this foam, virgin verse*).

<sup>7</sup> Sartre, “Mallarmé” (1953, trans. by Nikola Bertolino), in: *Šta je književnost*, Beograd, Nolit, 1981, 385.

abolishes itself by leading only to the ‘absence of any bed’<sup>8</sup>, while the ‘clean glass with no drink’, in agony, refuses to hope for anything that might announce the invisible rose...<sup>9</sup>

Trajković, however, does not build the dramaturgy of the cycle by incorporating nor by musically distinguishing between these motives, which construct a network of meanings in the five selected songs, but rather focuses his attention on the psychological and affective aspect of the verses. The somber mood pervading the first song, in the anticipation of “the pain (of spring) to subside”, is replaced by a distinct uneasiness and excitement of the second song, *Anguish*. The third song, *Album Leaf*, evoking French classical *mélodies* as a *gallant* intermezzo of sorts, flows into the *tour de force* of the turbulent and tense fourth song that features dramatic scherzando effects and announces the return to the sound of “empty non-being” (famous Mallarmean redundancy<sup>10</sup>) in the fifth song, which ends the cycle. As it can be seen, the diachronic dimension of the work is effected by stark and convincingly rendered contrasts on the emotional scale. In doing so, the composer seems to counteract the Ideal towards which Mallarmé’s poetry was moving while “keeping the world at a distance”<sup>11</sup>: “...this poetry, says Valéry, was freed... of any demand to reproduce the sensitive world... it almost entirely repudiated the idea of resorting to ‘emotion’”<sup>12</sup>. How then does one explain the increased level of affectivity and, correspondingly, the drama in the musical rendering of the verses that are for the most part riddled by “hermetism”? On the one hand, by the force with which Mallarmé’s poetry operates despite being detached from reality and undemanding of its reproduction, but on the other hand by a mediation of sorts, which is essential to understanding Trajković’s vocal work. Unlike Debussy’s and Ravel’s cycles<sup>13</sup> inspired by Mallarmé’s poetry, the benefit of hindsight and the experience of modernism allow Trajković to bring to the surface a more distant, deeper layer that directs, almost covertly, the inner modalities of Mallarmean poetic writing. Certain themes of Mallarmean thought can be explained in Baroque terms: the combination of tragic emotion, despair and nothingness and transparent gallant scenery; the concept of Nature, which preserves some of the 18<sup>th</sup> century “beautiful nature”; impressionism and symbolism that communicate with the theory of symbols; the “association of ideas” from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

However, the direct connection between Trajković’s music and this Baroque motivation stems

---

<sup>8</sup> This dialectic “cannot be seen” in Kolja Mićević’s translation nor in Trajković’s revision of the translation of the cycle’s fifth song. Another possible rendering of the first strophe could be: “*Jedna se čipka ukida/ U sumnji Velikog okreta/ Da odškrine, kao prokleta/ Tek večnu odsutnost kreveta. (Lace passes into nothingness/ With the ultimate Gamble in doubt/ Revealing just, as if damned,/ Eternal absence of any bed.)*”

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Mallarmean redundancy does not appear in the existing translations either. It is a so-called autoimplicative attribution resulting in the redundant epithet. A well-known example of this is Mallarmé’s figure *l’Azur bleu*.

<sup>11</sup> This is how the poet describes one of his moments: “It was one of those exceptional mornings, when my spirit, miraculously cleansed of the pale sunsets of everyday life, awoke in Heaven, far too drenched in immortality to seek pleasures...”, “Symphonie littéraire”, in: *Igitur, Divagations, Un coup de dés*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, 343.

<sup>12</sup> Valéry, *Mallarme. Melanž* (trans. by Kolja Mićević), Sarajevo, Svjetlost, 1991, 37.

from the rhetoric impulse of Mallarmé's "absolute poetry", from its efforts to emphasize sound, materiality, the existence of verse: the form of meaning. The tendency of 18<sup>th</sup> century rhetoric to cancel the duality between basic and figurative meaning is once again brought by the poet only to the point of crystallization: owing to this tendency it is possible to build, on the ruins of basic meaning, a new meaning in poetry which does not lead to the severing of all ties with reality; it also opens up and reveals its other aspect, which is inaccessible to everyday speech. Still, the abolishing of this duality, which is undoubtedly at work in Mallarmé's poetry, leads to a disguising of rhetoric – historically speaking, to the cancellation of rhetoric. The obscurity of his poems, the difficulties in understanding them, or rather, the inability to translate them into natural speech, are exactly proportional to their unpretentiousness, artlessness and spontaneity, realized in a purely poetic space. In it they seem like sketches, while in the context of Mallarmé's poetic philosophy they appear as calculated failures, as an active contemplation of weakness.<sup>14</sup> In his rendition, Trajković employs inversion, which transfigures the naturalness of Mallarmean utterance and the nontransparency of meaning into a complicated, highly "rhetorical" speech, an unexpected and, for every reader of Mallarmé's poetry, surprising transparency of meaning and, correspondingly, into a wholeness, completeness of the poems. This is precisely because he understands the semantic plane as affective, and thus the logic of structuring the cycle is steered by the Baroque dramaturgy of sequencing strong, contrasting emotions.

Inversion is directly related to the rhetorical basing of music, the voice part in particular. Its mainstay is hypotyposis, a figure of speech that steers the precise and consistent exposition of spoken content and the conveyance of the story, to the last detail and with the highest level of cogency. It seems as if Trajković's composition attempts to convey, elucidate, interpret and display to the reader the contentual and emotional weaves of Mallarmé's poetry. Recitative, understandably, plays a dominant part in this, appearing in the vocal line from the first to the last bar. It mostly moves towards its extremes: in a manner of very frequent, pure declamation (which, depending on the kind of effect used, varies from "psalmody" to *quasi parlando*, which is quite impressive in the fourth song), that is, as an expressionistic form of the distant *rappresentativo*, which is executed by great leaps of sharp dissonances (the prevalent leap of the major seventh, the leap of the ninth), chromatic shifts, broken octaves, abrupt changes in register. The absence of a melody and melodic basis of the recitative (except in the first part of the third song, where, as suggested, it serves to evoke the milieu of Debussy's *mélodies*, primarily those inspired by Verlaine's *Fêtes galantes*) is explained by the composer's obvious concern, which is to follow the

---

<sup>13</sup> Debussy's and Ravel's cycles for voice and piano, composed to Mallarmé's verses in 1913 and 1914 respectively, bore the same title *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*.

<sup>14</sup> "O modern muse of weakness", says the poet in one place, 'until the day you swathe me in your net of no escape, the net of *ennui*; my enemy... I dedicate to you, as a jest or – do I know? – as a token of love, these few lines about

prosodic aspects of the text, first and foremost its accent curve, Mallarmean play of accents and vowels and, to a lesser extent, its metrical disposition. Both the emphatic-rhetorical conception of the vocal line, in which words are not “transformed” into music but rather musically-rhetorically intensified (where not only the relationship between pitch levels and the musical meter, but also dynamics and tempo play a major role) and the affect of the whole, which are the mainstays of the overall sound quality of Trajković’s songs, originate from an old musical-rhetorical doctrine. The affect of the whole logically supports the discursiveness, which is the reason why classical patterns of musical form and syntax are avoided, and yet Mallarmé’s clear sentence can be easily followed (the composer successfully manages to synchronize the syntactic and metrical breaks in enjambment). In such a context the narrative aspect is achieved by internal, at times stark and surprising, contrasts within rounded meaningful wholes of the songs. According to an old rhetorical rule, the closer the other, figured, line is to the basic line of meaning, the greater is the possibility that it might become independent and ornamentally “unglued” from the (real) meaning, and that a rhetorical surplus might be created. The complete amalgamation of the vocal line and the text, in which the vocal line tendentially renounces its autonomy, sometimes does, however, lead to its gaining independence. Such is the case with the already mentioned frequent resorting to the *parlando* effect, which in fast tempo leads to the “instrumental” treatment of the voice and, practically, pushes the poetic text – both its structure and meaning – into the background, in favour of the affect of the whole. The distinctiveness of the poetic meter allows the composer at certain points to employ a fixed rhythm which originates from it (as an anapestic lilt at the beginning of the first song). The metric pattern of the verses, however, is more often pushed into the background as required by the interpretation of the semantic layer. At the end of the first song, the anapest that has dominated since its beginning becomes hazy as the voice is transformed into a “scanning” counterpart of the fixed meter and equal note values of the strings. A similar situation can be observed at the beginning of the fifth song, where the metrics of the text are pushed into the foreground by the “empty” vocal line “drawled out” by triplets (*Jedna čipka se para...*). Such a position of the poetic meter impedes the differentiation of the rhythmic configuration (not only in *parlando* parts) of the vocal part in such a way that the prosodic aspects of the texts are realized primarily by metrical changes of the music flow. Trajković’s compositions thus depart from both the poetics of Baroque music playwrights and the expressionistic recitative. Unified rhythmic values and the effect of arrhythmicity in the circumstances of strict syllabicity and declamation result in a specific kind of uncontrolled, yet mediated expressiveness.

This expressiveness is supported by the linguistic orientation of the cycle, which at the same time favours free dissonance, first and foremost the minor second, which is the mainstay of the overstretched

---

my life, written in kind hours, in which you did not instigate in me a hatred of creation and the fruitless love of nothingness”, in: Mallarmé, *Igitur...*, op. cit., 342.

vocal *espressivo*, and structures created by layering thirds while constructing the vertical. In a situation where tonal centres of the songs are only roughly indicated: F/A flat, A flat, B flat, B, F/A flat, and in the context of the afunctional sequencing of tertian textures (always connected by second and third, never fourth or fifth relationships) – which corresponds to the amotivic concept of the horizontal – this combination of impressionistic and expressionistic orientations and their constituents reflects the link between the composer and his predecessors in interpreting Mallarmé's poetry as cogently as the modernistic context. The linguistic “dualism” of Trajković's cycle allows very different poetic and expressive realizations and renders the work complex. However, if primacy were to be given to one of the oscillating linguistic models, that would be the extremely acute, yet impressionistic foundation. Moreover, the field where dissonance and atonality dominate turns out to be a specific difference in relation to the linguistic models of the predecessors and role models.

The forming of a third vertical involves, almost regularly, chords with three or four, sometimes even five or six thirds, where characteristic impressionistic chords of minor seventh chord, major seventh chord with minor third and major seventh chord, that is, leading seventh chord, are distinguished as the bases. The “usual” added fourths and sixths are, however, coupled with the added dissonant potential of the minor second – analogous to the leap of the major seventh and the chromatics in the voice – which “blemishes” the familiar impressionistic structures: the prevalent technique of simultaneous sounding of one or more essential notes (of any note, even the seventh) and their alteration, that is, double alteration. Multiple tertian textures can also be found in unconventionally structured chords, which are also poetic constants of the work, underlined by differentiation between textural planes.

For example, three layers in the piano (song 1, score mark 3), which harmonically support other orchestral groups, are so formed that the chords are structured on a different model, albeit forming a thirteenth chord. On the other hand, just as an atypical syllable is used to “break” tertian textures, so the structure of the second chord, when required by the desirable interpretation of a poetic text, is broken into an orchestral vertical: in the first song (score mark 14), this “dissipation” of the sound of the second chord contributes to the “ironic-grotesque” twist in the finale of Mallarmé's song. Also, clusters in the true sense of the word are activated when it is necessary to underscore the effect of fear and anxiety (in the piano part, in the coda of the second song, score mark 29). Chords with two thirds mostly form cumulative chords, unless an augmented five-thirds chord or augmented seventh chord (with a major seventh) is used on its basis as frequently as the mentioned collision of essential notes and their alterations. The impressionistic expressive spectrum includes occasional mixture parallelisms, an isolation of the sound of the “empty” fifth, either by layering or in the manner of alternating parallel fifths, as well as pedal tones, which is the orchestral counterpart to a declamation in the voice, where tertian textures interchange.

As can be seen, harmonic, as well as orchestrational realizations vary depending on the

interpretation of the semantic, that is, affective layer. The work's semantic field is to a large extent complemented by isolated imitations of style, organized as homages. What appears next in them is a specific crystallization of the basic linguistic idea of the composer's harmonic base. In the third song, *Listak iz albuma*, where "ariettes oubliées" are invoked by "collecting" the voice part into classical syntactic structures using fixed, dance metrics and the "accompaniment" of the harp and piano – the landscape thus evoked is indicated by occasional interventions of the harpsichord – multiple tertian textures, including the augmented triad and bichordal combinations, are strung up along second and mediant relationships, but nonetheless arrive at the "classical" perfect cadence.

Stylizations are striking in the first song too, where tones in the clarinet cadenza (score mark 4) circle around the minor seventh chord (of the II degree) in a Debussian manner, until they encounter the F tonic. The same function in the semantic structure of this song is fulfilled by the interlude prior to the exposition of the third strophe (score mark 8), harmonized within the extended tonality (B flat-F), in which the piano sequence introduces the English horn into the melody (duplicated in the piano and the violas) – which alone can be understood as an indication of the imitated style that is here identified with Mallarmean and perennial *ennui*, supported by a discrete, chamber orchestral sound. It logically rises to the forefront at the end of the song *Preporod*, where the cadential process with Ravelian undertone is organized through suspension structures (as well as accented notes of resolution and their resolutions in the English horn part) up to the dominant ninth chord and the F major tonic.

The homage is rounded out by adding quotations of the text to quotations of the style – like in the third song, where the sudden *espressivo* of the voice is developed on the initial motif of the fifth act of *Pelleas and Melisande*, on the background of the dominant ninth chord.

Certain interventions of the tropological type orientated towards the lexical plane of the text play a double part, that of signified elements of style towards which the homage is orientated and that of elements communicating the poetic meaning: a combination of the rhetorical conception of music and Mallarmé's borrowings from the gallant landscape realized on Baroque grounds. Thus the Debussian *glissando* of the harp in the first song is introduced as an instrumental "echo" of the word "spring" in the vocal part, while the line "*Polja, gde trava se ogromna kočoperi*" /*Fields, where gigantic grass swaggers*/ is conveyed by a quasi trio-texture, formed by homophonic accompaniment in the orchestra, vocal part and its complementary elaborate recitative of the solo flute. All of the landscapes that can be found here – the Baroque gallant style, impressionism and Trajković's contemporary language – converge in the concertante and ornamental flute line in the last verse of the first song "... poj od/Tol'kih *ptica* u cvetu na suncu što žamore" ("... so many birds in bloom chirping in the sun").

The same function, however, also determines the procedures belonging to the experience of modernism or, on the other hand, the experience of pretonal traditions. Such are, first and foremost, short

isolated repetitive surfaces, like the one in the fourth song which is formed, in transitions, by the harpsichord supported by the strings, and whose mechanical rhythm is simultaneously a reflection of extreme tension, gracefulness and Mallarmean play on the sound of words, of a pulsating space in which, to quote Yves Bonnefoy, “words are illuminated by mutual reflections”. An even more striking feature, a musical trope in the true sense of the word, is the micromodel in the high register of the harp at the end of this song, whose repetition actualizes the word “shimmering”.

These procedures are poetically related to those which the composer employs in order to semantically reinterpret Mallarmé’s verses. In the orchestral coda of the third song, the repetition of models with striking, conflicting rhythms in the piano and the first violins, in a harmonic frame of texturally broken clusters, tends to be descriptive but at the same time achieves the effect of parody and grotesque, a semantic collision, with the last lines of the song: “Nema reči da opiše/ Vaš rođeni, punan zara,/ Dečji smeh što vazduh para.” (“It lacks the means to imitate/ Your very natural and clear/ Childlike laughter that charms the air”). In the first song, in conveying the semantic twist by which the poet counterposes the final couplet to the image of “sickly spring”: “Al’ ipak Plavet se smeje na ogradu i na poj od / Tol’kih ptica u cvetu na suncu što žamore” (“The Azure laughs on hedges/ wakes so many birds in bloom chirping in the sun”), the already mentioned “scanning” of the voice and the strings (including *staccato*, *pizzicato* and *martelato* in articulation), in a dissonant context, parodically interprets the meaning of Mallarmé’s gist. To quote Mallarmé: “... not even the sky contradicts me, and its azure, vast without a single cloud, is stripped of the irony of its beauty, which, irresistibly azure, stretches far beyond...”<sup>15</sup> The said interpretative interventions into the meaning of the poetic text allow the composer to ask the following: is Mallarmean irony the goal, or is it, along with “despair” and “nothingness”, pursuit of “the ideal” and “pure ideas”, merely an excuse, as Sartre would say, for “resentment and hatred, which cause absence from reality”<sup>16</sup>. Shall we not fall into the trap of Mallarmé’s poetic space, a space of figures and sounding, if, instead of his play on literal meaning, which opens up an infinity of interpretants, we make a decision on the basic meaning and cancel the ultimate insolubility of that play? If we allow that “The azure, nonetheless, laughs...”, that the twist in the song is “simply” contrastive rather than ironic; that the sky, and spring are stripped of the irony of its beauty, and that it now, irresistible and pure, stretches far beyond..., hermeneutic space would be more appealing and complex, open to the possibilities of twists that are actually offered by Mallarmé himself. And even if we allow the possibilities of a poetic twist: that irony of Mallarmé, when there is one – whether aimed at his own work or reality – is, in fact, a “sham”; a flip side of the effort, much like Baudelaire’s own, to attempt, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in front of the “muse of *ennui*” which had invaded the spirits and poetry, to salvage the presence and beauty

---

<sup>15</sup> Mallarmé, “Symphonie littéraire”, op. cit., 344.

<sup>16</sup> Sartre, op. cit., 382.



and usage of words, such as they are.

By undertaking the setting of Mallarmé's poetry to music, for the first time in the history of Serbian vocal lyricism, Trajković has enriched it, in this composition of his, with rare and significant achievement.

Translated by Dušan Zabrdac