

2 A narrow path to the truth: Arvo Pärt and the 1960s and 1970s in Soviet Estonia

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Estonia, a state in the Baltic region of Northern Europe, is an important part of Pärt's development as a composer. His experimentation and musical formation took place there, and it is where he went through the most significant changes in his output before emigrating to the West. Tintinnabuli music was born in Tallinn, the capital city. In a small apartment, Pärt composed such well-known works as *Für Alina*, *Tabula rasa*, *Fratres*, *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, and *Spiegel im Spiegel*.

It is important to analyze the beginning of an artist's creative path to analyze in light of what follows. During the period of artistic maturing, discoveries, and emergence, every new detail can potentially have an influence that becomes decisive and long-lasting. Exploring the circumstances and conditions in which a composer most intensely develops his musical language gives us an opportunity to see the many crossroads at which he had to choose a path, and to understand how his choices determined the rest of his life and, for our purposes, the music he wrote.

Arvo Pärt lived in Estonia during a time when the country was under four different political regimes. He was born in 1935 during the first period of Estonian independence (independence was declared in 1918); he started elementary school when the German military had seized power; his musical career started under Soviet rule. Currently, he lives in Estonia, which restored its independence in 1991.

The Soviet era was the most significant, since its rules and context of living surrounded Pärt during his most formative years as a human being and composer. This is the era when he received his musical education, went through important periods of experimentation, and achieved his first goals. When Pärt's music was first internationally recognized in the early 1980s, Pärt was very often compared to other Soviet avant-garde composers such as Alfred Schnittke, Edison Denisov, Sofia Gubaidulina, and Andrei Volkonsky. It is immediately assumed that the conditions and environment in which these composers lived and worked were identical and, therefore, that it is possible to apply the same standards when analyzing them.

In Pärt's case, there are several additional factors to be taken into account in order to understand how the foundation of his music was laid. In occupied Estonia, situated on the outer edge of the socialist empire, the

[10]

influence of the ideological pressure was slightly different than in the capital of Moscow, for instance. The Soviet regime had had a relatively short time to influence people, and the strong undercurrent of the previous cultural environment was still clearly present when Pärt started his career as a composer. For musicians, the degree of artistic freedom was somewhat greater than in Moscow, but politics and ideology, and resistance to them, are not the only factors relevant here. A number of other components specific to the time and conditions are also important.

There has been a vast amount of research undertaken on the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. The features specific only to Estonia during that period have been examined much less. Therefore, the argument that Pärt's musical path navigated a unique, once-in-a-lifetime maze of opportunities might come as a surprise. Pärt made choices based on his beliefs and ideals, some of which differed radically from other musicians around him. There were many external restrictions and prohibitions, and Pärt often tested them. It was his conscious choice to stay true to his goals even when it brought suffering and poorer living conditions. Due to these conditions, the path of Pärt's musical searching was at times extremely narrow. But there were many situations to learn from as well.

The beginning

Arvo Pärt was born in Paide, in the center of Estonia, and grew up in Rakvere, in the north. Both of these are provincial towns away from the cultural centers of the country. For Pärt, the most influential event during his childhood was the foundation of the Children's Music School in Rakvere in 1945. This music school was one of four founded outside of Tallinn, and it followed the model of the music schools founded all over the Soviet Union. During the years after World War II, the teachers who worked in music schools and other schools carried on the societal and cultural ethos of the pre-war independent Estonia. This had a definite effect on the formation of the young Pärt's worldview.

When Pärt was 9 years old, he started to study piano at the music school, a popular activity at that time. Later, he was active in the school's dance orchestra and accompanied singers who performed at festive events. By the time he was a teenager, Pärt's social status was already intimately connected with music in the eyes of his fellow students. With these experiences behind him, the decision to continue his musical education in Tallinn after graduating from high school was made without hesitation.

In the fall of 1954, Pärt passed the entrance exams for the Tallinn Music School (which, at the time, was an intermediary step between the Children's

Music School and the Conservatory, which in the Soviet music education system is the highest level of training). He was only able to attend school as a composition and music theory major for a few weeks before being drafted into the army. This was during the time when Estonian men were allowed to serve in the Soviet army in the Estonian regiment situated just a few dozen kilometers outside Tallinn. Since Pärt was a musician, he was chosen to play in the regiment's orchestra, which made his army experience more bearable. Sometimes he was given the opportunity to attend symphony concerts in Tallinn. He also attended a workshop for novice composers in the Composers' Union led by Estonian composer Veljo Tormis (b. 1930).

Because of ill health (which was ongoing for some time), Pärt was released early from the army – instead of serving three years, he served only two. The Estonian regiment was disbanded at that time, so if he had served his full term he would have had to do so in some other part of the Soviet Union far away from Estonia.

In the fall of 1956, Pärt reentered the Tallinn Music School and started studying composition with Veljo Tormis, who had just graduated from the Moscow State Conservatory, the most prestigious music school in the USSR. At the Tallinn Music School, Tormis founded a creative circle that aimed to “broaden the minds of students in every possible way.”¹ During the first year, the circle actively made contacts with communities in Estonian Radio and the Conservatory, as well as with well-known musicians. Pärt took part in the circle's activities, although not systematically.

In the fall of 1957 a total of 144 students were enrolled in the Tallinn Conservatory. Prospective composition students could apply to the Conservatory only every other year (alternating with music theory students) and, although it was the year for music theorists to apply, a rare exception was made for Pärt, who started that year.

Heino Eller (1887–1970), 70 years old at the time of Pärt's entrance, was the most prominent among the three composition professors at the Conservatory.² Eller was as notable a composition professor in his arena as was his contemporary Nadia Boulanger in Europe. His students formed a large and influential group among Composers' Union members and were very supportive of each other. One of Eller's talents was to preserve every student's individuality while, at the same time, helping to strengthen their technique. Pärt's composition lessons took place at Heino Eller's home, which was located near the Estonian Radio building. In 1961, when Pärt did not take the exam in his polyphony class, his expulsion was discussed at the Conservatory, and only when Eller forcefully intervened was the matter dropped.

In the 1950s, the ten most gifted students were listed in the Conservatory's annual report. Pärt was the only composer in that list in 1958 and 1959,

and this represents a significant accolade since the qualitative level of conservatories in the Soviet Union was assessed by the number of students who won various competitions or achieved other notable success. In the context of the Cold War's cultural battles, the results of international competitions were given a symbolic meaning, since they were used to demonstrate superiority. In 1961, in her speech at the party congress in Moscow, cultural minister Yekatarina Furtseva stressed that young Soviet musicians had participated in thirty-nine international competitions in 1960 and won twenty-seven of them (at thirty-five of the thirty-nine competitions they received the second or third place).³ Although Pärt was listed among the top students, in many ways the Conservatory distanced itself from his success during the following years because of contradictory reactions to his music. For example, the rector of the Conservatory at the time was Eugen Kapp, a board chairman of the Composers' Union. Kapp was also a member of the Communist Party and had expressed a hostile attitude towards Pärt's orchestral piece *Nekrolog* (*Nekroloog* in Estonian) at a Union meeting.⁴

Working for Estonian Radio

In various biographies of Pärt, the fact that he worked for Estonian Radio as a sound engineer in the 1960s is mentioned only in passing. Pärt himself has talked about that period of his life only very briefly. Later, he has admitted that he did not enjoy this job since he did not like the music he recorded.

Since the recording process is central in contemporary practices of disseminating music, and taking into account the fact that Pärt is always very involved in the recording process of his music, it is important to talk more about the years he worked as a sound engineer and the experience he gained. Based on Pärt's own remarks, although infrequent, about this work, it could be argued that it shaped his attitude towards music more generally:

This influenced me in one very odd way. The flawless quality of the sound captured brought me to the other end of the extremes: to the essence of the music, since external cosmetics does not say anything about substance.⁵

Initially, Pärt recorded his music himself but gave it up as early as the beginning of the 1960s (with a few exceptions), and he has since established a strong relationship with ECM Records, who produce almost all the first official recordings of his works.⁶ One could argue that this was the moment when he started looking at his music differently – from a distance:

I heard that music only through loudspeakers, and when I did not like something in its orchestration or timbre, all I had to do was to work the mixer and filters until I did like it. Sometimes when I entered the studio and heard how this music sounded unmediated, I was extremely disappointed. I realized that I needed to make changes in the score. This strange situation accompanied me almost the whole time I worked in the radio. There was no correlation between the music sounding in the concert hall and on the record. My impressions of music had always been influenced by the fact that I was recording it. For that reason, I later needed to learn much more about the orchestra and orchestration.⁷

During the recording and editing processes, the music came from large studio loudspeakers, and usually it was rather loud. This also left a distinctive mark:

It was superb equipment I worked with at the time, but somehow I started to drift away from this noise and abundance, mess and chaos. I felt that it was too much. Then I realized that I needed to look for music someplace else. I bought a tape recorder. The quality of sound I got from it was just like from the kitchen radio. The real music will get across even with sound quality like this. It is not about the timbre or cleanness of the sound ... If the essence of music is able to reach the listener even through this medium, it is enough for me.⁸

Working as a sound engineer definitely broadened Pärt's musical mind. He had access to the radio's sound archive, including tapes that had been prohibited from being played on the air. Although the collection had only a limited amount of modern Western music, it was still the best of its kind in Estonia at the time. Local musicians who had been given a rare chance to travel to the West brought back records, and it became common practice to lend them to the radio station to be copied. This was appreciated by the music editors in the radio archive.

When Pärt first started his work in the fall of 1958, he became one of five sound engineers (*toonmeisters*) working at Estonian Radio. Everybody needed to do everything: record in the studio and broadcast live from concert halls whenever needed. The music varied from entertainment and traditional music to symphonic music and opera. Young, talented composers were hired as sound engineers in hopes that they would be better prepared for recording serious music by Estonian composers.

Despite Pärt's comment, the recording equipment was comparatively primitive and, therefore, the more creative the sound engineer with the placement of microphones and operating channels on the mixer the better the result of a recording session. Editing took place by cutting and splicing

tape in order to gather the most successful takes into a whole. This editing work was quite often done by a sound engineer.

Arvo Pärt was fortunate to work in radio during the years when the independence and importance of sound engineers were at their peak. The sound engineer was both a technician who set up microphones and a producer who judged the artistic quality of the results. In the studio, the sound engineer's opinion trumped the editor's, who had made the initial choice of whom and what to record. When the separate job of 'technician' was created in Estonian Radio and the whole recording policy was reformed in the mid-1960s, the importance of sound engineers started to decrease. Although Estonian Radio began testing stereo broadcasts in 1961, the music recorded in its studios was still captured monophonically at the time Pärt left the job. It is possible that this repeated exposure to a monophonic sound source had an effect on Pärt's compositional processes.

Pärt was also lucky because he was allowed to work full-time while studying at the Conservatory. The same year that he graduated from the Conservatory and was granted a job at Estonian Radio (in the Soviet educational system, it was mandatory to accept the job that was given to you after graduation), the rules for students who studied and worked at the same time were changed, which would have eliminated the chance for Pärt to work in radio.

There is another aspect during Pärt's period of radio work which has been overlooked but is important. Let us call it a social aspect, which has several facets.

Estonian Radio was at the center of the local musical life at that time. It employed the most important symphony orchestra, a professional mixed choir, a light-music orchestra, and various smaller ensembles formed by members of all of these collectives. Most of Estonia's best musicians worked for Estonian Radio or had recording sessions there, because it had the only recording studio in Estonia at the time. Due to his job, Pärt got to know all of these musicians – their skills and personal characteristics. This came in handy when Pärt the composer needed to achieve a certain sound or understanding of his music during the rehearsals preceding a premiere or recording sessions.

Sound engineers belonged to a subdivision of the music department. Pärt was a frequent guest in the music department. He is remembered as cheerful and a great communicator by his colleagues there. Often he played the piano for everyone's pleasure. There were active musicians as well as composers and musicologists working in the music department. All of those who have worked there have described the atmosphere as extraordinarily supportive, friendly, and creative. This environment was at the core of Pärt's social life at the time.

A young Soviet composer

The continuation of the Soviet occupation in postwar Estonia brought along the effects of a new war. The Iron Curtain constructed by the Cold War hid behind it a major part of the rest of the world and caused isolation. The change was sudden. The fiercer the ideological struggle was internationally, the stricter and more intense became the ideological oppression locally during this period.

In Estonia, this change brought along reforms in cultural life that followed the model of all Soviet republics. A state concert agency was founded that organized concerts, many musicians got jobs in the new orchestras, and composers were gathered into the Soviet Estonian Composers' Union, which was a subdivision of the Soviet-wide organization and received instructions from Moscow.

In their creative work, all composers were obliged to follow the methods of socialist realism, although nobody really understood during these years exactly what these methods were. The same way that artists were recommended paintings and sculptures from Moscow as examples created by well-known artists, during the Stalin era composers were given a list of recommended works that they could use as models.

At first, the new political system did not impose itself as forcefully as in later decades. The young Pärt, who was fond of cinema, watched films in Rakvere at a theater which retained its name from the prewar period. The name of the local paper, until 1950, was neutral: *Viru Sõna* (The Word of Viru). Then it was renamed *Punane Täht* (Red Star), which had obvious ideological connotations. Around that time, all movie theaters were given Soviet names as well.

A sudden and somber change took place when in March of 1949 over twenty thousand people from Estonia were deported to Siberia, Pärt's uncle's family among them. None of them came back, just like numerous other deportees who died far away.

The art community, scared already, was given another shock by the Party's meeting in Tallinn in March 1950, which, in accordance with Moscow's orders, heavy-handedly imposed the new rules on the creative communities. This is how the reality of the cultural battles of the Cold War arrived in Estonia. Three composers were imprisoned, some were expelled from the Composers' Union, and ten lost their jobs. The accusations against the composers were not always clear, but the usual complaints were 'formalism' and 'prostration in front of the West.' These were considered betrayals and were duly punished. A human life cost nothing during the Stalin era, so any discord with the government could have been fatal. Pärt's composition professor Heino Eller was among those composers who were targeted in this witch-hunt.

All ‘formalists’ lived in fear of persecution, and other composers, not accused, were scared as well. Extreme tight-lipped caution was characteristic of the entire generation, and it was definitely in the air in the summer of 1958 when Pärt, who had just finished the first year of his composition studies at the Conservatory, presented his First Piano Sonatina during a meeting of the Composers’ Union.

At that time, Stalin’s photos and busts had already been removed from almost all of the public institutions, and the signs of the so-called Khrushchev-era thaw were apparent. In the local newspapers from 1956 onwards, young composers had the opportunity to read translations of articles by prominent composers such as Shostakovich and Kabalevsky, and they found encouragement in what they read. As a result, Eino Tamberg (1930–2010) and Jaan Rääts (b. 1932) started to experiment with form and sounds in their works. Pärt and his compositions entered into the new wave when it was already in full swing.

A new generation started to take over the music, film, literary, visual arts, and other artistic communities during these years in the Soviet Union. They were curious about what was going on in the West, and they tried to take advantage of the knowledge and freedoms available and to make their mark. Among other things, these young artists were connected by the absence of extreme fear.

Officially, an internal generational difference between artists never existed in the Soviet Union. It was disavowed. There was only an ideological battle with the West and some young people who had strayed from the right path.

It is widely assumed that Pärt ended up on a blacklist because of his dodecaphonic piece *Nekrolog* for orchestra, written in 1960, but actually it happened earlier. In December of 1958, the board of the Composers’ Union of the Soviet Union met for ten days in Moscow. The meeting was dedicated to the music of young composers. Seven from Estonia were sent to Moscow; Pärt, although not yet a member of the Union, was one of them. The resolution of the meeting mentioned Pärt’s neoclassical piano piece *Partita*, along with works by Alemdar Karamanov, Edison Denisov, and Andrei Volkonsky, as non-recommended models (‘formalist experimentation’) for composing music. In the summary of the same meeting, more precisely in the critical notes sections, there are some generalizations about the deviant young composers, including “deficiencies in the ideological and creative development ... undervaluing the national-folkloric music ... [and] inclination towards certain ‘modern’ tendencies.”⁹ In Tallinn, the reaction to the resolution was very much the same as later reactions to Pärt’s *Nekrolog* and *Credo* – in official documents, *Partita* was disavowed and Pärt received cautious, reserved treatment.

In general, though, Pärt was lucky to start his career during a time that favored young people. Both Union-wide and inter-Republic events were organized for young composers. They received many commissions, their work was covered in the media more than had been usual before, and there was communication within the USSR with other composers. This was exactly how the so-called Soviet avant-garde, despite all the restrictions, came to life in the 1960s. One of the important members of this group was Pärt.

One example of the extraordinary attention given to young composers' work was a composition competition that took place in 1962 and that is often referred to in Pärt's biographies. The competition was announced in August 1961, and in all of the Soviet republics, including Estonia, a highly qualified committee was formed to organize the competition. The main goal, as publicly announced, was to introduce and promote music by young composers. Over one hundred works by thirty-three young Estonian composers (younger than 33 years of age) competed in the local first round. The Union-wide rounds followed, and six Estonian composers made it to the finals.¹⁰ The Estonian press called the results a triumph for Estonian music. All these composers received a great deal of attention, especially Pärt, and this brought him into the cultural mainstream for good.

Who is not with us, is against us: the Composers' Union

Pärt became a member of the Composers' Union in September 1961, when he started his fourth year at the Conservatory. Again, he was lucky, since just a few years later the rules for becoming a member were made stricter by the officials in Moscow. Becoming a member at that time meant that Pärt had a wider perspective and better conditions for his work.

The Estonian Soviet Composers' Union was a subdivision of the Union-wide institution that grouped together thousands of Soviet composers. Rodion Shchedrin, one of the most successful Russian composers who started his career during the 'youth wave,' has most aptly described the essence of the Composers' Union as a Stalinist organization founded in order to keep composers under strict control with a carrot-and-stick method.¹¹

The local subdivision reported more to Moscow than to the local cultural ministry or to the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party. The Union-wide Music Foundation paid for composers' retreats and spa trips as well as scholarships. If someone was disobedient, there were plenty of ways to discipline them, including the cancellation of travel grants and scholarships.

Being a member of the Composers' Union had many perks for Pärt. In 1963, he was given an apartment in the brand new Composers' House in Tallinn; that same year he was given a chance to participate in the Warsaw Autumn Festival, which stimulated his ideas and thoughts. The Union was responsible both for compensating Pärt for his work (although technically the money came from the Cultural Ministry) and allowing a piece of music to be performed. Not being connected with the Composers' Union meant that it was practically impossible to have your music performed in concert halls.

Pärt, however, was rather a nuisance to the organization, since after he had composed the orchestral piece *Nekrolog* (1960) his music had been earning fierce criticism from Moscow. These complaints always included the disapproval of certain officials for work that, according to Moscow, was not done well enough. On the other hand, some other pieces by Pärt received a lot of praise, which balanced out the situation. In the early 1960s, the Estonian Composers' Union, despite having only sixty members at that time, had a much more significant position in the Soviet Union than in the following decades.

When Pärt became a member of the Composers' Union in Tallinn, one-third of the members were under 33. In the same union in Moscow (which included such composers as Alfred Schnittke and Edison Denisov), young composers comprised a much smaller minority, and their voice was not taken into account at all. It was the older generation's Union, and many of the members were war veterans. The situation was different in Estonia. Although, according to documents, one-quarter of the members had participated in the war with the Red Army, most of them were in fact forcefully drafted into the occupying army. Being on the side of the winner was a foreign sentiment in Tallinn. A few members had even fought in the German army. There was only a handful that belonged to the Communist Party, and this number grew very slowly. And, at least at the beginning of the 1960s, the Composers' Union had frequent difficulties in fulfilling set plans in terms of the number of patriotic works.

At the meetings, Pärt's new works brought out the most contrasting of opinions. Looking at the minute books of the meetings, it becomes clear that the attitude towards avant-garde music did not always follow generational lines. In general, the Composers' Union had, in the opinion of musicians themselves, a friendlier atmosphere than other artistic unions in Estonia at that time.

Film music: a separate corner

Moving picture and sound are two sides of the same coin both in film and theater. If a film director says that music added a lot to a film, a composer

can say that it is completely different to listen to that music with and without moving pictures. These moving pictures provide an entirely new dimension for the music. But one can also find a kind of very poor music that has no effect whatsoever without the moving pictures. And in its scarcity there is the richness that is created in a synthesis with the moving pictures. And if in the visual side, there are so-called empty spots that leave room for the music, then this duo starts to breathe a new way.¹²

Film music and stage music form a significant part of Pärt's Soviet-period oeuvre (more than fifty films and plays). Pärt, however, has frequently stressed that this part of his work is less and less important to him, especially after he started composing in tintinnabuli style.

"At one point, music received no attention at all, it was cut like some sausage," Pärt said later about the handling of his music in films, mostly referring to the last-minute cuts made for by censorship reasons.¹³ It is still likely that working with films has influenced his later works, as Pärt has admitted himself: "This should leave a mark after all. It is somewhere there but it needs to be found."¹⁴

The production of films in Estonia was reorganized after World War II according to Soviet models. A new practice of film music commissioned from local composers was introduced. The film music scholar Tatyana Egorova argues in her book *Soviet Film Music* that the film music composed in the Baltic states in the 1950s differed greatly from the other Soviet film music in terms of its Europeaness.¹⁵ In her in-depth research she mentions the film music composed in Estonia on only a small number of occasions, and Pärt's film music only once in connection with Georgian films. This fact shows vividly what an insignificant role the Estonian films played in the wider arena. Only a handful of films made in Estonia by Tallinnfilm made it to the Soviet-Union-wide distribution network.

The first film Pärt wrote the score for was the 30-minute *Õhtust hommikuni* [From Evening to Morning], produced in 1962 by Tallinnfilm. This was a graduation film by Leida Laius (1923–96), a director graduating from the Moscow Film Institute, where she studied along with Andrei Tarkovsky and many other well-known directors. Laius made art films, a genre still new in the Soviet Union. She, like other directors of the same generation, brought a new approach to the symbiosis of moving pictures and music in the Soviet cinema.

Pärt, already locally well known as a musical modernist, worked hard on the commission. The score that he prepared was very much in the style of his *Nekrolog* and this made the Soviet officials cautious again, since Pärt apparently had not learned from his 'mistakes'. Meanwhile, he applied his new style and real aspirations in a number of film scores. In an interview with the Italian musicologist Enzo Restagno,¹⁶ Pärt describes a situation in

1963 when he introduced one of his film scores influenced by dodecaphony to Luigi Nono, who was visiting Tallinn. Nono was most amused by the fact, as Pärt explained it, that while this kind of music would never be allowed to be performed in a concert hall, there were no problems with it as a film score. The score was for Elbert Tuganov's puppet film *Just nii!* (Just So!), which criticized Soviet bureaucracy.

In Pärt's opinion, the medium of film was like another country where those in power did not apply the same rules to music as they did to concert music.¹⁷ It was therefore possible to experiment and use new sound techniques in film music, as evidenced by the work of Pärt's allies in Moscow: Schnittke, Denisov, Gubaidulina, and Volkonsky. Pärt's scores were mostly for 10- to 20-minute-long animated and documentary films, but also for a few full-length feature films. Hence, for Pärt, it was mostly a short but very intense period of work.

Since the Soviet film industry had to follow the rules of the Soviet planned economy, which made the deadline very tight, the score had to be composed and recorded in a very short period of time – often within only a few days. If the deadline was not met, the whole team working on the film was left without a bonus for their work.

The film's budget determined the size of the ensemble for the score. In most cases there were ten to twelve musicians, and for most of Pärt's scores the conductor was Eri Klas (b. 1939), a good friend of Pärt. There were several occasions where the film score was recorded in the radio studio at night and Pärt himself was the sound engineer during the session. Pärt was one of the most productive film music composers in the 1960s and 1970s in Estonia. He was highly valued for his film scores, although this was a local recognition only.

On the concert stages of the 1960s

In the early 1960s, when Pärt's music was first performed in various Estonian concert halls, the arts – architecture, fashion, and music among them – underwent major changes. The concert life in Tallinn had burgeoned and was now active and diverse. This influenced the music composed and performed in Estonia. Almost all of the concerts were organized by the State Philharmonic Society of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), which was founded in 1941 and connected to Goskontsert (the State Concert Agency). Goskontsert had a monopoly on the promotion of all concerts by foreign performers.

In the early 1960s concerts in Tallinn included performances by classical guitarist John Williams, Peruvian singer Yma Sumac, performers from Cuba, Brazil, India, Mexico, and Bali, as well as Hungarian Roma singers,

popular singers from Georgia, African dancers, and Chinese traditional musicians. Almost all well-known Soviet musicians (Oistrakh, Richter, Gilels) performed in Estonia during these years. Music by composers such as Debussy, Ravel, Poulenc, Hindemith, and Messiaen appeared in the concert programs – music that only few years earlier had been on the non-recommended list. Works by Johann Sebastian Bach were relatively often performed, even sometimes his works with religious texts. By the middle of 1960s, there was a sharp decline in this kind of global and varied range of performers appearing in Estonia, and concert life stabilized although the size of audiences decreased.

The works: the 1960s

It is very hard to detect crucial influences and personal discoveries that bring along new perspectives without the creator's own explanations. Notoriously laconic, Pärt has given some hints over the years but this is not enough for a complete understanding.

Pärt first started to compose during his high school years. In 1954, when he entered the Tallinn Music School, he showed one of his piano pieces, *Meloodia* (Melody), to composition teacher Harri Otsa (1926–2001), who commented that it had an “unadulterated style.”¹⁸ What Otsa meant by this was the absence of motifs from traditional music and of a Rachmaninov-influenced sound. The community of Estonian composers, being frightened, diligently followed the models of socialist realism by composing works that were, in the words of a common slogan from the time: “socialist by content, national by form,” emphasizing the latter part of the slogan. The scarceness or absence of folkloric elements was conspicuous. Complaints about the absence of these elements accompanied Pärt from the beginning of his career as a composer and continued until the end of the 1960s.

The fact that Pärt himself has named Tchaikovsky as one of his early influences is natural. From the end of World War II until Stalin's death in 1953, Russian music, especially Tchaikovsky, was frequently played on the radio, to the exclusion of other music. During this time the teenage Pärt would ride his bike in circles around a loudspeaker on a post in Rakvere market square listening to the symphony concert broadcasts. Radio was the main source for information about music in general, and the young Pärt wrote down every single name and work that he heard mentioned in radio announcements, filling one sketchbook after another.

Without doubt, important inspiration for Pärt's work came from his discussions with other composers from various Soviet republics, especially from Moscow. For instance, Pärt has recalled that it was at the

Russian composer Edison Denisov's house in Moscow where he first heard Webern's music on a record.¹⁹ In Estonian Radio's sound archive, which had the best music collection in Estonia at the time and to which Pärt had easy access, there was no recording of dodecaphonic music in 1960. This compositional style was often mentioned though, along with abstract art, in Estonian-language newspaper articles that criticized Western society.

Heino Eller gave to Pärt two textbooks on dodecaphony that he had received from his former student Eduard Tubin, who had emigrated to Sweden.²⁰ Pärt, following the textbooks, started to compose dodecaphonic music without any audio examples or previous knowledge about the style. In an interview given decades later, Pärt noted that when somebody hears that in a faraway land people dance on one leg, traveling to this land and observing it is not necessary in order to imitate this kind of dancing.²¹ So it was with his composing twelve-tone music.

The orchestral piece *Nekrolog*, completed in the fall of 1960, was one of the most significant milestones in Pärt's oeuvre in general. During the specific time and under the specific circumstances, composing this kind of work was a public defiance of the socialist rules for the creation of art. In a more general sense, *Nekrolog* gave a signal about the direction of Pärt's spiritual quest and formed a backdrop for the rest of his music.

This piece was the starting point of my explorations. Searching for truth. Searching for purity. It is searching for God, in fact. What is really going on? What does have a meaning after all? This is like the end and the beginning all in one.²²

The limits of what was allowed and what was not most certainly influenced Pärt's music during his Soviet creative period. The more he attempted to transgress these limitations while following his ideals, the more forcefully the system hit back and tried to discipline him, largely through harassment. Soviet officials were often satisfied when somebody went through the motions of making corrections and changes; however, Pärt did not do even this, and most of his problems with Soviet authority stemmed from unwavering commitment to his ideals even under duress.

The Soviet restrictions and rules were in constant change and they cannot be applied to the whole Soviet period mechanically. For instance, *Nekrolog* did not meet the standards at the time of its completion and was for several years a transgression so severe that it put Pärt's career as a composer in danger. But at the end of the 1960s the local board of the Composers' Union held serious discussions on whether this work should be sent to the festival of war and patriotic music taking place in Riga.²³ By this time the previously rejected piece could possibly be representing the classic example of Soviet music.

Pärt's vocal symphonic work *Maailma samm* (*Stride of the World*), first performed in October 1961, was in a way seen as a redemption after sinning with *Nekrolog*. This work won the first prize almost a year later at the all-Soviet Union composers' competition. Since on the surface it seemed like an ideologically correct piece, *Maailma samm* was the most aired of Pärt's work on the radio in the 1960s. In fact there were ambiguities in the text by Enn Vetemaa that appealed to the Estonian audience, and Pärt hinted sonically that the style that he used in *Nekrolog* was still part of his musical conception.

The prohibition of dodecaphony disappeared unnoticed sometime in 1963–64, when the methods of ideological control were changed in Moscow. After that, many Estonian composers, some from the older generation as well, proudly announced that they used elements of this compositional technique in their new works.

One of the most important events that strongly influenced Pärt in the 1960s was the Warsaw Autumn Festival, which he attended in 1963. Founded in 1956, this annual event is the largest international Polish festival of contemporary music and the festivals had an obvious connection with the burst of CIA-backed modernist music all over Europe. Pärt and Veljo Tormis were the first Estonians who, as members of the Soviet Union Composers' Union's delegation, had a chance to witness the performances of the new modernist works. After returning to Estonia, Pärt and Tormis shared their impressions and introduced the records they had brought back from Warsaw at a meeting of the local Composers' Union. All of this awakened significant interest for the festival. The activists of the Students' Scientific Society at the Conservatory even managed to attend the festival without needing permission from Moscow. Starting in 1964, groups of students and professors from Tallinn visited the Warsaw Autumn Festivals with the help of the youth tourism organization Sputnik, which specialized in exchange tourism in the Soviet Union. One of the foreign composers attending the 1963 Warsaw Festival was Luigi Nono. Pärt and Nono met at the festival and then, barely a month later, Nono and musicologist Luigi Pestalozzi unexpectedly visited Tallinn. The same trip also brought Nono to Moscow, where he attempted to have closer contacts with the innovative composers. According to the memoirs by Edison Denisov and Alfred Schnittke, the reception of Nono and overall attitude towards such kinds of contact were radically different in these two cities.²⁴ In Moscow, the Composers' Union's officials attempted to prevent the meeting between Nono and the young experimental composers, and diminish the possible influences of his visit. In Tallinn there was no such intervention. Some newspapers published overviews of Nono's visit after he had left Tallinn, and Nono presented his music to a large audience in an evening TV

program. In the Composers' Union, Pärt's *Nekrolog* was introduced, along with works by various other Estonian composers, and it received a lot of praise from both Nono and Pestalozzi.

A couple of months later, Pärt's orchestral piece *Perpetuum mobile* (dedicated to Nono) was first performed at the Estonia Concert Hall. The following year, 1964, was one of the most productive in Pärt's career as a composer. It was the year he became interested in collage technique, which he utilized in his works until the end of the 1960s – until the (in)famous performance of his *Credo* in November 1968. For Pärt, these collages, using contrasting musical material, were about not only form but something much more serious and connected to Pärt's spiritual searching, as he has explained:

I was like skin that got burnt and I needed a skin graft. One piece of new skin at a time. New live tissue was needed and planted on my burnt spots. They were my collages and these pieces started to grow together after a while. They formed a new skin in a way.²⁵

During 1964, Pärt also experimented with serial technique (which uses a series of values to manipulate musical events), sonorism (an approach to music that focuses on the specific quality and texture of sound), and aleatoric music (a term coined by Werner Meyer-Eppeler in 1955 to describe sound events that are “determined in general but depends on chance in detail”).²⁶ For the score of the short TV-film *Evald Okas*, Pärt used tapes played backwards, which he manipulated, with records performed in different tempi. In addition to his personal musical language, a pursuit for timeless depth in music was a distinct feature that set Pärt apart from the rest of Estonian music in the 1960s. Since *Nekrolog*, whenever Pärt was portrayed in the all-Soviet Union press or in the Estonian media, a parameter of seriousness was almost always featured.

In 1966, Pärt's kidney disease led to several surgeries and to a near-death experience. The Second Symphony and Cello Concerto “Pro et contra,” both using collage technique, were completed during his acute illness, and both were first performed at the end of 1967. They do not yet fully demonstrate the new and evolving worldview first seen in *Credo*.

In September 1968, when Pärt finally agreed to talk on a radio program (he had been avoiding interviews and so this was the first time a wider audience had had a chance to get acquainted with his way of thinking), it became clear how spiritually focused he really was now.²⁷ His answer to a question about how he understands progress in art is revealing: “Art has to deal with eternal questions, not just sorting out the issues of today ... Art is in fact nothing else than pouring your thoughts or spiritual values into a most suitable artistic form or expressing them in artistic ways.”²⁸

He added that wisdom resides in reduction, throwing out what is redundant. He spoke about “the one” that is “the correct solution to all fractions, epochs, and lives.”

Ivalo Randalu, the interviewer, did not air one part of the interview with Pärt because it contained material that would guarantee a ban from airing on the radio in late 1960s Soviet Estonia. He hid the tape with the edited-out section, but it is now available. Randalu asked about Pärt’s most important paragons: “Of course, Christ,” answered Pärt without hesitation and continued: “Because he solved his fraction perfectly, godly.”²⁹

It was much later that people realized that this radio program *Looming ja aeg* (*Creation and Time*), aired on Pärt’s thirty-third birthday, contained a key to understanding his *Credo* in its many meanings and also explained some of the nuances in Pärt’s later music.³⁰

The performance of *Credo* in November 1968 once again put Pärt in the spotlight. The Christian subject matter was a problem for the Soviet authorities. As Russian music theorist Yuri Kholopov put it: “God and Jesus Christ were bigger enemies to the Soviet regime than Boulez or Webern.”³¹ Sometimes what immediately followed has been called a scandal, but in fact it is similar to the previous situation with *Nekrolog*. But whereas the issues around *Nekrolog* circulated for a couple of years and even reached the media and documents, the aftermath of *Credo* was suppressed and kept hidden from the public sphere.

The board of the Estonian Composers’ Union, together with a guest from the Communist Party, discussed this ‘problem’ three months after the concert but they did not succeed in convincing Pärt to denounce his standpoints and purpose of the work. Under these circumstances, it took courage to stay true to one’s convictions. Practically everybody who was active in the cultural and public spheres had made humiliating compromises and compliances as forced by the system. Some suffered from it, some did not. Pärt was disobedient and got punished. *Credo* vanished from all of the official reports and lists of Estonian music. Again, just like in the mid-1960s, the newspapers, following the Communist Party’s ideological guidelines, started to avoid Pärt’s name. Pärt’s music was rejected in the concert halls, and radio was cautious with it for a while. But he was not expelled from the Composers’ Union. He was pushed aside, and he himself withdrew from the public.

Credo marked the beginning of a substantial inner change, a long quest, in which external factors and environment did not play such a part as in the early 1960s. During the eight years from 1968 to 1976, only two works were completed: the *Third Symphony* and the vocal-symphonic *Laul armastatule* (*Song to the Loved One*) (which Pärt was dissatisfied with and later withdrew from his official list of works).

Significant changes also took place in his private life. His marriage to Nora provided him with important support and encouragement. The desperate searching of this period has been compared to pilgrimage through a desert without knowing whether there will be another side to reach. Then Pärt, on a sunny morning in February 1976, wrote down a piano piece that was later titled *Aliinale (Für Alina)*. Tintinnabuli – the style, the personal philosophy, the technique – was born. Pärt had reached the other side.

A way out: early music

Pärt's interest in early music accompanied him throughout his years of reflection and was also one of the cornerstones for tintinnabuli. Pärt claims that his interest emerged before he composed *Credo*.³² He and fellow composer Kuldar Sink started to gather information about the music originating from the pre-baroque era: relevant literature, scores, and recordings. In their music history classes at the Conservatory, this period was very superficially introduced, without any decent musical examples. Early music was thought to be inferior to later music, and, because the majority of it was religious, it was often rejected on the grounds of its subject matter.

In 1966 the first serious attempts in Estonia to perform vocal music from the renaissance were made. In the same year, several foreign performers gave concerts in Tallinn with early music as part of their programs. An important event was a concert in Tallinn by the ensemble Madrigal, directed by Andrei Volkonsky, at the beginning of 1968. Volkonsky later claimed that it was he who inspired Pärt to move towards early music. The fact that Madrigal attracted a large audience was a clear sign of early music's popularity. The radio started to air more and more early music. In Dorian Supin's documentary *24 Preludes for A Fugue*, Pärt describes how he studied Gregorian chant, which he heard for the first time on the radio, and tried to play the melody line on the piano but felt that he could not get access to this laconic music.³³ A maturing period was needed. Slowly and with fumbling steps Pärt was moving towards finding a new expressive style for his music.

Around 1970, Pärt met Andres Mustonen, who was 17 at the time and also, like Pärt, had a tape and record collection of early music. After Mustonen had entered the Conservatory to study the violin, he founded the early music ensemble Hortus Musicus in 1972. Soon Hortus Musicus concerts became hugely popular. The ensemble became well known across the Soviet Union and made numerous recordings for the record company Melodya. After Pärt had developed his tintinnabuli technique his music began to be played again, and Hortus Musicus was an important partner in reestablishing Pärt's reputation.

The end of the 1970s: departure

The environment of Soviet society affected Pärt relatively little during his tintinnabuli period. He was not expected to contribute Soviet music to the planned economy. In comparison to the 1960s, things were significantly different. Pärt did not challenge the cultural officials any more (with one notable exception in February 1979 at the Congress of the Estonian Composers' Union). His personal quest for truth did not depend on the external factors at the time, since Pärt was more occupied with overcoming the problems of his inner life.

As in the early 1960s, Pärt's first performances attracted a bigger audience than was usual for other composers. And again, most of the audience was young. His new music spoke to the next generation as well. The cultural life of Soviet Estonia was becoming multifaceted and, compared to the 1960s, serious music was pushed more and more to the side. The global popular music explosion in the second half of the 1960s had its impact too.

At the end of the 1970s, the ideological pressure of the cultural sphere was strengthened even more. The 1980s, when Pärt was already living in the West with his family, were hopeless and dark years of stagnation for the Estonian culture. Fortunately, this no longer had any effect on Arvo Pärt's music.

Further reading

David Caute, *The Dancer Defects: The Struggle for Cultural Supremacy During the Cold War* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

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