

## INTRODUCTION

*The texts exist independently of us and are waiting for us: each of us has a time when he will find a way to them. This meeting happens when the texts are not treated as literature or works of art, but as points of reference or as models.\**

Arvo Pärt

The texts were awaiting Pärt: just as the extremely significant role of words in Arvo Pärt's tintinnabuli music cannot be overlooked, their almost complete absence in his earlier, modernist works up until 1968 is also noteworthy. In Pärt's early composing years, the relationship between music and word is manifested solely in pieces written for children.\*\*

The 1968 piece *Credo* became the breaking point. It was a radical upheaval not only on the composer's personal path: while seeking escape from the creative crisis of an entire generation, Pärt shaped into music his aversion to the dominant ideologies in the world, as well as to the avant-garde style that proceeded from them. The work sounds almost like the artist's vow: he will either find true harmony within himself and his works, or he will be doomed as an artist. From the very beginning, word was an anchor and a model for this transition: in *Credo*, Pärt turned towards spiritual text for the

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Enzo Restagno and others. *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*. Dalkey Archive Press, 2012, p. 55.

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This volume will account only for compositions in Arvo Pärt's authorized list of works in its current form.

first time. However, what became the basis for the work was not any ordinary composition of text, but rather a couple of brief sentences – an extreme concentration of the composer’s crisis and endeavor, out of which the structure of the piece was simultaneously born. *Credo* was like a seed; the hidden model of a germinating organism that had to die in order for it to bear fruit. Several more years would pass before its potential was discovered.

The title of this book references both Pärt’s worldview and his creative credo. The opening verses of the Gospel of John, “In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum” (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”) are one of the New Testament’s most fundamental and, at the same time, mysterious statements. This is made mysterious foremost by one word – the Greek *Λόγος* (*Logos*, Latin *Verbum*), which incorporates many fields of meaning. It signifies everything that is spoken (word, sentence, speech, story, expression), but it may also equally signify the sense, the meaning of what is said; although the philosophical and especially theological tradition also uses it with the meaning “primary cause” – that, which structures the universe. When John says that “In the beginning was the Word” and “the Word was with God”, and especially that “the Word was God”, this unambiguously means that the Word/*Logos* is not created. However, John goes even further and identifies the Word/*Logos* with the Son of God, saying “and the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

In *Faust* (Part 1, verses 1,214–1,227), Johann Wolfgang Goethe gave particular poetical weight to the issue of translating this part of the Bible. Faust ponders how weighty of a meaning one word is capable of bearing overall and tests

out the different translated equivalents for *Logos*, which are firstly “the Word”, then “the Sense” and “the Power”; but ultimately, he settles on “the Deed”. Among other aspects, the creative potential of the Word rises in this chain of meanings. If, however, *Logos* can be understood as “the Power” and “the Deed”, can *Logos* then also exist as “the Sound”? John the Evangelist does not answer this directly; however, the creative act is indeed unambiguously designated as “a saying” in the Old Testament’s story of Creation. It is also worth noting how many different nations’ creation stories are associated with some kind of an acoustic phenomenon, just like the one told by modern-day cosmology.

The understanding of the Word/*Logos* that is not an attribute of God, but is coessential with God – of the Word, which is not the created, but is the Creator – has formed the relationship between text and singing in traditional liturgical practice. The words in liturgical texts do not express reality; rather, they create it – the act of providing these words with a resonance, their vocalization accomplishes and changes something in the world; holds its hidden structure together. Even when the texts employ the grammatical “I”-form, they are never subjective in nature: “I believe ...” expresses the common belief just as much as the personal one.

In his relationship with the Word, Arvo Pärt is close to the original Christian way of thinking, which has been preserved more purely in the Orthodox Church. He is not a “construer” of the texts in his works; he does not highlight a personal aspect in them, but rather presumes that the text comprises the entire message perfectly. The texts likewise possess their own music, which must merely be brought forth. As such, the composer does not have all that much to add to the texts on his own part – the music only serves and carries out the text, giving it a sound-based existence.

The recitation of texts, in which the simple melodic forms can vary depending on the text's liturgical function, is characteristic of both the traditional Eastern and Western Church; however, these forms always follow the grammatical construction of the text passionately. The formulas of textual treatment in Pärt's works follow the same principle: the musical structure is derived from the text's various parameters – the number of syllables, word emphases, commas, and periods. Although Pärt also selects several musical elements (such as the key, register, tempo, etc.) according to the content of the text, this aspect has a lesser influence on the course of the piece's form.

Arvo Pärt first tied his tintinnabuli technique to verbal text in the piece *Missa syllabica* (1977). In order to avoid subjectivity, he invented in it a truly Spartan method, matching melodic devices to the number of syllables in a word: the musical setting of each word had to flow from either above or below to a central pitch selected for that particular segment. By modifying and developing this principle, he soon also arrived at one of his most significant masterpieces: *Passio*, which lasts for over 70 minutes. However, the relationship between text and music in this work are concentrated to the extreme, and its complex structure is completely derived from the story of Jesus' suffering in the Gospel of John (18, 19:1–30); from a narrative, which Pärt gives sound and shape but does not interpret.

One of the primary secrets of Pärt's music seems to be concealed within this concentration: in extreme asceticism, the Word is placed into a framework that appears to rule out any kind of expressionism. Paradoxically, however, this very asceticism unleashes the true power of the Word and opens up its dimension of depth. Just as in the case of words, sounds can only truly reference the essence, and therefore (accord-

ing to Pärt), his sounds are likewise "simply keywords" that point to much more behind them.

Arvo Pärt has stated: "The words write my music"; this similarly means that he searches for musical structures, which might be as analogous with his texts as possible. Word and sound, speech and song are among those dialectical pairs of opposites, in the case of which the paradoxical formula  $1 + 1 = 1$  could ideally be applied. Pärt has also named this the basis of his tintinnabuli technique's musical structure. Through prosodic rhythm, accentuations and degrees of quantity, intonation and speech melody, this uniformity has been an inseparable part of archaic poetry and folk song, and likewise occurs in Early Church Fathers' writings on singing and in traditional liturgical song itself. In this sense, Pärt pursues the underlying structures of the music.

A number of concepts for contemporary textual analysis such as "content plan" and "expression plan" might be of aid in comprehending the connection between word and music. By ignoring the fact that every text possesses both, we could conceptualize many of Pärt's compositions as such, in which the content plan is manifested only in the verbal layer and the expression plan only in the sound layer, while it nevertheless endeavors to achieve complete unity. For the composer, this appears to be almost an ideal that is indeed impossible to achieve in a vocal piece, because even a verbal text always has a sound-based, rhythmic, and sensuously expressive side to it. Apparently striving to draw closer to this idea, Pärt has written a number of instrumental pieces (*Silouan's Song*, *Trisagion*, *Lamentate*, *Symphony No. 4*, and others), the musical material of which is derived from verbal texts, which themselves remain unheard; mute. The notion of dialectics of a word-based content plan and a music-based expression plan could be especially fitting in the case of such pieces.

Pärt composed *In principio* for mixed choir and orchestra in 2003: in it, he wrote the first fourteen verses of John 1 into the music. That same year, Pärt said to Italian musicologist Enzo Restagno (*Pärt in Conversation*, p. 66):

Words are not exactly my area, but I will say that I pay increasing attention to the potential content of the text. These mystic words of the Gospel according to John, “In the beginning was the Word,” lie at the heart of it all, since without the Word, nothing would exist. I believe that this concept should not only be conveyed in the text, but in every note of the music as well, in every thought, in every stone. The roots of our skill lie in this thought: “In the beginning was the Word.” We may interpret it in many different ways, but this thought has more to do with the ancient formula /.../, something that is at the same time extremely complicated and incredibly simple.

Arvo Pärt has never been lavish with words when commenting on his music, because (as he loves to say, “The Sound is my Word.”). However, it is certainly difficult to grasp Pärt’s attitude towards music and his unique manner of composition without having a sense for the composer’s awe of words. Religious texts, which Pärt always regards as topical (because human nature has not changed much over the millennia), are a part of his everyday life: “It is a root, which extends especially deeply but raises me higher.” This selection of texts cannot, of course, be sufficient for opening up the complex

nature of one artist. However, they may likely serve as a model and a point of support for a listener of Arvo Pärt’s music, just as they were for the music’s creator.

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