

# Tacit Texts: Considerations on Pärt's Settings of the Word

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## Abstract

As Arvo Pärt scholarship continues to deepen, considerable attention has been paid to the role of the text in Pärt's compositions. Most of his *tintinnabuli* works are textual settings, and there are enough quotations from the composer to indicate that the texts are extremely important to him and his work. This essay investigates the compositions in which the text shapes the music but is not sung, and poses questions about why the composer chooses to leave certain texts unheard, how this music is received, and whether or not the text can be said to play a role in that reception.

The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son.  
And this Word He always speaks in eternal silence,  
and in silence must It be heard by the soul.  
(St. John of the Cross, *Maxims on Love*, 21)

The study of Arvo Pärt's music – both of its genesis and its impact – has increasingly been touched by questions of theology and religious experience. Many aspects of Pärt's work have no need of analysis at the theological or spiritual levels. Yet there are areas of Pärt's output where the avoidance of such topics would either be disingenuous or be missing something fundamental. Once one does embark on it, the attempt to bring theology and musicology into conversation is liable to face some methodological problems that go beyond the challenges common to multidisciplinary study. The main issue that must be laid bare before an academic readership is that the points of connection or dissonance between music and theology – and perhaps even more so between music and spirituality/experience – generally do not lend themselves to incontrovertible proof or substantiation. An author exploring such connections must of course work on the basis of fixed data in musicology and history, as well as in demonstrated theological concepts and spiritual practice. But I am convinced that some of the more useful and resonant statements and conclusions must be made at a more intuitive and therefore less demonstrable level. These can only be propositional in their character, and their

reception will inevitably be mixed.<sup>1</sup> This has been the approach in all my writing on Arvo Pärt, as I have sometimes made explicit (e.g., Bouteneff 2015: 16–20). And it is the case with the present essay.

Much has been written about the role of text: the logogenic nature of many if not most of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* compositions, the way in which the syllables shape the melodies, etc. Yet there comes a point where it becomes inevitable to comment on the fact that not only does the overwhelming majority of Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* oeuvre consist in text settings, but all but a handful of the set texts are explicitly sacred in their character. They are devoted to the praise of God, the calling on God, Jesus, Mary, the angels, et al. in prayer, often as passages from the scriptures or liturgical hymnography. The statistics are clear and rather overwhelming: the vast majority of Pärt's post-1976 compositions are settings of sacred texts.

Here too there is still much to say without venturing into theology or spirituality. But the composer's dependence upon text to give his music its shape, character, and sound is such that he has said that the *words* actually *write* his music, that his music is "a mere translation of the words". They do so through more than just the syllabic

<sup>1</sup> For example, my assertion (repeated at the close of this essay) that Arvo Pärt's compositions are acts of prayer would be impossible to substantiate. It is founded on a combination of evidence and intuition. Its use or its meaninglessness is for the reader to discern.

contours which give the melody its shape. If the texts did not mean anything to the composer (and we all know that they mean a great deal to him) the words would not be front-and-centre in the compositions, as they are. As the composer has said, "... sound should also speak about what the Word determines. The Word, which was in the beginning" (epigraph to *In Principio. The Word in Arvo Pärt's Music*).

These two registers of the imprint of text upon music, the affective and the syllabic, are not mutually exclusive; they are usually deployed in combination. Together, their primary aim would seem to be two-fold. One is to give the music an organic rhythm, a breathed quality. It flows with the sound of spoken or sung phrases. It respirates. The scores reveal this visually. But the other motivation is to serve the reception of the text. A listener is more apt – not just to hear the text, but to receive and comprehend it, when it is either sung in a rhythm that mimics the spoken or read poetically. Furthermore, the meaning of the text is enhanced through a deft application of the language of music. Again, his music is a translation of the words. I spoke on this theme in an unpublished lecture at the Arvo Pärt Centre in 2019 (Bouteneff 2019).

However, the centrality of the text to Pärt's compositions, and especially their reception by the listener, is complicated by those of his compositions where the text, as text, is in fact *unheard*. At least seven of Arvo Pärt's compositions are text settings whose text is unsung. The text is there, but it is set to instrumentations and ensembles without singers: *Psalom*, *Silouan's Song*, *Trisagion*, *Orient & Occident*, *Lamentate*, *Für Lennart in memoriam*, *These Words ...*, and *Symphony No. 4 Los Angeles*.<sup>2</sup>

I had suggested above that the words shape Arvo Pärt's music with the intention of their proper hearing and understanding, so that they are *received*, in a verbal sense, by the listener. These compositions, their texts silent, defy such an interpretation. The words still shape the music; the syllabic rules are still in effect. But having given the music its structure, they then fall away, leaving us their rhythm, and a less-quantifiable

affective trace. The words also impart the character of flow, of breath, mentioned above. But as to textual meaning, these compositions serve as challenging case studies in the relationship between composer and text, text and music, music and listener.

There are also instances of the unsung-text phenomenon *within* some of the sung compositions. That happens in the interlude passages for example in the *Berliner Messe*, where an instrumental passage is shaped by the words that had just been sung, as if to "repeat" them for a kind of subliminal emphasis. There, however, it isn't as if the listener is guessing as to textual meaning, because she has just heard the text itself. With the unsung compositions identified above, the listener is bereft of the verbal content.

Let me begin with a few remarks about each of these compositions in turn, on the way towards gleanings further insights.

- The earliest of the textually silent compositions is *Psalom*, dating from 1985. Like many of Pärt's compositions, it is taken from the Psalms, in this case Psalm 113 (112), in Church Slavonic.
- *Silouan's Song* (1991) – text is from the writings of St Silouan, in Russian.
- *Trisagion* (1992) – text is from the Trisagion prayers through "Our Father", in Church Slavonic.
- *Orient & Occident* (1999/2000) – text is from the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, in Church Slavonic.
- *Lamentate* (2002) – text is from the Orthodox prayer tradition – troparia in conjunction with the reading of the psalms (with the *Dies irae* interpolated), in Church Slavonic.
- *Für Lennart in memoriam* (2006) – texts are from the canon sung at funerals (as well as within the Canon of Repentance) and from a prayer composed by St Sophrony (Sakharov), in Church Slavonic.
- *Symphony No. 4 Los Angeles* (2008) – preceded in kernel form by *These Words ...* of the same year (*In Principio*, pp. 226–228). Text is from the Canon to the Guardian Angel, in Church Slavonic.

<sup>2</sup> The textual basis of these compositions is attested in *In Principio* p. 17, see also pp. 96–97; 126–127; 132–133; 182–183; 198–199; 216–217; 238–240 respectively.

Let me now offer some observations and then suggest some possible explanations, interpretations, and insights.

1. These compositions date from well after the period where the composer needed to shroud his faith, and the religious character of the music (as was the case for *Credo*, for example). Otherwise, that might have made for a plausible explanation for the text's silence.
2. They appear to come in one- or two-year bursts. After *Psalom*, the trailblazer and the outlier from 1985, we have *Silouan's Song* and *Trisagion* coming in 1991 and 1992, *Orient & Occident* and *Lamentate* in 1999/2000 and 2002, and *Für Lennart* and the Fourth Symphony in 2006 and 2008. This is merely an observed pattern from which I hesitate to draw any profound conclusions.
3. There is generally little or no interest in drawing the listener's attention to the underlying text of these compositions. Most of their titles bear no hint of their textual basis. *Psalom* and *Trisagion* are potentially exceptions, although the title does not indicate which "Psalom" is being referenced, and only those versed in Greek terminology for Christian prayer will know what "Trisagion" means. In some cases, the title is rather distant from the text, such as *Orient & Occident*. A setting of the Nicene Creed in Church Slavonic, this composition is named not only for the text but also for the compositional device according to which it is conceived – the words take turns, one word in chords, referring to Western music, and every other word in monophony, approximating to Eastern style of chant. The Creed simply provides an underlying structure. The composition does take on a character that is at the same time solemn and celebratory, appropriate to the Creed. But how different it is from *Silouan's Song*, for example, with its stirring musical evocation of a "soul that yearns after the Lord ...". Likewise, the liner notes for these compositions in their premiere recordings on ECM

usually bear no reference to the texts. Symphony No. 4, and *Für Lennart* are the exceptions, where the text is identified in passing, but the text itself is not provided in those cases either.<sup>3</sup> It is only in the Arvo Pärt Centre publication *In Principio: The Word in Arvo Pärt's Music*, that any real attention is drawn to the textual basis of these compositions.

Indeed, even if the text played a strong role in the composition process, the composer's concern for the textual reception of his compositions seems to vary widely. In some cases, the performance puts the text front and centre. One thinks of *The Deer's Cry, Which Was the Son of ...*, *Bogoróditse Djévo*, and *Adam's Lament*, for example, where the text is clear as a bell. We may also recall the importance of the text in *Adam's Lament*, demonstrated in the fact that at some of its most significant performances,<sup>4</sup> the text was projected on the walls of the concert hall while being sung – with the composer's enthusiastic blessing – for maximum reception.

Evidently, then, sometimes the text's reception means more to the composer than at other times. Sometimes even with the same text, as is the case in the Creed in *Orient & Occident*, versus the Creed in the *Berliner Messe, Summa*, or any other of Pärt's settings of it. And sometimes even within the same composition, as is the case for those works that began as sung texts and – in later instrumental reorchestrations – became unsung (among other examples: *Summa, Sieben Magnificat-Antiphonen, Littlemore Tractus*, and *Da Pacem Domine*).<sup>5</sup>

4. All of the unsung texted compositions, without exception, are in Russian or Church Slavonic. (Other Slavonic and Russian texts are sung, but these are not.) This must be significant. The logical explanations for this fact could include the following:
  - The consecrated nature of the Church Slavonic language itself, which was created on the pattern of ecclesiastical Greek with

<sup>3</sup> See *Arvo Pärt. Te Deum* 1993. CD. ECM New Series 1505; *Arvo Pärt. Litany* 1996. CD. ECM New Series 1592; *Arvo Pärt. Orient & Occident* 2002. CD. ECM New Series 1729; *Arvo Pärt. Lamentate* 2005. CD. ECM New Series 1930; *Arvo Pärt. In Principio* 2009. CD. ECM New Series 2050; *Arvo Pärt. Symphony No. 4* 2010. CD. ECM New Series 2160.

<sup>4</sup> Such as at Carnegie Hall, 31 May 2014.

<sup>5</sup> As *Greater Antiphons, Swansong*, and there is one version so far of *Vater unser* for saxophone quartet.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Liivika Simmul for this suggestion.

the sole purpose of giving voice to sacred scripture and church hymnography.<sup>6</sup>

- The sonic nature of the Slavonic and Russian languages, the way in which syllables are formed in these related Slavic tongues.
- The particular character of classical and ecclesiastical music emanating from Russia. It has already been observed that, for Pärt, the language of a composition's text frequently influences the harmonic character of the composition. His Slavic-texted compositions, as a rule, tend to sound Slavic.
- Two of these compositions emanate from the world of Silouan/Sophrony, which is especially meaningful to our composer. Yet not all of the Silouan-based compositions are silent – to wit, *Adam's Lament*, where text is front-and-centre, booming forth with syllabic enunciation and emotive contours.
- Finally, might it not be a matter of the place that Russian and Slavonic languages occupy within the heart and soul of the composer? We do know that Pärt found the depth of his religious faith squarely within the context of not just Orthodox Christianity, but specifically *Russian Orthodoxy*. As complex as that may have been on political and cultural levels during a time of Soviet-occupied Estonia, it is a reality. And I venture to suggest that Russian and Slavonic are the chief languages of his prayer.

...

Now that I have invoked prayer, rushing in like a fool where angels fear to tread, I will continue to “speak as a madman” (cf. 2 Cor 11:23) and suggest some parallels between these compositions and the life of prayer. The scriptures and the ascetical writers of the Church advocate a prayer that is unceasing (cf. 1 Thess 5:17) – even if that prayer is not necessarily heard. Indeed, there are roughly three registers on which prayer may dwell. One is spoken prayer, that is articulated and heard. Another is silent prayer, which is still recited but not heard. This is the register we may focus on a little longer, owing to its relevance to the unsung texts. Most often this unheard prayer is of the repetitive kind, such as the Jesus Prayer or another short, cyclic prayer. Let me give a relevant, lived example: at the Monastery of St John the Baptist,

founded by St Sophrony on the principles of St Silouan, there are twice-daily services devoted to the communal recitation of the Jesus Prayer. It is recited, by one monastic after another, in series of 100 petitions each. Sometimes during this recitation, the monk or nun will fall silent, but the repetitions continue, internally, silently. You wouldn't know that they are praying by the sound of it, but the context tells you that they are praying, and you know very well the words they are praying. I invite the reader to take a moment to imagine this – an audible recitation of the repeated Jesus Prayer, punctuated by the *inaudible* recitation of the Jesus Prayer.

It feels to me as if this is what is happening with most, if not all, of our tacit-texted compositions. The prayer is there, but silent.

Let us now at least mention that a third register of prayer is devoid of words entirely – it is more like a state of being. But even this wordless state of prayer bears the character and significance of words. It is prayer where the word itself is not only unheard, it is not even thought. Yet the word is the basis of it all. The psalmist attributes this kind of prayer to the stars in the sky. In their beauty and their mysterious movements they are *wordlessly speaking* of God:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;  
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours forth speech,  
and night to night declares knowledge.

**There is no speech, nor are there words;  
their voice is not heard;  
yet their voice goes out through all the**

**earth,**

**and their words to the end of the world.**

Psalm 19:1–4

The heavens – the sky and the stars – are without speech and words, yet their words go out to the ends of the world. Such are the inevitable ironies of life in all its wonder, experienced by human beings who are, at their core, word-bearing creatures. We perceive the “words” (in Greek, *logoi*) underlying realities, even when there are no words.

Where does this psalm, and these observations about prayer, leave us?

Whenever we consider Pärt's work, or really any work of art, we must consider three stages or elements. One is the composer and his process, another is the composition itself, and finally

the listener and the listener's reception of the composition.

As to the composer and the process of composition, I have suggested elsewhere that Arvo Pärt's compositions are akin to his *praying* the texts (Bouteneff 2020). Whatever the significance of their underlying texts for the listener, their importance for the composer and the composition is undeniably paramount; they are sacred to him. His music is a vehicle for the text, a kind of a translation or elucidation of it. He is obedient to it; he is praying it. And all of this seems to be the case whether the text is heard or not. For the composer, then, I suggest it is something akin to the Jesus Prayer recited, sometimes heard, and sometimes unheard, but there nonetheless.

As for the compositions – those with unsung texts that we have been considering here – these bear the trace of the texts, but not as heard words.

As for the listener, the case is different. Only the most avid of Pärt's hearers will take the time to uncover the silent texts that underlie *Orient & Occident*, *Psalom*, *Lamentate*, and follow them syllable by syllable as they listen. No. The text has made its mark on the composer, and through him to the composition. The influence of the text remains utterly decisive, but indirect. One searches in vain for apt analogies. Does the listener experience only the "flesh", but not the "soul" of the text? Or is it exactly the opposite? It likely depends on the person, and the answer is ultimately inscrutable. But perhaps the best analogy leaves the listener free, speaking of the composition as analogous to the wordless voice of the stars. "There is no speech, nor are there words, ... yet their voice goes out ..."

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## References

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## Vaikivad tekstid: tähelepanekuid Pärdi teoste sõnakäsitluse kohta

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Arvo Pärdi muusika põhinemist pühadel tekstidel uuritakse üha sagedamini. Nii oli ka Arvo Pärdi Keskuse esimese väljaande eesmärk dokumenteerida niihästi originaalkeeles kui ka ingliskeelses tõlkes kõik tekstid, millele Pärt oli selleks ajaks muusikat kirjutanud. See teedrajav raamat „In Principio: The Word in Arvo Pärt’s Music” („In principio: Sõna Arvo Pärdi muusikas”, 2014) osutab mitmele Pärdi teosele, mis küll põhinevad tekstil ja mille muusika on kujundatud lähtudes sõna silbilisest ülesehitusest, ehkki teksti ennast ei laulda. Seega me ei kuule ega mõista seda tavapärasel viisil (teostes „Psalom”, „Silouan’s Song”, „Trisagion”, „Orient & Occident”, „Lamentate”, „Für Lennart in memoriam”, „These Words ...” ja neljandas sümfoonia „Los Angeles”). Oma artiklis ei vaatle ma neid teoseid mitte ainult teksti ja muusika omavahelise suhte aspektist (mis on põhimõtteliselt samasugune nagu lauldud teostes), vaid uurin ka helilooja ja teksti ning kuulaja ja teksti vahelist suhet.

Õeldes, et muusika on pelgalt sõnade tõlge või „sõnad kirjutavad minu muusikat”, viitab Arvo Pärt muusika *kuulekusele* teksti ees ning väljendab selgelt, kui oluline on tekst talle kui heliloojale. Muusika vormimine teksti järgi (*logogenesis*) peaks järelikult toetama ka kuulajat, sest tekst, mis kõlab nii, nagu seda loomulikult kõneldakse, on kergemini arusaadav. Selle kohta on palju näiteid keskaja vaimulikus muusikas. Kui aga teksti ei olegi kuulda, kerkib küsimus veelgi teravamalt: kas kuulaja on siis üldse võimeline teksti mingil tähenduslikul moel vastu võtma?

Toon välja mõned tähelepanekud selliste vaikivate tekstidega teoste kohta. Esiteks ilmneb, et üldjuhul ei ole heliloojal suurt või üldse mingisugust soovi tõmmata kuulaja tähelepanu neile alustekstidele. Enamik pealkirju ei vihja kuidagi sellele, millisel tekstil teos põhineb. Erandiks on ehk vaid „Psalom” ja „Trisagion”, kuigi esimese puhul ei selgu pealkirjast, millise psalmiga on täpselt tegu, ning mõiste *trisagion* tähendust teavad ainult need, kes valdavad kristlike palvete kreekakeelset terminoloogiat. Mõnel juhul on pealkiri tekstiga üsna kaudselt seotud – näiteks „Orient & Occident” on komponeeritud kirikuslaavikeelse Nikaia usutunnistuse tekstile.

Teiseks on oluline märgata, et kõik mittelauldaval tekstil põhinevad teosed on eranditult kas vene või kirikuslaavi keeles. (Mitmeid teisi vene- ja kirikuslaavikeelseid tekste lauldakse, aga neid mitte.) See peab midagi tähendama. Loogiliselt selgitades võime viidata kirikuslaavi keele pühitsetud loomusele – see on keel, mis on loodud kirikliku kreeka keele eeskujul ning mille ainsaks eesmärgiks on anda hääli pühakirjale ja kirikulauludele. Kuid võib-olla on tõeline põhjus selles, et vene ja kirikuslaavi keelel on oma eriline koht helilooja hinges ja südames? Nagu teame, ei leidnud Pärt oma usu tuuma mitte lihtsalt õigeusu õpetusest, vaid nimelt *vene* õigeusust, olgugi see nõukogudeaegse okupeeritud Eesti kontekstis poliitiliselt ja kultuuriliselt kuitahes komplitseeritud. Ja ma sõندان koguni oletada, et vene ja kirikuslaavi keel on tema peamised palvekeeled.

Lõpetuseks toon viite ühele palveviisile. Paljudes traditsioonides, kaasa arvatud õigeusu traditsioonis, võib kontemplatiivne palve võnkuda kordamööda kõnelise ja mittekõnelise faasi vahel, kuigi ka mittekõnelised faasid põhinevad siiski sõnadel. See näib olevat sobiv paradigma aitamaks meil mõista, kuidas toimivad mittelauldavad tekstid Arvo Pärdi teostes.

Tõlkinud Kristina Körver