

# 1 Introduction: the essential and phenomenal Arvo Pärt

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Arvo Pärt is by all criteria an extremely successful composer. He has composed many pieces that have garnered both critical and popular acclaim, and he has received prestigious commissions and worked with some of the greatest musicians of our time. He has received numerous honors and awards, and the diversity of these accolades demonstrates the breadth of his appeal, from the 1989 Grammy Nomination for *Passio*, in the 'Best Contemporary Composition' category, to a Classic BRIT Award for 'Composer of the Year' in 2011. His audience is diverse and international, with performances of his music and record sales all over the world. His hugely popular recordings have been used in both film and television, including Oscar-winning movies such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *There Will Be Blood* (2007), and have also been appropriated by the general public and used in video pieces on social media platforms such as YouTube and Vimeo. His ability to transcend genres is demonstrated in musicians as disparate as Björk, Keith Jarrett, Radiohead, and Lupe Fiasco, all of whom cite him as an influence. His music has had a profound effect on many visual artists who draw inspiration from what they hear; it is frequently choreographed to great effect (as seen, for example, in Helen Pickett's 2011 work with Boston Ballet), and is being used in pioneering work with people with learning disabilities and with palliative care for the sick and dying.

Around 1976 Pärt did something extraordinary and unexpected: he developed an entirely new technique for composing music, which he called 'tintinnabuli' (from the Latin word for 'sounding bells'). The technique is seemingly simple, comprising just two musical lines, one of which moves in largely stepwise motion and the other which moves through the notes of a principal triad. What is remarkable is that the method can offer such rich possibilities for compositional variety, all within a music that has broad aesthetic appeal. It is rare for a composer to create a new compositional system and even more rare for such a system to produce music that has such enormous popular and critical success.

The purpose of this book is to elucidate the essential and phenomenal traits of this remarkable composer and his music. The essential part deals with the interrelation of Pärt's biography and compositions, and continues with discussions of how to analyze and understand the tintinnabuli

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technique. The phenomenal part deals with the spiritual qualities of his music, its relationship with musical modernism, and its extraordinarily diverse appeal. It is not aimed at the academic, rather it is written for those who love Pärt's music and who want to learn more. What is presented here is a summary of important work that has already been done on Pärt and his music, new opinions and ideas from a group of distinguished writers, and suggestions for further exploration of this remarkable man.

Pärt was born in Estonia in 1935. He received his musical education first at the Children's Music School in Rakvere, then at the Tallinn Music School for a brief spell before being drafted, and finally at the Conservatory in Tallinn, where he studied with the distinguished Estonian composer Heino Eller. From 1958 he worked as a sound engineer on Estonian radio, and became a member of the Estonian Soviet Composers' Union in 1961. During this early period he composed music for more than fifty films and plays. In 1980 he left the USSR and, after a short stay in Vienna, settled in West Berlin before eventually returning to Estonia in 1992.

Throughout the 1960s Pärt composed art works using serial and collage techniques. In 1968 his *Credo* for piano, chorus, and orchestra caused a political scandal. It is not a liturgical creed; however, its title was interpreted as a gesture of defiance and the piece was banned in the Soviet Union for more than a decade. Following this, Pärt went into a self-imposed period of reflection until 1976, composing very little. Pärt claims that during this time he studied the music that was available to him, including plainchant, Guillaume de Machaut, Franco-Flemish music, and Josquin. As a result of this study he made an observation which was important to the development of his new style: "I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence comforts me."<sup>1</sup>

At the time Pärt's mature works were composed, musical modernism had left composers with the possibilities of myriad techniques at their disposal, but with no prevailing style. Composers found many solutions to the dilemma, including turning to music of the past, fusing music of different styles, mixing different styles into collages, randomizing music with aleatoric procedures, and by resorting to minimal use of materials. Pärt disconnected himself from modernism by turning not to the immediate past but to medieval and renaissance music. In an interview in 1999, he made a declaration that is key to understanding his musical technique: "I am tempted," he said, "only when I experience something unknown, something new and meaningful for me. It seems, however, that this unknown territory is sooner reached by way of reduction than by growing complexity. Reduction certainly doesn't mean simplification, but it is the way ... to the most intense concentration on the essence of things."<sup>2</sup> Far from being

simple, tintinnabulation is a process that affords a large and subtle range of consonance and dissonance, which Pärt uses to negotiate tension and relaxation on micro- and macro-levels. With this innovative technique Pärt has managed to create an authentically contemporary music.

Pärt came to prominence in the early 1980s due to the release of recordings of his music on the ECM label. This encouraged live performances of his work in many different countries, where it met with critical and popular acclaim. In a review for *High Fidelity* in September 1980, critic Robert Schwartz summarized the mood of the moment, observing: “Pärt’s emotional intensity, his quiet strength and simplicity, his meditative rapture, had brought a fleeting moment of repose to our hectic lives.”<sup>3</sup> In an essay for the *New Yorker* in December 2002, Alex Ross noted that several people have described to him how the “still, sad music of Arvo Pärt ... became for them, or for others, a vehicle of solace.” Ross comments that “one or two such anecdotes seem sentimental; a series of them begins to suggest a slightly uncanny phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> These reviews have continued to this day and continue to emphasize the ‘otherworldly’ and ‘transcendent’ properties of this music.

What, then, is the enchantment of Pärt’s music? At its most basic level, reduction to the simplest musical means allows us to construct our own meaning. There are clearly many ways of hearing Pärt’s music made sensible by our individual responses to what we hear. This encourages strong personal reactions, typified by the American poet Rika Lesser, who wrote to Pärt: “Yours is the only music I’ve ever wanted to live inside. Sometimes I wish the music would stop, congeal, erect a lasting structure around me, one that was silently vibrating and resonating, enclose me. Forever.”<sup>5</sup> This book explores Pärt’s highly individual approach to composing and seeks to explain the quality of intimacy his music produces with his large and appreciative audience.

The tintinnabuli style is extraordinary in that it constitutes a fully developed new compositional style occurring late in the twentieth century. It is, however, not without its critics. An article written in 1993 by David Clarke explored some of the contradictions of Pärt’s music, and suggested that “Far from signifying the resolution of the conflicts of modernity, this music is in fact symptomatic of a deepening crisis.”<sup>6</sup> Clarke examined the simplicity of procedures and material of the tintinnabuli style and acknowledged that “compared with other such ventures, Pärt’s tintinnabuli style ... appears a far more synthetic integrated and authentic compositional voice.”<sup>7</sup> Clarke believed that in order to circumvent modernism’s critical agenda Pärt has to “convince us of the validity – the contemporary meaningfulness and truthfulness – of the musical materials he has remortgaged from the past,” and concluded that “It might be conceivable, then, to regard Pärt’s music

as the fragile growth of a few small flowers on the wasteland modern art has refused to reseed. We should not be fooled, however, into believing that spring is on the way.”<sup>8</sup> Pärt’s huge success since 1993 suggests that Clarke’s slightly cynical view was misguided, because Pärt *has* managed to convince us of the validity of his musical materials, and he has done so repeatedly. These chapters evaluate Pärt’s success, noting how unusual it is for the music of one composer to evoke the same positive response in so many people, and they address this phenomenon while at the same time locating Pärt in the broader intellectual current of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Although Pärt is given much media coverage, there has been comparatively little scholarly attention paid to him and his work. His wife Nora commented on this in 1999, noting: “We’ve been in the West for twenty years now. Since then there have been a growing number of texts on Arvo’s music but very little of it is musicologically founded. In effect, almost nothing. This deficit in musicological methodology is always smoothed over by biographical or personal information which cannot necessarily be linked to Arvo’s music directly. Naturally, you can always connect ideas – biographical or not – with Arvo’s music. Yet the meaning of the music is purely musical. Arvo is predominantly concerned with musical forms and structure.”<sup>9</sup> The authors of these chapters tackle some of the important questions regarding Pärt’s music: why is analyzing it so difficult if its structure is so simple? How can we talk about spirituality, in its broadest sense, in the music of a Christian composer? How can we account for its broad appeal? It is not easy to talk about any type of music, because it resists confinement by mere words. It is harder still to talk about music that has spiritual or theological content since, in order to do so, we must move away from vague description and invoke extra-musical discussions including philosophy, theology, history, and cultural studies. In addition, writing about a living composer is a fascinating enterprise since we assume we can go directly to him for answers. Pärt has resisted this, claiming not to be interested in such things, and has repeatedly asserted that people should find their own truth in his music. The contributors to this collection aim to help the reader find this truth.

All of the writers of these chapters have met Pärt and are advocates of his work. Conferences at Boston University in the United States (March 2010) and at the Southbank Centre in London, England (September 2010) organized to celebrate Pärt’s seventy-fifth birthday, and a subsequent event as part of a conference on Baltic Music in Canterbury, England (May 2011) provided an opportunity for the authors of these chapters to get together and discuss Pärt’s music. Pärt was himself present for portions of the latter two of these events. Pärt has supported this volume by granting interviews,

allowing me access to archive material in the International Arvo Pärt Centre in Estonia, and by suggesting some of the contributors to this collection. He has not intervened in or influenced any of the chapters except to verify facts regarding his biography.

The contributors hope that this *Companion* will be read by those who enjoy Pärt's music but who may have little or no musical training, so every effort has been made to present a readable and comprehensible anthology and to provide sufficient explanation and additional resources for the interested reader. There are many points of connection between the chapters, which can either be read consecutively as a narrative or as individual pieces. We aim to provide information that helps to get to the inner life of both the composer and the music.

The contributors are internationally recognized scholars and performers who bring a range of skills and disciplines to their contributions. The first two chapters deal with Pärt's biography, starting with a chapter by Immo Mikhelson, a longtime friend of Pärt, who discusses the early years during the period when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union. Using personal reminiscences, formal and informal interviews with the composer, and archive material, Mikhelson draws a picture of Pärt's early career as a student, as a professional sound engineer for Estonian radio, and as an emerging voice on the Soviet and international musical scene. Mikhelson contextualizes the ideological pressure, restrictions, and prohibitions Pärt faced during this period, and traces his training at the Estonian Conservatory with Heino Eller through his emergence as a composer with an international reputation, with reference to works such as *Nekrolog* (1960) and *Credo* (1968). Observing the distinctive mark left by his work as a sound engineer (which had musical and social ramifications for Pärt as a developing musician), Mikhelson details Pärt's relationship with the Estonian Soviet Composers' Union and provides interesting information on his work as a composer of music for film and stage. Finally, Mikhelson describes Pärt's interest in early music during his period of reflection between 1968 and 1976, and how this came to have a profound effect on the development of the tintinnabuli style.

Jeffers Engelhardt situates Pärt in the soundscapes of twenty-first-century life, detailing the extraordinary influence his music has had on a diverse range of musicians. Engelhardt accounts for this success by outlining and contextualizing important biographical events in Pärt's life. Starting with the personal and compositional crisis following *Credo*, and the harassment and persecution he endured prior to his emigration from Soviet Estonia in 1980, Engelhardt describes Pärt's intensive and disciplined study of early music between 1968 and 1976. For the period from 1980 to the present Engelhardt concentrates his discussion on the

relationships that were beneficial to Pärt's development, including those with the publishing house Universal Edition; the recording company ECM and its founder Manfred Eicher; and with several musicians and groups such as Paul Hillier, the Hilliard Ensemble, Tõnu Kaljuste, and the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir (EPCC). Through detailed discussion of such works as *Passio* and *Kanon Pokajanen*, Engelhardt describes these collaborations and their effect on Pärt's music. A further section deals with Pärt's public return to Estonia in 1992 and his reintegration into that musical scene. Engelhardt concludes with a summary of Pärt's activities at age seventy-five, noting especially the way Pärt has used his music to address political and moral issues.

The second pair of chapters investigates in detail the tintinnabuli technique that Pärt devised. Leopold Brauneiss, another longtime friend of Pärt, discusses the basic mechanics of the tintinnabuli style. Brauneiss suggests that the essential elements of Pärt's tintinnabulation can be viewed as musical 'archetypes,' and he discusses how this idea is connected on a deep structural level with visible forms, shapes, and events, as well as imagined ones. Concentrating on what he perceives as the timeless and exquisite beauty of these structures, he talks about specific musical features such as scales (the melodic lines) and triads (the 'sounding bells') employed by Pärt, as well as more advanced techniques such as mirroring (moving pitches on vertical and horizontal axes from a central note), parallel movement (used to create multi-voiced textures from a single line), and finally multiplication (the mathematics of addition and subtraction to musical figures). Brauneiss draws his examples from well-known pieces such as *Spiegel im Spiegel* and also from more recent works such as *La Sindone*.

Music theorist Thomas Robinson's detailed chapter gives an overview of possible methods of analyzing the tintinnabuli compositions to answer the fundamental question: How does it work? The first part of the chapter examines how traditional analytical techniques can be applied to this innovative music and what may be gained from the application of five distinct analytical methods: style analysis (a comprehensive descriptive technique); musical hermeneutics (which seeks to find expressive meaning in music); Schenkerian analysis (a method that examines hierarchical levels of structure and how harmonies are prolonged at a deep structural level); pitch-class set theory (which enables systematic enumeration of pitches and the relationships between them); and, finally, triadic transformation (a technique inspired by the work of theorist Hugo Riemann, which provides tools to look at transformation of triads).

Because tintinnabulation is such a radical new technique it requires a radical new approach to analysis. In the second part of his chapter Robinson turns to minimalist music and how the two principal processes at work in

this kind of music can be fruitfully applied to Pärt's music. He explains the multiplicity of events that can result from these two processes (called 'rules of the game,' and 'machine set in motion'), using examples from *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old* and others. Many tintinnabuli pieces use text, and for Pärt text-setting is itself a process that can be quite sophisticated. Robinson dissects the processes by which the text leads the music and vice versa, and he acknowledges that Pärt's tonal system is not truly a return to tonality as some might claim.

Despite the inherent problems of judging a work of art by assuming artistic intent, I contend in my own chapter that there is enough information available in statements made by Pärt to be able to compile a rudimentary philosophy of his tintinnabuli style. While Pärt has been very clear that he wishes people to find their own answers in his music, his comments, collected from many sources and some published for the first time here in English, present remarkable insights into his creative process, tintinnabulation, text-setting, and thoughts on subjects such as spirituality and time. This chapter also discusses some repertoire not covered elsewhere in the volume, as suggestions for further listening.

As previously noted, the tintinnabuli technique is named after the Latin for 'sounding bells.' Marguerite Bostonia's chapter examines how the mechanics of bell-ringing influenced this technique, and takes a practical look at how bells have directly influenced Pärt's music. Bostonia notes that, far from being a simple simile or metaphor, 'tintinnabuli' is a "fully engaged metonym: a figure of speech in which the name of an entity is borrowed to define another, where both share innate characteristics, musical and spiritual." Bostonia defines these musical and spiritual characteristics in both bells and the tintinnabuli style by referring to different types of bell-ringing, especially the Russian tradition with which Pärt is most familiar. A technical discussion of the harmonic series of bells shows why this label is apt for Pärt's musical language, the melodic and triadic lines of which share the sonic profile of sounding bells. It also explains Pärt's conception that the melodic M-voice and tintinnabuli T-voice are conceived not as two separate parts but as one sonic whole, characterized most succinctly by Nora Pärt in the formula "1+1=1."<sup>10</sup>

The final three chapters deal with the notion of spirituality in Pärt's music, his relationship with modernism and minimalism as movements, and his popular appeal and varied use in the marketplace.

Much has been written about the spirituality of Pärt's music. Robert Sholl delves further into the subject, providing a unique take on the ways in which the discussion of the spiritual or religious content in Pärt's music can be constructed, articulated, and evaluated. Situating his argument in relation to the idea of 'modernity,' Sholl examines Pärt's tintinnabuli language



and relates it to a discussion of cultural and musical narratives of death, mourning, enchantment, and embodiment that inform Pärt's musical search for God. Drawing on comments by contemporary composer James MacMillan and writers such as Jeremy Begbie and T. W. Adorno, Sholl furthers the arguments of critics such as David Clarke, suggesting that "the music of Arvo Pärt once again breathes life into the corpse of modernity."

In a wide-ranging chapter, Benjamin Skipp discusses Pärt and his music in relation to two key issues, minimalism and modernism, noting that these labels, along with 'holy minimalist,' need to be fully explored and defined in order that we can begin to understand what is so valuable about Pärt's music. Skipp begins his discussion with an exploration of Pärt's 'style' and how it fits into general notions of what is 'modern' or 'postmodern.' Using examples from the pre-tintinnabuli works as well as the more familiar tintinnabuli ones, Skipp suggests that the music Pärt composed after 1976 resists the label 'modernist' and is generally situated as a counter-modernist reaction. Skipp explores some of the criticisms of minimalism in general and of Pärt's approach in particular. The term 'holy minimalist' Skipp finds particularly worthy of discussion since the addition of the term 'holy' implies a language of faith at work and this can hinder empirical discussion of the music. If we can accept that Pärt's music is sacramental (possessing a sacred or mystical significance, bestowing grace) what are the qualities of his music that ask for interpretation in this way? Pärt is an Orthodox Christian who uses specific religious texts, but whose music is perceived as eclectic, spiritual, and mystical. Skipp explores the notion of tintinnabuli as an 'antidote' to modernism and minimalism, labeling it as "an indictment of the detritus of contemporary living," and he describes its transformative potential using the example of *Spiegel im Spiegel* in the film version of Margaret Edson's play *Wit*. Skipp concludes that enjoying and appreciating Pärt's music at whatever level we do as individuals allows us the possibility of being a 'sacral community,' and that this music offers us a "release from the confused plurality which characterizes the postmodern."

No discussion of Pärt would be complete without an acknowledgment of his extraordinary popular and critical appeal. Laura Dolp examines the "vernacular meanings" of Pärt's music, recounting the way it has moved from a carefully controlled image to an object of extensive free-market forces. From his initial involvement with ECM Records Pärt has been branded in a certain way, and his early success and eventual long-term appeal is attributable to the themes with which he was branded, and a comprehensive strategy to market him to a diverse audience. From the debut album *Tabula rasa* in 1984 to the most recent compositions and recordings, Dolp traces the fortuitous partnership with ECM Records. Led by their founder and director Manfred Eicher, ECM does not consider itself just a



recording company but one where music, title, and image are all involved in the design process and eventual product. This approach was foundational in the creation of Pärt's public ethos and is evidenced by Dolp's examples from the *Passio* and *Kanon Pokajanen* albums. Dolp describes Pärt's success and accounts for it by describing reception of his music in the western press and lately the prolific use of his music in film and new media. Attributing this in part to its "non-intrusive formal clarity," Dolp concludes that his marketable identity is rich and complex and that this complements his music.

The appendices include several short speeches by Pärt himself, published for the first time in English. There is also a short essay by Andreas Peer Kähler about the phenomenological effect of Arvo Pärt's music on listeners as well as an analysis of its special requirements for orchestral musicians. Kähler's starting point is a quotation from Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* about the desert landscape and the radiation from silence, which he associates with Pärt's "self-imposed asceticism" as a key to understand his music and its idioms. The main part of the essay is a reflection about the relationship between musicians and Pärt's music: about the psychological impact of being alone with few sustained tones, about practical questions (the right Pärt 'sound,' using vibrato, how to tune, and so on), and the challenges that professional musicians face when charged with performing this extraordinary music.

Each chapter has its own suggestions for further reading and, since this text is the first major work about Pärt in English for many years, there is a comprehensive bibliography of studies in many languages about Pärt and his music. A discography is not provided here for reasons of space and because this information is readily available online.<sup>11</sup>

The tintinnabuli music of Arvo Pärt invites us to accept it as a point of departure for a new or different spiritual experience with music that is elegantly simple, deceptively complex, visceral, and remarkable. Perhaps the best thing to do is simply to listen to it. We hope, however, that this book will encourage active rather than passive listening, and that readers will gain new insight and understanding into the music of the essential and phenomenal Arvo Pärt.