



# Arvo Pärt

SOUNDING THE SACRED

*Peter C. Bouteneff,  
Jeffers Engelhardt,  
and Robert Saler*

EDITORS

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## Sounding Structure, Structured Sound

Toomas Siitan

A close colleague said something to me a few years ago while I was preparing a lengthy lecture series on Arvo Pärt's works for the University of Tartu, and the comment is still fresh in my mind: "It is going to be a real challenge for you to show that pieces Pärt composed during different periods were all done by the same person!" For me, Pärt's works have always formed an integral whole, no matter how dissimilar their soundscapes may be. But my colleague was right: *Am* I capable of putting together a consistent picture for those who hear polar opposites in Pärt's work from different periods? There are contrasts not only of style but also of genre to think about here: Likely there is no other composer of postwar avant-garde music who gained fame for writing serialist pieces who has also written popular children's songs and music for dozens of films and plays (with a preference for animation and puppet theater).

In the canon of scholarly Pärt interpretation (if such a thing already exists), it is common to speak of a watershed moment in the late 1960s and 1970s: On the one side is *Credo* (1968), in which Pärt bids a firm farewell to serialism and collage, and on the other is his invention of the "tintinnabuli" style in 1976. Between these two points were seven or eight years of "silence," or "transition years," as Peter Bouteneff has termed it with much greater accuracy,<sup>1</sup> since it would be entirely incorrect to give the impression that the composer wasn't working intensely during that period. During this time of transition, Pärt composed not only his pivotal Symphony No. 3 (1971) but also the seven-movement oratorio *Laul armastatule* (*Song to the Loved One*, 1971–1973, later withdrawn by Pärt; text by the medieval Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli) and scores for twenty movies. Pärt's emigration to the West in January 1980 — just a handful of years after arriving at his new style of composition — articulates

these two contrasting stages of life and composition. This framework is an adequate heuristic, but it can easily become a cliché that prevents one from noticing the clear links connecting these creative periods. For instance, Pärt was indeed especially active in researching early music in the early 1970s, but the traditional titles used for several of his works already composed during his student years and the canon techniques in his Symphony No. 1 (“Polyphonic,” in two movements: 1. Canons, 2. Prelude and Fugue, 1963) point not only to the neoclassicism prevalent in Soviet music at the time but also allude to his focus on traditional polyphonic technique, which led him to the use of dodecaphony, or twelve-tone serialism. References to Bach in several of Pärt’s works of the 1960s, especially his consistent use of Bach’s initials as head-motifs for ten- or twelve-tone rows in a number of his compositions in 1964 (*Diagramme*, *Missa syllabica*, *Quintettino*, *Collage über B-A-C-H*) all seem to lead up to a particular piece: *Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte* (1976), which is one of the most complex but least-performed and understudied of Pärt’s works from the year he invented the tintinnabuli style.

Pärt’s compositional method has been characterized by the search for a solid yet simple structural anchor in his earliest works. At the same time, a central facet of his creative process has been the shaping of a composition’s structural concept to complement an expressive, communicative gesture. The significant role of film and theater music in Pärt’s compositions from the 1960s is thus in no way coincidental or marginal. What is more, children were often his intended audience: The composer used these genres as a “creative laboratory” for trying out new structural concepts, such as his “serial architecture,” which Christopher May has wittily analyzed using the example of Pärt’s soundtrack for the 1962 stop-motion film *Väike motoroller* (*The Little Motor Scooter*).<sup>2</sup> Leida Laius (1923–1996) — the first film director with whom Pärt collaborated — was also astounded by the composer’s visual, playwright-like instincts when he assisted in the film-editing process.

Allow me to point out a simple, vivid example of the connection between illustrative gesture and organizational structure in one of Pärt’s earliest compositions: *Dance of the Ducklings* (*Pardipoegade tants*) from the cycle *Four Easy Dances for Piano: Music for Children’s Theater* (*Neli lihtsat tantsu klaverile. Muusika lastenäidenditele*, 1956–1959). In the foundational structure of this children’s piano piece, Pärt implemented the very same “musical archetypes” (the diatonic scale and triadic harmony) that Leopold Brauneiss refers to as a starting point for the tintinnabuli style.<sup>3</sup> Here we encounter the mirroring of musical elements that is so common in tintinnabuli, but what is most inventive is how Pärt ties the horizontal to the vertical: Arpeggiated clusters played with the right hand, which resemble a duck waddling over the white keys,

## Tanz der Entenküken

Pardipoegade tants \* Dance Of The Ducklings

Arvo Pärt  
(1956/ 57)

Maßvoll / Parajalt / Measured

8va

*p*

8va

*f*

Figure 1. *Dance of the Ducklings* (Pardipoegade tants) from the cycle *Four Easy Dances for Piano: Music for Children's Theater* (Neli lihtsat tantsu klaverile. Muusika lastenäidenditele, Eres 2163). Reproduced with the permission of Eres Edition.

correspond both in pitch content and the ambitus of their movement to a left-hand scale that is twice as slow (Figure 1). Similar proportional canons are frequently found in Pärt's later pieces, where identical material assembles in layers that move in various rhythmic proportions.

Pärt's first twelve-tone scores, composed as a student, did not yet feature a strong, systematic buildup when joining horizontal and vertical dimensions. However, a clear shift occurred in the composer's style immediately after completing his graduate work (Symphony No. 1, titled "Polyphonic"), with the sensationally successful orchestral piece *Perpetuum mobile*, composed in 1963. Here, the more narrative form of his earlier works is replaced by the strict, mathematical, systematic nature of serial technique. Paul Hillier correctly notes that *Perpetuum mobile* "incarnates a compositional archetype,"<sup>4</sup> which becomes characteristic of a great number of Pärt's later works as well — pieces are shaped as a dynamic ebb and flow with a culmination around the golden section, for instance.

After a 1964 performance of *Perpetuum mobile* in Venice, the Italian music critic Giacomo Manzoni wrote that "the composer has not directed useless

attention to any kind of popular trend, but has absorbed and generalized the most important experiences of recent years.”<sup>5</sup> This opinion is paradoxical: In Soviet Estonia, Pärt could only have had a cursory familiarity with the “important experiences” Manzoni believed he had integrated. Pärt was included in the Warsaw Autumn Festival of Contemporary Music, which was the Eastern bloc’s primary (and virtually only) forum for avant-garde music, the same year he composed *Perpetuum mobile* (1963). He relied more on general principles than on “experiences,” and the piece met with success as a result of the extreme rationality of the composer’s vision as well as its extreme simplicity of structure. The fact that Pärt’s manner of compositional thinking was primarily on the structural level in late 1963 is vividly represented by the pruning down of *Perpetuum mobile*’s structure in the choral miniature *Solfeggio*. Instead of a twelve-tone row, the piece features the simplest archetype of what is considered a series: the C-major scale. *Solfeggio* can even be regarded as a “prototintinnabuli” composition: Although triads are not among the base elements, its maximal structural reduction, modes of expression, and harmonic aesthetics, which reconcile the interlaced dissonances into euphony, connect the work to Pärt’s later style.

The structural patterns that recur in Pärt’s work produce diverse sonic results. Pärt had already experimented in the 1960s with various means of structuring that move from work to work and later shape his compositions in the tintinnabuli style. For example, *Perpetuum mobile*’s great dynamic swell and consequent fragmentation are the result of Pärt’s adding and subtracting of structural elements: Layers of progressively shorter durations are added together according to an orderly mathematical pattern to arrive at a culmination of extreme rhythmic complexity, followed by a *diminuendo* that is crafted by a subtraction of layers. The extended swelling to a culmination in the first movement of Pärt’s cello concerto *Pro et contra* (1966) has an entirely different musical feel, but the principle behind its structuring is comparable.

Mathematical order helped Pärt distance himself from the subjective and emotional realms of music. By concentrating on basic musical elements, he invented a range of archetypal compositional methods for future use. For instance, Pärt’s 1977 double concerto *Tabula rasa*—his first longer tintinnabuli composition—uses mathematical logic in its structuring similar to the kind in *Perpetuum mobile* and *Pro et contra*, although the new musical landscape seems like the polar opposite of his earlier style. Commenting on his 1960s serial compositions in an interview with Enzo Restagno, Pärt states:

At that time I was convinced that every mathematical formula could be translated into music. I thought that in this way one could create a



more objective and purer kind of music. If I had succeeded by other means in creating a music free of emotions, I would have been able to distance myself from twelve-tone music.<sup>6</sup>

Formulaic writing tends to work the opposite way in tintinnabuli compositions: They no longer seek the musical expression of a formula but instead the formula *for* a musical gesture. In his monograph on Pärt, Hillier quotes from a conversation the composer had with a group of students at the University of Oregon in 1994: “A composition comes as a single gesture which is already, in essence, music. . . . The compositional task is to find the appropriate system for the gesture.”<sup>7</sup>

Serialism enabled Pärt to create coherent musical spaces in which melodic and harmonic aspects derive from the same formula. However, the resulting harmonic dimension no longer satisfied him, and during the transition years of the 1970s, Pärt sought to join melody and harmony just as coherently, but in a different way. Prototypes drawn from the history of Western concert music — diatonicism and triadic harmony — are clearly recognizable in Pärt’s Symphony No. 3 (1971), where he attempted to roll complexity back into simplicity while adhering to a strictly systematic mode of writing.

## Historical Resonances I: Flemish Polyphony

Pärt has discussed his deep interest in fifteenth-century Flemish polyphony during the early 1970s. His first unmistakable reference to music of this era, which he never used in the 1960s collage works, comes in his Symphony No. 3, which features the emblematic use of the so-called Landini cadence characteristic of early fifteenth-century Flemish vocal polyphony. A cornerstone of this style is the fauxbourdon technique, which integrates melodic line and triadic harmony into a systemic whole using a three-part texture. An accompanying line that follows the melody in parallel sixths and octaves is added, while a lower parallel fourth moves along mechanically with the upper line. The result is a chain of 6/3 chords framed by 8/5 chords. The connection to Pärt’s tintinnabuli technique is obvious: Both have a rigid bond between melodic line and triadic harmony, and the harmonic plane does not form freely but instead scrupulously follows the melodic movement, adding a vertical dimension.

This technique, which first appeared in European music around 1430 in the compositions of Guillaume Du Fay (1397–1474), is heard explicitly in many of Pärt’s pieces: After his Symphony No. 3, it appeared in *Littlemore Tractus* (2000) and *Da pacem Domine* (2004), for instance. As such, this Flemish

texture has accompanied Pärt for more than forty years. It is also worth noting that at a concert given by the Estonian early music ensemble Hortus Musicus on October 27, 1976, in Tallinn — the first public performance of the tintinnabuli style — Guillaume Du Fay's *Missa L'homme armé* was performed for the second half of the concert. The choice of style and genre as a companion to Pärt's works cannot be coincidental, especially since Flemish vocal polyphony was rather rare in Hortus Musicus' repertoire. During a public discussion with Pärt held at the Estonian Composers' Festival on June 7, 2013, at St. John's Church, in Tartu, I asked him how conscious he is of this stylistic prototype in his work. The question appeared to confuse him: Apparently, Pärt does not think in the same categories as music scholars and arrived at the connection only through prolonged concentration and reflection.

## Word, Text, Music I

Binary opposites exist in music's foundations: sound and silence, movement and stasis, tradition and originality, tonic and dominant, melody and harmony, to name only a few. Pärt endeavors to transcend each of these oppositions in his own way. Schoenberg attempted to transcend the binary of consonance and dissonance as well, but by declaring the equality of all pitches, the outcome was pandissonant music. Already in *Solfeggio* (1963), Pärt sought equality between the seven pitches of the diatonic scale and created a captivating soundscape characterized by dissonant seconds and sevenths continually sounding together, with dissonance now reduced to the qualities in the major scale. Leopold Brauneiss has interpreted the tintinnabuli technique as "the second emancipation of dissonance": it is not avoided or resolved but placed in a balancing triadic context.<sup>8</sup>

Verbal text has a very specific role in Pärt's work. The relationship between text and music can be seen as another binary in the tradition of Western concert music, and Pärt strives to transcend this as well. "The words write my music," he has remarked, which means that Pärt seeks musical structures that are as analogous to texts and speech patterns as possible.<sup>9</sup> German Baroque music displays a similar humility before words, especially in terms of scriptural texts: Heinrich Schütz, for example, called himself "a translator of the story into music," as evidenced in many of his compositions' titles.<sup>10</sup> Baroque composers endeavored to harmonize musical sound and the semantics and rhetorical qualities of a text in order to reveal "the whole meaning" (*die ganze Meinung*) of words, thereby becoming their interpreters. Pärt, on the other hand, proceeds from the formal structure of the word, since he believes in the semantic self-satiety of texts: The full message is perfectly contained within

the words, and music merely endeavors to serve and perform, giving the words a sound-based existence.<sup>11</sup>

In *Missa syllabica* (1977), Pärt devised a simple mathematical method for handling text. Initially, the method calculated the number of syllables in a word, but later it accounted for sentence structure (*Cantate Domino canticum novum*, 1977; *De profundis*, 1980), punctuation (*Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem*, 1982), and accentuation (*Te Deum*, 1984/85). In *Stabat Mater* (1985), Pärt expanded the textual rules to encompass some of the instrumental *ritornelli*<sup>12</sup>—inversions of the preceding vocal phrases—that subdivide the large-scale work. Thus, the compositional formula for instrumental passages is likewise derived from the text of the corresponding phrase. Pärt repeated this same procedure in several parts of *Berliner Messe* (1990). The possibility to write for instruments on the basis of text was something of a revelation: In September 1985, right around his fiftieth birthday, Pärt drafted *Psalom* (initially without definite instrumentation) on the basis of Psalm 112 (113), and in 1991–92, three pieces comprised a series of instrumental works with “silent texts”: *Silouan’s Song* (dedicated to one of Pärt’s greatest spiritual role models, Archimandrite Sophrony and his brethren), the original version of *Psalom* for string quartet, and *Trisagion*. With *Trisagion*, the text was written into the original score; elsewhere, Pärt merely alluded to the textual associations until he published them in the book *In Principio* (2014).

The instrumental pieces written for silent texts<sup>13</sup> bear particular significance for Pärt: Those expressing personal faith are written in Church Slavonic or Russian (the language of Pärt’s religious practice); several pieces bear connections to Archimandrite Sophrony and St. Silouan the Athonite, who are major spiritual figures in Pärt’s life; and in most (with the exception of *Lamentate*), a homogenous string sound that mimics the sensitive articulation of liturgical recitation is central to the piece. Initially, the connection to a prayer (the Canon to the Holy Guardian Angel) was the most cryptic element of Pärt’s Symphony No. 4 “Los Angeles.” The title appeared to be more closely associated with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, which commissioned the piece, and its dedication to the imprisoned Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky gave the work a political subtext that was difficult to tie to its musical expression. Pärt, whom the media has long portrayed as a hermetic, monastic figure, had issued strong political statements before, comparing, for example, the October 2006 murder of Anna Politkovskaya to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and dedicating all performances of his works to the journalist’s memory during the 2006–2007 season. Pärt’s political statements are not contradictory, because he believes change can only be brought about by prayer that is not perceived externally—just like his “silent text” works. Pärt’s politically

charged protest in *Credo* was similar: He sought egress not through opposition to violence but through a change within oneself. The lesson from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount, which Pärt chose for the culmination of *Credo* — “But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil” — remained unintelligible to its Estonian audience at the time, being in Latin, and was of course not translated in the program. This text — the very first that Pärt used in a piece after his student years — also remained “silent,” in a way.

## Historical Resonances II: Conrad Beissel

It is difficult to find authored examples of music structured around the accents and number of syllables in words, such as is common in Pärt's text-based compositions; however, the connection is prevalent in liturgical chanting. One surprising parallel comes from North America — from the German religious émigrés in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. In 1732, German-born Conrad Beissel (1691–1768) founded the Ephrata Community of pietistic religious refugees — der Lager der Einsamen (the Camp of the Solitaries, or the Ephrata Cloister of the Seventh-Day Baptists), a Protestant community of mystical Christian devotion and practice.<sup>14</sup> Beissel, who remained the community's spiritual leader until his death, was an outstanding amateur musician, composing over one thousand hymns and appointing himself Kapellmeister of the Ephrata Cloister.<sup>15</sup> Entirely self-taught, Beissel created a singular system of harmony. The historical accounts of visitors to the Ephrata community tell of the peculiar sweetness, strange beauty, impressive cadence, and even angelic or celestial quality of its hymns and choral pieces.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas Mann describes Beissel's activities with remarkable historical precision in chapter 8 of his novel *Doctor Faustus*. He details Beissel's harmonic system, which was based on rational chord tables, and suggests that Beissel can be viewed as a forerunner of twentieth-century serialism. His simple, purely text-based rhythmic system has also attracted attention. Accented syllables were marked with longer notes and unstressed syllables with shorter notes, without there being a definite relation between the durations. Even so, the basis for Beissel's compositional method was a simple melodic teaching that divided notes into “masters” and “servants”: “Having decided to regard the common chord as the melodic center of any given key, he called the ‘masters’ the notes belonging to this chord, and the rest of the scale ‘servants.’ And those syllables of a text upon which the accent lay had always to be presented by a ‘master,’ the unaccented by a ‘servant.’”<sup>17</sup> This entire description resembles to a remarkable degree the principles of musical composition, and especially the approach to text, that have characterized Pärt's works for forty years.

## Word, Text, Music II

The Word is sacred: This conviction has shaped the relationship between text and music for both Beissel and Pärt. Pärt included the opening verses of the Gospel of John (1:1–14) in *In principio*, his masterpiece from 2003, and one of his most oft-quoted statements puts this in context: “Sound is my word. I am convinced that sound should also speak of what the Word determines. The Word, which was in the beginning.”<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it would not be misconstrued simply to say: “Sound is the Word.” And as in the Christian tradition, if Jesus is understood as God’s Word, God’s perfect self-expression,<sup>19</sup> then we may perhaps even paraphrase in this way: “Music is the self-expression of the Word.” In this sense, Pärt seeks a hypostatic union between the Word/*logos* and music as it is understood in Christian theological tradition, as well as in the way Nicholas of Cusa understands the union between Man and universe in his renowned *De docta ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*) (1440).

Postwar avant-garde music has often been accused of intellectualism, set against a “mourning for the loss of naïveté adapted and exploited by mass culture,” as Theodor Adorno puts it.<sup>20</sup> However, a similar sense of mourning arises from the sharpened perception of a lost natural feeling of unity and from the breaking of tradition. Just as how “coinciding opposites” have shaped the aesthetics of Pärt’s compositions on various levels,<sup>21</sup> so has the composer consistently sought a connection between the intellectual and the naïve — and here, naïveté should be understood as “pure,” “natural,” “complete,” and “not self-reflective,” in Friedrich Schiller’s sense in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry*,<sup>22</sup> thereby contradicting judgments that derive from reason and understanding. These categories appear as opposites in Pärt’s early work, where extremely rational forms of musical expression stand side by side with music written for children, or in his Symphony No. 2 (1966), where the anguish of dodecaphony contrasts with a starkly emotional passage from Tchaikovsky’s *Sweet Daydream* — a piece published in his classic 1878 album of children’s piano pieces. Opposites were united in the “complex simplicity” of Pärt’s tintinnabuli technique.

Throughout his compositions, Pärt seeks to create music congruent with the laws of harmony and a Pythagorean notion of the cosmos’s numerical structure. Since many of his own aphorisms are quoted with excessive frequency but still more of his thoughts are preserved only in private notebooks, allow me to conclude with a quotation from Sofia Gubaidulina, Pärt’s peer in terms of generation and artistic ideas. Their respective modes of compositional expression, both of which matured under the conditions of Soviet oppression, are dissimilar in nature but nevertheless linked by a similar understanding of music’s role and deeper meaning:

Many have said that music is the most spiritual form of art there is. I've wondered: why is this, exactly? The thing is that we musicians deal with a sound, with a single tone. And that in and of itself contains the pattern of the universe. The fundamental laws of everything that exists are in a constant state of pushing and pulling. And that exists in our material, in sound, which is vibration. It isn't a metaphor or a symbol — it's a fact. It contains the divine pattern of all existence. No other form of art has this kind of material.<sup>23</sup>

When a composer like Arvo Pärt seeks the most elementary and coherent sound structures, he is not striving for simplicity or widespread communication in his music. Rather, what he is pursuing is *unio mystica* — unity with the self-expression of the universe.

## Notes

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7. Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 201.
8. Leopold Brauneiss, "Vähem on rohkem: vabatahtlik enesepiirang tintinnabuli-stiilis, selle olemus ja tähendus esteetilises, kultuurilises ja vaimses kontekstis," in *Arvo Pärdi tintinnabuli-stiil: arhetüübid ja geomeetria*, ed. Saale Kareda (Laulasmaa: Arvo Pärt Centre, 2017), 39.
9. Toomas Siitan, "Introduction," in *In Principio: The Word in Arvo Pärt's Music*, ed. Hedi Rosma et al. (Laulasmaa: Arvo Pärt Centre, 2014), 13.
10. E.g., Heinrich Schütz, *Historia der frölichen und Siegreichen Aufferstehung unsers einigen Erlösers und Seligmachers Jesu Christi . . . in die Music übersetzt durch Henrich Schützen* (Dresden: Gimel Bergen, 1623).
11. Siitan, "Introduction," 11.
12. E.g., in bars 128–132, 228–232, 245–248, etc.
13. *Psalom* (1985/1991), *Silouan's Song* (1991), *Trisagion* (1992), *Orient & Occident*

(2000), *Lamentate* (2002), *Für Lennart in memoriam* (2006), Symphony No. 4 “Los Angeles” (2008).

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17. Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter (London: David Campbell, 1992), 64.

18. Rosma et al., eds., *In Principio*, 5.

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21. Leopold Brauneiss, “The Unification of Opposites: The Tintinnabuli Style in the Light of the Philosophy of Nicolaus Cusanus,” *Music & Literature* 1 (2012): 53–60.

22. Friedrich Schiller, “Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung,” *Die Horen* (1795/96).

23. Sofia Gubaidulina, interview with Timo Steiner (18:40–20:30), *MI*, Estonian Public Broadcasting (ETV), October 20, 2016, <http://arhiiv.err.ee/guid/20161020115300201000300112290E2BA238B440000004380B00000D0F028004>.