

# Refracted Zen in the Art of Composition: An Investigation of Zen Buddhism in Hans Otte's *Book of Sounds*

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The scant secondary literature about Hans Otte often locates the influence of Zen Buddhism in his compositions dating from the 1990s. While Otte's interest in and exposure to Zen Buddhism peaks in that decade, the composer had already begun exploring Zen Buddhism in the 1960s. Otte's *Book of Sounds* (1979-1982) was written after the composer had taken up the practice of *zazen* meditation, read the writings of D. T. Suzuki and Zen-obsessed guru, Rajneesh, and worked with American composers interested in Zen Buddhism and Eastern thought. These interests and influences are evident in the visual art, design, notation, aesthetic goals and musical techniques used in *The Book of Sounds*, as well as in Otte's use of language in his introduction to the composition. Identifying the influences of Zen Buddhism in *The Book of Sounds* also places the work within the larger history of the popularization of Zen Buddhism in the West.

The contemporary cultural saturation of Zen Buddhism in the West has a history extending at least as far back as Schopenhauer, who believed that his own philosophy of *Vorstellung* was a kindred spirit with Buddhism.<sup>1</sup> While the influence of Zen Buddhism on American artists and composers like John Cage has been well documented, composers in Europe were also interacting with Zen and other Buddhisms, particularly after World War Two.<sup>2</sup> German composer Hans Otte, for example, began investigating Zen Buddhism and meditation in the 1960s, yet the reception of his work only locates the influence of Zen in later compositions.<sup>3</sup> In 1979, when Hans Otte began writing *Das Buch der Klänge* or *The Book of Sounds* (1979-1982), Buddhism in Europe was beginning to transition from a scholarly topic towards institutionalization and popularization.<sup>4</sup> Otte had come to know the “core Buddhist literature” (Buddhist sacred texts) as well as the works of D. T. Suzuki, and Indian-born guru Rajneesh’s writings on Zen.<sup>5</sup> The composer’s position as the Director of Radio Bremen had also brought him into contact with numerous American composers who had turned to the East for inspiration.<sup>6</sup> As I will make clear, Hans Otte’s primary sources of information about Zen Buddhism presented highly idiomatic representations of the religion that can themselves be seen as refractions, or personal transformations and interpretations of Zen Buddhism. I will show in what way

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Abelson, “Schopenhauer and Buddhism,” *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 2 (1993): 255.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties: Interaction in art between East and West* (Zwolle: Waanders Publishers, 1996), 143-175.

<sup>3</sup> Ingo Ahmels, *Hans Otte: Klang der Klänge* (Mainz: Schott Musik International, 2006), 63.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Baumann, “Buddhism in Europe: Past Present, Prospects,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism beyond Asia*. Edited by Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002): 85.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmels, *Hans Otte*, 62-63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-38, and 133-134.

and to what extent Otte's *Book of Sounds*, a post-minimalist piano cycle, manifests the "refracted" and, therefore, unique representations of Zen Buddhism with which Otte interacted.

How can Zen Buddhism be present in a composition? Answering this question requires a brief foray into the history of exoticism in the West. Recently, Ralph Locke has provided a highly inclusive framework for dealing with compositions that feature non-Western influence, which he named the "All the Music in Full Context" paradigm.<sup>7</sup> Rather than assume that exoticism can only be identified in notes and rhythms, Locke's paradigm identifies elements of exoticism in texts, staging, design, and performances. Even composers' statements about their composing process can reveal forms of exoticism. Thus, Steve Reich's suggestion that borrowing musical structures from non-Western music is more appropriate than imitating non-Western sounds is understood by Locke as a type of exoticism.<sup>8</sup> Following Reich's line of reasoning, using the musical structures of another culture is more appropriate because it is, in his words, "more subtle" than imitating the sounds of another culture.<sup>9</sup> The exoticism in Otte's *Book of Sounds* is of an even subtler nature. Otte's exoticism stems not from Japanese or Zen musical structures, but from their underlying aesthetics. Where Reich wrote with musical structures in mind, Otte wrote under the influence of the aesthetics upon which those structures are founded. Had Otte's influence stemmed from Zen Buddhist music, it may have been deemed direct or "unrefracted."

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<sup>7</sup> Locke describes various perspectives on exoticisms and refrains from declaring specific exoticisms "good" or "bad." For each case in Locke's work, and in Otte's case, determining the value of the exoticism at hand is a separate discussion. Ralph P. Locke, *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59-64.

<sup>8</sup> Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Steve Reich, "Postscript to a Brief Study of Balinese and African Music," in *Writings on Music: 1965-2000*. Edited by Paul Hillier (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 71.

Instead, Otte seems to have written *The Book of Sounds* under the influence of his practice of meditation and his own understanding of Zen Buddhist aesthetics.

Ultimately, even Otte's understanding of Zen Buddhism and Zen Buddhist aesthetics was refracted since his access to and understanding of Japanese and Zen aesthetics was predicated on the prominence of cultural figures like D. T. Suzuki. Such figures brought unprecedented attention and access to their own idiosyncratic understandings of Japanese and Zen Buddhist thought by means of lectures and publications. Their interpretations and presentations of Zen Buddhism were often considered to be particularly authentic because of their own personal relationships with Japanese culture. Yet Buddhist scholar Robert Scharf suggests that D. T. Suzuki and most Zen Buddhisms encountered in the West were derived from highly idiosyncratic perspectives and fringe Zen groups in Japan.<sup>10</sup> For example, D. T. Suzuki's writings on Buddhism show the influence of both universalizing syncretism and an undercurrent of Japanese racial superiority (*nihonjinron*).<sup>11</sup> The presence of scholars, religious figures, and gurus in the West who promoted highly individualized understandings of Zen Buddhism was on the rise following the Second World War as cultural barriers between Japan and the West lowered.<sup>12</sup> By the time that Otte began his work on *The Book of Sounds*, D. T. Suzuki had passed away leaving behind an extensive body of work. The Zen Buddhisms that were largely inspired by D. T. Suzuki and Shunryu Suzuki's presence in the West, had successively been reinterpreted in the Beat, Hippie, and New Age movements.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Scharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33/1 (1993): 40.

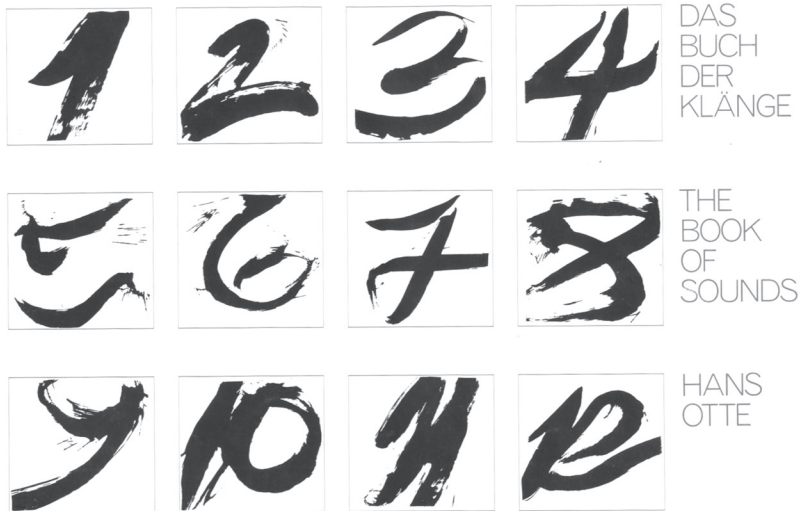
<sup>11</sup> Dharmachari Nagapriya, "Poisoned Pen Letters? D. T. Suzuki's Communication of Zen to the West," *Western Buddhist Review* 5 (October 2010), Accessed March 13, 2014, <http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol5/suzuki-gentium.html>

<sup>12</sup> J.J. Clark, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London: Routledge, 1997), 98.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-105.

The score of *The Book of Sounds* is brimming with references to the representations of Zen Buddhism prevalent in the West at the time of its composition, particularly the concept of *wabi*, translated as “solitariness” or “aloneness” by D. T. Suzuki.<sup>14</sup> The word has strong connotations of both spiritual poverty and “understated beauty.”<sup>15</sup> Even before opening the score of *The Book of Sounds*, one encounters a display of pseudo-Japanese calligraphy on the front cover: the numbers one through twelve represent the twelve movements of the work (Example 1).

**Example 1: Cover Art from *The Book of Sounds*<sup>16</sup>**



<sup>14</sup> D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 253.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Also in Graham Parkes, “Japanese Aesthetics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2011 Edition, Edited by Edward N. Zalta (Accessed February 6, 2014) <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>

<sup>16</sup> Hans Otte, *The Book of Sounds* (Munich: E. R. P. Musikverlag Eckart Rahn, 1983), cover page.

The enclosing of each calligraphic number inside a square creates a highly symmetrical order, which underscores the clean lines and simplicity of the calligraphy, and echoes the qualities associated with *wabi*. Three smaller and slightly altered versions of the cover art also occur between certain movements of the work. The cleanliness and simplicity of the calligraphy also resonates in the musical notation. All but three of the movements use exactly five staves per page and Otte's use of repeated rhythmic patterns and avoidance of bar lines leads to a highly regularized notational appearance. This is especially the case in the final movement of the work that consists almost entirely of quarter note chords (Example 2).

**Example 2: *The Book of Sounds*, Movement 12, page 1<sup>17</sup>**

Another example of *wabi* in Otte's score occurs in the fourth movement, which is made up of a monophonic melody repeated

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 28

between reoccurrences of a triplet chordal figure that constantly undergoes slight pitch alterations. Both, the notational design and the musical content result in clean lines and empty space (Example 3).

### Example 3: Lines 1-2 of Movement 4<sup>18</sup>

*Wabi* and other esthetic concepts can also be located in the notes and rhythms of the work. The first movement for example, consists of alterations between two types of material: 'A' material (consisting entirely of the pitches F, A, C, and E written as dyads) and 'B' material (consisting primarily of C, E, G, and B written as triads). The 'A' and 'B' material is slightly altered throughout the course of the work, but those alterations maintain a relatively narrow pitch content and always return to the original. The rhythms of the movement are similarly straightforward with quarter notes dominating the A material and sixteenth notes prevailing in the B material.<sup>19</sup> *Ma*, or "space/silence" and its aesthetic relative *hira*, or "cutting" can also be heard and seen in Otte's score.<sup>20</sup> Both concepts play a role in Movement 10, which is largely made up of whirring sixteenth

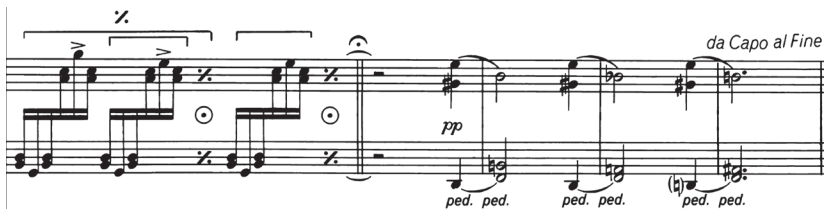
<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>20</sup> Henk Oosterling, "Living - in between - Cultures: Downsizing Intercultural Aesthetics to Daily Life," in *Intercultural Aesthetics: A Worldview Perspective*, edited by Antoon Can den Braembussche, Heinz Kimmerle, and Nicole Note (Brussels: Springer Science+Business Media B.V., 2009), 31. Explanations of terms are confirmed in Parkes, "Japanese Aesthetics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2011/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>

note sextuplet figures interrupted only once, about two-thirds of the way through the piece. Otte separates the contrasting material from what precedes and follows by means of a double bar line, fermata, pedal change, half rest, textural change, and a sudden drop in dynamic level. All of these devices “cut” the primary motive of running sixteenths from the intervening material by opening up aural space or silence (Example 4).

**Example 4: *Ma* and *Kire* in Movement 10<sup>21</sup>**



Movements 1, 2, 4, 8 and 9 use similar techniques to produce aural space that delineates highly contrasting material.

In addition to the structural echoes of Zen Buddhist concepts, Otte's description of the work and its goals echoes the rhetoric of Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, as found in his extensive writings on Buddhism. Rajneesh was an Indian philosophy professor who became a syncretic guru, and Otte's interest in Zen Buddhism in the 1960s and 70s coincided with the dramatic growth in the number of Rajneesh's disciples. Rajneesh was particularly popular in America, Britain and Germany and Otte's interest in his writings occurred at a time when Rajneesh was primarily publishing lectures and essays on Zen Buddhism. Between the years 1975 and 1982, i.e., immediately before and during Otte's work on *The Book of Sounds*, Rajneesh published eighteen books on Zen, many translated into German (an unnecessary luxury for Otte, who was fluent in English). The rhetoric of Rajneesh's writings (particularly surrounding music and meditation) had a residual effect on Otte, who uses similar language to

<sup>21</sup> Otte, *The Book of Sounds*, 25.



describe his compositional process and the goals of *The Book of Sounds*. Rajneesh speaks of “infinite music,” “music of the spheres,” or “celestial music” being, “used by many religions as an approach towards prayer – because music will make your ears more vibrant, more sensitive. One has to become more of the ears and less of the eyes.”<sup>22</sup> Rajneesh also saw parallels between music and *zazen*, or Zen Buddhist seated meditation, as well as the possibility of music aiding in the meditation process; his own *satsang*, or religious gatherings, were accompanied by music.<sup>23</sup> The following excerpts<sup>24</sup> from a German introduction to Rajneesh’s religious thought reveal the centrality of music in his philosophy and the close relationship he believed music and meditation shared.

Musik ist ein Weg, der zur Meditation führt – und der schönste von allen. Music hilft dir von aussen, mit dem inneren in Einklang zu kommen.	Music is a path that leads to the most beautiful meditation. <i>Music helps you come to inner harmony/unison/accord from the outside.</i>
Musik ist eine harmonie...zwischen Ton und Stille.	Music is a harmony...between <i>sound and silence.</i>
Musik ist äussere Meditation – Meditation ist innere Musik. Beide gehen zusammen, Hand in Hand, sie umarmen einander. Es gehört zu den grössten Erfahrungen des Lebens, so von allen seiten mit Musik eingehüllt zu sein, dass sie dich überwältigt, dich überflutet und die Meditation in dir inuner stärker wird – bis Meditation und Musik sich endlich treffen, bis Geist und Materie verschmelzen. Das ist die <i>unio mystica</i> – die mystische Vereinigung.	<i>Music is external meditation – meditation is internal music.</i> Both go together, hand in hand, they embrace one another. <i>It belongs to the greatest of life's experiences to be enveloped from all sides in music so that it overpowers you and overflows and the meditation inside of you is made stronger until meditation and music finally converge, until spirit and matter merge. That is the unio mystica – the mystical union (The English translation is my own).</i>

<sup>22</sup> Yoga Anurag Osho, *A Sudden Clash of Thunder: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh Talks on Zen Stories and Answers Questionom* (New York: Rajneesh Foundation, 1977), 29, 66, and 133.

<sup>23</sup> Rajneesh, *Rajneeshismus: Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh und seine Religion eine Einführung* (Rajneeshpuram: Rajneesh Foundation International, 1983), 34, and 52.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53

Rajneesh's use of language and his emphasis on the unity possible through listening to music and engaging in meditation is mirrored in Otte's introduction to *The Book of Sounds*.<sup>25</sup>

<p>Mit diesem "Buch der Klänge" wird der Hörer wiederentdeckt als Partner von Klang und Stille, der, auf der Suche nach seiner Welt, einmal ganz bei Klängen sein will.</p>	<p>This "Book of Sounds" rediscovers the listener as a partner of <i>sound and silence</i>, who in the quest for his world, <i>wishes for once to be totally at one with sound</i>.</p>
<p>Mit diesem "Buch der Klänge" wird das Klavier wiederentdeckt als Instrument des Klingens und Schwingens mit allen seinen Möglichkeiten der Dynamik, der Farbe, seiner Resonanz.</p>	<p>The "Book of Sounds" rediscovers the piano as an instrument of timbre and tuneful sound with all its possibilities of dynamics, colour and resonance.</p>
<p>Mit diesem "Buch der Klänge" wird das Spielen wiederentdeckt als Möglichkeit, sich klingend zu erfahren, mit all diesen Klängen im Raum, in der Zeit eins werden zu können.</p>	<p>This "Book of Sounds" rediscovers play as <i>the possibility of experiencing oneself in sound, of becoming at one in time and space with all the sounds around one</i>.</p>
<p>Mit diesem "Buch der Klänge" wird eine Welt klanglicher Erscheinungen wiederentdeckt, die erst jetzt aufgrund eines ganz anderen Bewußtseins von den Klängen auf dieser Erde geschrieben werden konnten.</p>	<p>This "Book of Sounds" rediscovers a world of consonant experience, which could only now be written because of a totally <i>changed consciousness of sounds on earth</i>.</p>

Rajneesh and Otte emphasize that music is both "sound and silence," a way to achieve inner unity, as well as the physical, non-rational experience of listening to sound. Where Rajneesh's concept of music as "sound and silence" leads to a *unio mystica*, or mystical union, Otte aspires to assist listeners who "wish for once to become totally one with sound." This unity with sound itself proves to be only an intermediary goal. At the premiere of *The Book of Sounds*, Otte poetically proclaimed

<sup>25</sup> Otte, *The Book of Sounds*, 5. German and English texts are both provided in the score.

that the piece was “for all those who want to be close to the sounds *in order to*, having become sonorous themselves, *rediscover the secret of all life*.”<sup>26</sup> For Otte, becoming one with sound leads to a *satori*, an enlightenment-like moment for the listener, and *The Book of Sounds* is a path listeners can follow to this goal. The listener, performer, and even the instrument are all part of the process of creating Otte's transforming “consonant experience.” In this way, Rajneesh's dream of “music and meditation converg[ing] ...spirit and matter merg[ing]” is brought to life by means of Otte's “rediscoveries.” Listeners achieve unity through qualities of an instrument and through performers acting as ‘meditators.’

For Otte this project of unity is possible “only now” (in the late 1970s), because of “a totally changed consciousness of sounds on earth.”<sup>27</sup> The “totally changed consciousness of sounds on earth” was a sentiment shared by many of Otte's fellow composers. Through his work as the Director of Radio Bremen and his association with the *Pro Musica Nova* festival, Otte came to be involved with a number of American composers interested in Eastern thought and music. Over the course of the 1960s, the Radio Bremen broadcasts, as well as the many festivals that he was connected with, introduced the works of John Cage, David Tudor, Frederic Rzewski, Morton Feldman, and Earle Brown to German audiences.<sup>28</sup> Over the course of the 1970s, Otte met and promoted the work of composers with even stronger connections to Eastern thought and music including La Monte Young, Terry Riley, their guru Pandit Pran Nath, Steve Reich and Nam June Paik. Each of these composers brought to the fore a unique perspective on Eastern thought, likely of interest to Otte.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmels, *Hans Otte, Klang der Klänge*, 15. Emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> Otte, *The Book of Sounds*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Amy Beal, *New Music, New Allies: American Experimental Music in West Germany from the Zero Hour to Reunification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 142-148.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 181, and 199. Also, Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 178-187.

Of particular interest for *The Book of Sounds* is La Monte Young's "rediscovery" of stasis as a "point of structure," a technique that Young linked to Western medieval and Asian music.<sup>30</sup> One prominent example of stasis in Asian music is in Japanese religious and Nōh theater music, where stillness, or **ma**, is greatly valued and excessive movement on the part of actors (or sound in the case of musicians) is discouraged. Whatever Young's reference may have been inspired by, it is likely that Otte had a general knowledge of Japanese religious ceremony and Nōh theater through D. T. Suzuki's writings. And while Otte's writing does not achieve the temporal length of Young's drones or the stasis of his (in) famous Trio, *The Book of Sounds* offers incredibly slow tempi that often result in a feeling of motionlessness. Movement 9, for example, contains whole rests that last longer than four seconds if played at Otte's suggested metronome marking of fifty-two beats per minute. Immediately following the whole rests, the piece glacially accelerates with a dotted half note followed by a half note. The opening eighth-note hendecuplets further exaggerate the ponderous pace of the ensuing music (Example 5).

### Example 5: Movement 9<sup>31</sup>

The musical score for Example 5: Movement 9 is presented in two systems. The first system shows a piano introduction with a whole rest, followed by a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo is marked as 52 beats per minute. The second system shows a series of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with dynamic markings such as mp, pp, and mf. The score includes a section labeled 'mp come prima simile'.

Often, Otte's use of highly repetitive motivic figures creates a similar effect of motionlessness by the means of remaining

<sup>30</sup> Robert Schwartz, *Minimalists* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 23.

<sup>31</sup> Otte, *The Book of Sounds*, 23.

rhythmically unvaried throughout an entire movement. Movements 3 and 8 are the clearest examples of this technique. In Movement 3 the repeated eighth notes progress at the metronome speed [MM] of 1 eighth note = 92, while in Movement 8 the pace unfolds even more laggardly, in half-note chords moving at MM of 1 quarter note = 52.

Otte's interest in slow movement and his tendency for reduced pitch content is a natural consequence of the compositional technique he employed in *The Book of Sounds*. Having reminisced on a traditionally form-obsessed compositional process in an interview with Josef Hausler, Otte stated, "My way is totally different. I often search for months to find a very particular sound and its nature, and I compose more and more in(to) this sound."<sup>32</sup> By focusing on finding and composing in a single sound, *The Book of Sounds* often contains temporal plateaus of similar pitch content that encourage the listener to focus on the sound itself rather than potentially dramatic transformations. The opening 'A' material from Movement 1 is a prime example. The repeated quarter note dyads described earlier alternate between each other indefinitely at the rate of *twenty-six beats per minute*.<sup>33</sup> By reducing the speed and the pitch content of a movement, Otte furthers his Zen-like goal of uniting the listener and the sound as one in a meditative process. By narrowing the focus of the listener while emphasizing the timbre and possibilities unique to the piano, he achieves the goals laid out in the introduction to *The Book of Sounds*.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Philipp Vandré, "Hans Otte: "Das Buch der Klänge" (1972-82)" in *Fragment Beiträge, Meinungen und Analysen zur neuen Musik* (Saarbrücken: PFAU-Verlag, 1999), 4. The English translation is my own. The original German quotation reads: "Mein Weg ist ein total anderer. Ich suche oft monatelang nach einem ganz bestimmten Klang und dessen Natur, und ich komponiere jetzt eigentlich immer mehr in diesen Klang hinein."

<sup>33</sup> Otte, *The Book of Sounds*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 5.

*The Book of Sounds* was published in 1983 by Celestial Harmonies and its German division E. R. P. Musikverlag, a record company founded in 1979, the very same year that Otte began writing his piano cycle.<sup>35</sup> Just three years after publishing Otte's score, Celestial Harmonies released selections from the work on a recording entitled *Keys of Life*, also featuring works by Terry Riley and Alexander Scriabin. The release was hailed as the "ultimate New Age piano recording" in the 1989 *New Age Music Guide*.<sup>36</sup> Thus, despite Ahmel's protests,<sup>37</sup> Otte "fell victim" to being labeled as a New Age composer, a fate similar to that of Terry Riley, as described by Taruskin: "Like any other once-new music, Riley's was often assimilated in the minds of its critics to the routine practices it had helped set in motion, and it suffered in retrospect the negative judgments the routines inspired."<sup>38</sup> Beneath our accumulated cultural associations, *The Book of Sounds* offers a unique representation of Zen Buddhist principles in musical form. Having ingested the idiosyncratic messages of D. T. Suzuki and Rajneesh, Otte's piano cycle musically refracted his own understanding of their works and unconsciously abetted the wondrously complex reception of Zen Buddhism in the West.

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<sup>35</sup> Henk Werkhoven, *The International Guide to New Age Music* (New York: Billboard Books, 1998), 180-181.

<sup>36</sup> Patti Jean Birocik, *The New Age Music Guide: Profiles and Recordings of 500 Top New Age Musicians* (New York: Collier Books, 1989), 30.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmels, *Hans Otte, KlangderKlange*, 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Late Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 367.

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