

8 Arvo Pärt and spirituality

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I Orientations

This study examines the ways in which Arvo Pärt's music may be experienced as spiritual or even religious. Pärt's music embraces both a secular spirituality (understood as a personal experience of, communication with, or belief in the divine), as well as such experiences within the context of institutional religion.¹ The multivalent agency of his music, situated between what the philosopher Charles Taylor has identified as conformity and unbelief, is essential to its communicative power and appeal.² This study, therefore, offers a perspective on how the complexity of this musical agency and the spiritual experience of Pärt's music can be constructed, articulated, and evaluated.

Spirituality is a construct that is focused around specific technical and aesthetic concepts that can be related to the secularity and complexity of modernity. This relationship can be understood in the following way:

<i>Modernity</i>	<i>Spirituality</i>
Progress	Staticism
Materialism (external)	Spiritualism (internal)
Disenchantment	(Re)enchantment
Decay (death)	Transcendence, transformation (life)
Contingency (anxiety, now)	Permanence (eternity)
Anxiety	Centeredness (calm)
Knowledge about (science, rationalism)	Knowledge of (intuition)
Alienation (desensitization)	Integration (resensitization)
Desubjectification (institutions)	Awareness (person)
Fragmentation	Holism

This dualist conception is consonant with the ways in which spirituality, especially from the 1960s onwards, has been perceived as a counter-cultural panacea to modernity that has also absorbed a social psychosis of self-substantiating belief without recourse to religious or political authority.³

Both modernity and spirituality, conceived in these ways, however, have represented a search for an understanding of God as much as a resistance to the constrictions (doctrine and dogma) of formal religion. Some recent well-publicized books by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens (and others) are symptomatic of modernity's resistance (even disavowal) of God. These commentators put God under the microscope, examine God by human standards of post-Enlightenment rationality, and find God wanting.⁴ Spirituality, however, rather than resisting or disavowing God, enacts a search to understand God despite such 'rationality.' It is not a form of escapism from modernity. Rather, spirituality is a consciousness that has absorbed and even reconfigured the problems of modernity through alternative and sometimes equally rational discourses.

Spirituality can therefore be imagined as a relationship in which humanity is looking for God (through all means at its disposal), even though (from a Christian perspective) God already loves us, and has already found us. Music acts as a context for this relationship, and, more specifically, as an agent in this complex negotiation of searching and of realization. Arvo Pärt's music, as much as it espouses a unity with God, is symptomatic of humanity's search for God, and, as such, it is a self-conscious and modernist form of political vanguardism that relies on a productive engagement (rather than any antipathy) with modernity.⁵ His music, more pertinently, points to an excruciating gap between humanity and God that, in unexpected ways, is an exhortation to participate in and even bridge this liminal space.

This study examines the nature of this participation through the complementary strata of Pärt's music. It examines his musical language, and its resonances in associated aesthetic concepts and meanings that apply to modernity, spirituality, and religion. An understanding of the content and structure of Pärt's tintinnabulation music (after 1976) forms a preface to a discussion of cultural and musical narratives of death and mourning, and enchantment and embodiment that inform Pärt's musical search for God, and identify it as a soundtrack of our age.

II Language and resonances

Philosophy and theology have traditionally attempted to explain that the source of musical inspiration derives from God, the soul, or some secular 'noumenal' region.⁶ All of these explanations point towards, and attempt to describe, in some sense, the reason for the music's existence and, as a secondary phenomenon, the composers' own experience of their music: what

they were trying to do or to say, and what they want people to experience when they hear it. The desire to explain music in the twentieth century – a strange sojourner in a strange land – was an imperative for many of the major twentieth-century composers. Arnold Schoenberg, Igor Stravinsky, Olivier Messiaen, Pierre Boulez, John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and John Tavener, amongst others, have written extensively about their own music and the music of others.

Arvo Pärt has not written or said very much about his own work, but his music has been defined around certain key concepts: tintinnabulation, icons, silence, and simplicity.⁷ These concepts derive from an attempt by the composer and others to explain the source of his inspiration, and how his imagination has been articulated in his music. They are linked to the composer's own involvement with the Russian Orthodox Church, and they form a constellation of ideals that help to configure his music as spiritual.⁸ Although these concepts are described elsewhere in this volume, what follows is a brief explanation of these formative aspects of Pärt's musical language and its spirituality.

Pärt's music has come to be understood as spiritual since the advent of the tintinnabulation technique in his short piano piece *Für Alina* (1976). At its simplest, tintinnabulation is a counterpoint between two lines: the M- or melody voice (which is often modal) utilizes notes from the 'tonic' mode, and the tintinnabulation or T-voice arpeggiates notes from the 'tonic' triad against the M-voice. Pärt understands these voices, which effect a subtle and kaleidoscopic shift between consonance and dissonance, as an idealist dialogue between the melody (or M-voice) as the subjective, "egoistic life of sin and suffering" and the tintinnabulation (T-voice) as the "objective realm of forgiveness."⁹ The subtle sense of tension and release imparted by this technique creates the quintessential quality of Pärt's music. In order to understand the significance of this idea for spirituality in music, the background of this concept requires some explanation.

Tintinnabulation represents an engagement with and transformation of traditional ideals of creating a sense of musical narrative and structure. In this ideal (germane to the symphonies of Beethoven, Brahms, and Bruckner, for instance), a formative musical idea or motive undergoes a gradual (or organic) transformation, appearing in sometimes radically different but recognizable guises throughout a movement or a work. This motive is usually presented in the tonic (chord I), at or near the opening and again at the closure of the work, and the sense of this tonic is created by a dynamic opposition with other related chords, principally the dominant (chord V). In this idea of musical development, the main motive of a work undergoes processes of compositional manipulation: embellishment,

augmentation/diminution, inversion, extension (addition and subtraction of material), and timbral and registral recontextualization. It is transformed through time and through presentation in different keys that are related to the tonic. This creates a developmental musical narrative that is dependent on the way in which consonance and dissonance are used to create short-term (localized) and long-term (structural) senses of tension and release.

This is sometimes understood as an ‘organic’ musical development that enables a structure that grows (like a tree) from a root (with the motive understood as the musical seed) towards long-term goals of resolution. In order to escape this kind of ‘common practice’ ideal of musical development, many composers in the twentieth century (Stravinsky, Messiaen, Cage, György Ligeti, and Steve Reich, to name a few) composed music that creates its own kind of musical narrative through the juxtaposition of blocks of material. While it is tempting to see this ideal of musical development as distinct from common-practice principles for ideological, heuristic, cultural, or even racial reasons, in fact these composers have found their own ways to join or make connections between blocks of sound in unique ways that refine or allegorize the narrative and developmental functions of traditional music.

Arvo Pärt’s music belongs to this latter tradition. While Pärt’s music does not develop using the traditional methods described above, he does find ways – usually through accretion of material (adding and subtracting voices for instance), and using the tension and release inherent in the tintinnabulation method – to create his own coherent forms of musical architecture.¹⁰ His music is sometimes called minimalist because it repeats material, but such an interpretation of this term is misleading: the procedures of Pärt’s music have little in common on a technical level, and even less on an aesthetic plane, with the type of energetic and pulsating rhythmic repetition found in the music of the American minimalist composers Steve Reich and Philip Glass that is, as Robert Fink describes it: “inseparable from the colourful repetitive excess of post-industrial, mass-mediated consumer society.”¹¹ Pärt’s music may use repetition, but it is certainly not minimalist in this sense.

Its use of musical material is actually self-referential, formally hermetic, and deliberately limited (immanent) in its exploration of the motivic implications of his ideas. Each work, and each section of a work, is generally characterized by a certain repertoire of dissonances and consonances, and a selection of textures and sounds that provide a stable identity to that particular work. In fact, given that the tintinnabulation technique is so simple, it is a testament to Pärt’s originality that he has created so many different contexts for it.

That Pärt uses a minimum amount of material means that he must tread a fine line between repetition and monotony. Indeed, because the sense of change within this material is often achieved with great subtlety, it is possible to hear the evolution of the material through time, and aspects of expectation and fulfilment (if not long-term tension and release in his music) that are analogous to the common-practice procedures described above. Crucially, however, the degree to which one experiences new events as new is minimized. Because his textures have minimal but varying information, density and flux, the sense of change and direction, and even a sense of progress, when certain works are examined closely, are carefully controlled to create a sense of narrative particular to each work.

In short, Pärt's music demands a certain kind of listening that might referentially call to mind other traditions of musical structure. However, the desire to explain the effect of his music has led to various problems. Because it uses blocks of material, it is sometimes identified as 'static' art, in contradistinction to the 'dynamic' common-practice model described above. In this sense, staticism is a musical and ideological construction that configures the meaning of the music as a panacea to the sense of dynamism, drama, and progress associated with modernity. This perceived staticism of the music has led to a description by Paul Hillier of the music as a "sounding icon." The music has therefore been inextricably linked to the devotional art associated with the composer's own Russian Orthodox faith.¹²

As a visual metaphor, the icon is a powerfully representational way of describing (and criticizing) Pärt's music. An understanding of the spirituality of his music requires some explanation of icons and the ramifications of using this concept. Icons are painted images made as an aid to worship. Through fixed contemplation of such an image, the viewer is drawn into a greater sense of understanding of him- or herself, and into an understanding of the meanings and significance of the Christian faith. Central to this genre of images is the figure of Christ. There is no existing factual and universally recognized image of Christ. Perhaps because of this, artists throughout the last two millennia, with certain exceptions, have been empowered to imagine a standard iconography of Christ's image. So, because nobody knows what Christ looks like, each artist must recreate a new image, and each icon therefore remains incomplete. The icon's self-conscious resistance to realism, or even anti-realism, an expression of the Ten Commandments' prohibition of images, demands another representation that still remains allusively incomplete.¹³

Icons are therefore ideal and idealist representations made to inspire the mind to imagine the real presence of Christ. The imagination is empowered to bridge the gap between representation and reality, and even to create a

new spiritual reality: a sense of being with Christ that is akin to faith. For the Christian, this can never happen until after death, however strong the sense of any visual experience might be. This is of course deeply subjective, but the idea that humanity can be empowered by icons to continually reach beyond its own mortality in a process that could be called transcendence presents a powerful vehicle for the understanding of Pärt's music. Transcendence here can be understood as the ways in which the listener is taken on a journey both into the nature of an alternative or deeper reality (perhaps an intuition of Christ's goodness, God's healing presence, or the glory of creation) and into a more profound understanding of him- or herself within these paradigms. There is therefore a dialogue between external perception and internal awareness. Contemplation, like meditation, is not done to achieve or 'get' something, but to experience something.

If through its staticism Pärt's music can be understood as a sounding icon, then this has profound ramifications for the way in which it is understood as spiritual music. Put another way, it means that the forms and structures, and the language that is used to describe them, are configured in a concept (the icon) that allows Pärt's 'static' music to be perceived as spiritual or religious. So, how is this sense of contemplation, of absorption and possible transcendence, created in Pärt's music? In *Fratres*, three phrases in increasing numbers of quarter-note beats per bar (7 – 9 – 11) are subtly varied and intensified through a simple strophic form.¹⁴ The extreme slowness and the irregular phrase structure, and the absence of an upbeat or a downbeat, engender a sense of timelessness, assisted by a musical narrative which is created through the recognition of varied repetition. This aspect of varied repetition and intensification creates a depth to the music that could be likened to the way in which the iconostasis (a continuous screen of icons separating the nave from the sanctuary in Orthodox churches) points the viewer towards the sanctuary and the sacraments beyond.¹⁵

In the following two examples the sounding bass of the chord is the drone of violin II, and the string harmonics give a thinner, more liminal quality to the sound.¹⁶

In the opening of the work (including the two-measure introduction that introduces the prominent G-minor modality), violin I and the cello have the M-voices consistently in tenths, while violin II and the viola have the T-voice (Example 8.1).

Compare this with Example 8.2a and 8.2b: the beginning of the second and third verses. In both these examples, the cello has the main M-voice, counterpointed by the M-voice in the violin. The consistent intervallic relationship (in tenths) between these instruments in the second verse disappears in the third verse, where there is an increased level of dissonance between both the M-voices and with the T-voices. Whereas in

Example 8.1 *Fratres*, opening

♩ = c.60

Violin I: *pp* armonici

Violin II: *pp* armonici

Viola: *pp* armonici

Cello/Double Bass: *pp* pizz.

Example 8.2 *Fratres*: (a) mm. 11–13; (b) mm. 19–21

(a) 11

Violin I: *p*

Violin II: *p*

Viola: *p*

Cello/Double Bass: *mf*

(b) 19

Violin I: *mp*

Violin II: *mp nat.*

Viola: *mp*

Cello/Double Bass: *mp*

Example 8.1 there is a clear sense of G as a tonic (without any strong polarity with any other chord such as a dominant (V) or subdominant (IV) which would imply a traditional sense of tonality), in Example 8.2a and 8.2b, there is a more intense but subtle sense of conflict between the outer M-voices, which return respectively to a focus on E_b major and C minor, and the T-voices in G minor.¹⁷

So, even without tonality (traditionally created by a dynamic opposition of tonic and dominant chords), Pärt employs a symbiosis of related chords and tonal regions. Through the repetition of blocks of material a

Example 8.3 *Fratres*, mm. 27–29

subtle sense of musical change is promoted, along with an increase in tension, and a sense of progression and of narrative. This is taken a step further in the fourth verse, which intensifies the material yet again by registral change (violin and cello M-voices in tenths again), with increased dynamic levels, while also preserving and enhancing the sense of antipathy between the M-voices and the G-minor T-voices. In Example 8.3, violin I plays the same notes (an octave higher) as the cello in Example 8.2.b. The sudden absence of string harmonics in this fourth verse creates a further intensification of the sound.

In Examples 8.2 and 8.3 Pärt focuses the music on different nodal points: on E_b in measures 11–13, and then on different focal points of C minor in verses three and four. In measures 19–21 it is C, and in measures 27–29 it is A_b, projected against the G–D drone in Violin II.¹⁸ So, although the material has not developed according to the norms of common-practice harmony, there is a sense of a shifting perspective on a limited amount of material, and a changing level of density (voicing) in the texture. The increased intensity of the material also provides a sense of progression and movement within a supposedly ‘static’ structure. To complete the metaphor, the subtle but inexorable quality of change in the music is akin to the gradual but increasing absorption into an icon, and it is this aspect of narrative and changing subjectivity that is important to an understanding of the work as spiritual.

Fratres is a piece of absolute music: music without a text that does not have any kind of extra-musical narrative program that could be implied by the title or the contents. The sound of this music (with its use of string harmonics) is decentered, allusive, on the verge of the audible, and between presence and absence, in a way that implies a notion of spirituality as ineffable, almost intangible, searching and unfulfilled without reference to any concrete spiritual or religious narrative.¹⁹

In *Trisagion* for string orchestra (1992, rev. 1994), Pärt makes an explicit link between the homophonic chords in the piece and religious meaning

by writing an (unheard) text directly underneath each system of the music; the syllables of the text line up with the chords. Pärt therefore encourages the listener to believe (when using the score of course) that there is a meaningful link between the sounds and the religious substance of the text, which is an invocation of the humble and penitent soul's response to Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and concludes with the Lord's Prayer.

The repetitive form of *Trisagion* implies a set of variations, even though the degree of harmonic and textural variance is limited and carefully diluted. The relentless E-minor quality of the music is never broken, but is subtly stretched from within by changes of instrumentation, timbre, and register, most particularly by a variance of the density and intensity of sound. The plasticity of the phrasing in *Trisagion* allegorically gives a sense of tension, release, and even goal-directedness without tonal mediation, and the aural sense of certain music events or markers orients the listener (through the subtle use of repetition, chromaticism, dynamics, and register), and gives the music a sense of progression that somewhat undermines the absolute implications of the term 'staticism.' So, given that there is a subtle sense of variation, development, and even teleology in *Trisagion*, the work can be understood as enacting a personal and quasi-liturgical sense of devotion and absorption, as though standing before an icon in an intensification of prayer that is part-narrated, and partly experienced as embodied in the music.

In a salient critique of the music of the so-called 'holy minimalists' (a pejorative term that encompasses the music of Pärt, John Tavener, and Henryk Górecki), the Scottish composer James MacMillan rehearses an axiomatic critique of this music:

I find their music very beautiful ... but it's a music that is deliberately monodimensional. It's a music that sets out to be iconic. It sets out to have no sense of conflict. It's a music that's in a kind of transcendent state and that's why it's beautiful. But that's also why it exists in one level, there is a deliberate avoidance of conflict, and people like Tavener make very convincing claims for why his music should be that way: an avoidance of the dialectical principles that have been in Western music through Beethoven and before ... my whole compositional philosophy thrives on conflict and ambiguity ... so that there is violence in my music whereas with these other composers there is not, and that sometimes surprises people who think that music of a spiritual dimension should not have violence ... Perhaps the downside of the zeitgeist for spirituality in music is this need to retreat from the world. That's never been my concern.²⁰

Although drawing a personal creative distinction, MacMillan's critique is somewhat tendentious: one might as well criticize Mark Rothko's

panel paintings for not having the figurative detail and sense of conflict found in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937) or, more poignantly, the drama of Caravaggio's violent canvases (an ultimate expression of Tridentine Baroque Catholicism). They are patently different things, and made for different purposes.

MacMillan is effectively defining an opposition between spirituality and religion: the transcendent opposed to the dramatic and worldly. He is also echoing a long-standing theological (Neoplatonic) idea that associates temporal staticism with eternity, contrasted with worldly (progressive) time.²¹ Certainly, by espousing the icon as a visual metaphor, with its ideal of staticism, Pärt's music can be linked to an experience or intuition of eternity, and can be understood as spiritual in this sense. The theologian Jeremy Begbie supports MacMillan when he states that

the music of composers such as Tavener and Pärt ... is characterized by a highly contemplative ambience and often labelled "spiritual" ... I have suggested one way of accounting for at least part of the immense popularity of this music: it offers a cool sonic cathedral in a hot, rushed, and overcrowded culture. And I spoke of what I think are its potential benefits. But I also questioned the implicit assumptions about God and time that seem to be at work (and are sometimes articulated): in particular, the belief that the more deeply we relate to God, the more we will need to abstract ourselves from time and history.

Begbie continues:

We can press the point further. If Christ has embraced our fallen humanity, including its fear, anxiety, hunger, loss, frustration, and disappointment, and these have been drawn into, indeed, become the very material of salvation, can we be content with a vision of the spiritual that is unable to engage just these realities, with a cool cathedral that bears little relation to life on the streets? To focus the point further still: God's engagement with our time climaxes in a hideous and ugly death. Any concern for the spiritual cannot evade this (1 Cor. 1:18–25). As we saw, this is what lies behind MacMillan's suspicion of the New Simplicity movement, that it plays too easily into a world-denying (time-denying) distortion of Christianity in which God's cross-centered involvement with humanity is marginalized.²²

This is a fascinating critique in a number of ways, and unpacking it affords a glimpse of certain fundamental concepts germane to an understanding of Pärt's music as spiritual. Essential to both MacMillan's and Begbie's critiques is the notion that seriousness in music (in technique and aesthetic intent) is synonymous with complexity, and this is in turn synonymous with value. That complex music should be prized over simpler music is

itself a reflection of traditions of writing about music, sometimes traceable to the composers themselves. This preference also reflects the demands of academia for increasingly complex cultural, musical, analytical, and interdisciplinary critiques that support the association of modernity with complexity. This is understandable and even commendable: much modern music is complex and demands to be met at least on its own terms. But while Pärt's music does not espouse the level of technical complexity of MacMillan's music, the richness and the intensity of the experience it affords cannot be concomitantly downplayed in this way.

The distinction between the "cool sonic cathedral" and the "hot, rushed, and overcrowded culture" that Begbie ascribes to Pärt's music plays directly into the kind of demarcation of spirituality and modernity outlined at the outset of this study. Pärt's music is anything but 'cool' or objective. Its over-riding effect of lamentation and of grief is so appealing, from a Christian worldview, precisely because it does not ignore but takes up and attempts to heal what Begbie describes as "our fallen humanity, including its fear, anxiety, hunger, loss, frustration, and disappointment." Pärt's music embraces the horror of Christ's death (in *Trisagion*, *Miserere*, and *Passio*, for instance) through its own sense of musical drama, which has at its root the intensification of minimal sound materials, to take the Christian listener towards a deeper understanding of his or her own role in the end-game of salvation.

Pärt's music may therefore benefit the Christian who must surely believe that Christ was the son of God, and that as God made man, Christ suffered and died on the cross to save the sins of humanity and that he rose again on the third day, thus providing a talisman of the great Christian hope and, crucially, a focal point in history for the faith that humanity will also be resurrected. For a believer, the iconic or ecstatic quality of Pärt's music can act as a devotional aid, or more, as an intimation of what it would be to live *as if* resurrected.

But for those not content with the somewhat circular and predicated answers of Christianity or Christian theology, the (ec)staticism of the music may, in a similar vein, act as medium for understanding the transcendence of suffering in the world that is at the core of the Christian message of hope. Even if Pärt's music, at its best, operates within a limited emotional spectrum, the poetic of lamentation, desolation, and even pity for humanity is surely accessible to the agnostic, the atheist, the non-Christian as much as the Jew or the Buddhist.

Perhaps the most insidious of the criticisms by Begbie and MacMillan is that somehow because the music is not 'complex', it is also not 'critical' of our time, and that it is not 'socially responsible.' Leaving aside the issue of whether music should do this at all, Pärt's music has been used, in films for

instance, to excavate deep social, ethical, and emotional responses. While it could be argued that the beautiful sunlit images of a Ukrainian forest, the site of a Nazi massacre, and the voice of a survivor describing the event, are sentimentalized by Laurence Rees's choice of *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) as background music in the first episode of his documentary *Auschwitz, the Nazis and the 'Final Solution'*, such a critique would circumscribe the complexity of the experience offered. At this moment, the viewer is called upon not just to lament the inhumane action of others as contrasted with the beauty of the natural world (this might indeed be sentimental), but to imagine that this beauty existed as the event took place. Pärt's music therefore provides a space for the construction of our own presence at the event itself. It empowers the imagination to reflect on what we might have done in that situation, and even how human nature has not greatly altered in our own time (Kosovo, Rwanda). This poetic of mourning is another episode in the story of Pärt's spiritual music.²³

III Death and mourning

It is surely an irony that in the twentieth century, when music had reached its zenith of dissonance, that so much was made – by Anton von Webern, Cage, Messiaen, and Tavener for example – of the role of silence. Silence is the ultimate antipode of sound, and it is linked in spiritual terms in Pärt's musical aesthetics to an ultimate state of self-realization, and to death.²⁴

Modern culture has been obsessed with death. This is unsurprising considering that in the last two hundred years the ideal of the secular rationalist state has, while attempting to guard the citizen's rights, also been an enthusiastic agent for humanity's bloodlust, and has encouraged the invention of more cruel and industrial ways to achieve specious goals.

The Marxist philosopher T. W. Adorno's dictum that "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" has many ramifications, but here I am only concerned with two aspects.²⁵ On a musical-technical level, for Adorno, the music from late Beethoven onwards represented an attempt in music to work out the consequences of motivic material that, while using the ideal of development presented above, also tends towards fragmentation. Adorno understood this as a metaphor for the increasing desubjectification of the individual through industrialization, mechanization, and institutionalization (what the sociologist Max Weber called 'disenchantment').²⁶ The utopian promises of the Enlightenment were therefore a sham for Adorno, and art that is authentic reflects this social reality. For Adorno, the resultant breakdown of tonality – or what Schoenberg more positively called

“the emancipation of the dissonance” – was a symptom of the way in which (socially responsible) art reflected a disenchantment and an obsession with death (reification) that led straight to the gas chambers.²⁷ So, if the sort of common-practice musical development discussed above is synonymous with progress, then it is also a reflection of (and even instrumental in) the decline of humanity. The other implication of Adorno’s dictum is that, after the industrialization of killing in Auschwitz, the metaphysics of hope are no longer valid: hope has no hope.²⁸ In this climate, it is surely no longer possible to aestheticize death, to pity it, to iconicize it, or to make it quasi-heroic in the way that is done in the song cycles of Schubert, Schumann, and Mahler.

In some senses, the history of twentieth-century music (and art) is like a corpse that will not die. The predominance of ‘-isms’ in the twentieth century, as well as political and artistic factions (often with their attendant manifestos), has provided an ever-expanding constellation of artistic ideals and endeavour that, like small-scale suns, arise and continually burn themselves out to form part of the living museum culture of history.²⁹ Whether one sees this flux as symptom of decline, or indeed as proof of a blind sense of hope essential to the poetics and rhetoric of modern music, the music of Arvo Pärt once again breathes life into the corpse of modernity, but it also inhabits this body.

It is no surprise then that, given the use of theological imperatives as metaphors, our museum culture should also be interested in resurrections. The resurrection of past music, performance techniques, and instruments, and the music of pre-Enlightenment composers were an obsession of the twentieth century. Pärt’s discovery of the tintinnabuli method, partly as a response to the challenges of form and coherence created by the “emancipation of the dissonance,” was preceded by years of silence, and study of such early music.³⁰ His interest in renaissance polyphony, plainchant, mode, and rhythm is symptomatic of a desire to revive modern music with the enchanted and unsullied material of pre-Enlightenment, pre-rationalist artisanship. On one hand, this kind of conscious use of preexisting material speaks of a drowning culture clutching at straws, but it was and is also a way of connecting contemporary music with a tradition (thereby giving a sense of authenticity to originality). This sense of mourning for a lost and an unreachable utopia is essential to the spiritual poetics of Pärt’s music, and expresses with exquisite poignancy something of the quandary of modernity and humanity after Nietzsche’s pronouncement on the death of God.³¹ The same poetic dialogue between painful remembrance and utopian (even Christian) hope is enshrined in the tintinnabulation technique (the engagement between consonance and dissonance), which promises the possibility of fulfillment (salvation).

If, as musicologist Daniel Chua has pointed out, “in replacing God” humanity must “succumb to its own critique” and die, then any sense of re-enchantment (new aesthetic life) must be essentially temporary.³² A spiritual music, in effect, becomes a glorification of this contingency. It enacts a tension between a modernity that, as a corpse that will not die, continually strives for re-enchantment, but it also makes a Christian eschatological claim on what that new life should be. The sense of lamentation, pity, and desolation in Pärt’s work, expressed through a language grounded in musical stasis, therefore iconizes death as a spiritual absolute. The image is not frozen, however, but, like an icon, it is made to be contemplated, absorbed, and taken up by the living.³³

IV Enchantment and embodiment

The historian Michael Saler provides the following useful definition of disenchantment:

This view, in its broadest terms, maintains that wonders and marvels have been demystified by science, spirituality has been supplanted by secularism, spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucratization, and the imagination has been subordinated to instrumental reason.³⁴

It is indeed tempting to understand this disenchantment as a symptom of a pervasive and underlying nihilism inherent to secular modernity. Re-enchantment through art must offer opportunities other than glorification or escape from disenchantment. It provides a space for originality, and for the search for an authentic expression. In Pärt’s case it is clear that his pre-tintinnabulation compositional silence was a result of a dissatisfaction: a mismatch between what he felt was an authentic voice, and what the prevailing wallpaper of the 1960s musical avant-garde thought were legitimate historical and ideological methods of expression. However, like Górecki and Tavener, Pärt stepped aside from one kind of vanguardism to take up another.

Such a break undoubtedly took self-belief and artistic conviction, but, as Pärt’s output has shown, iconoclasm is no guarantee of consistent quality or intellectual energy. Certain pinnacles in his oeuvre have, however, perhaps unlike many works within the vanguard of (high-)modernism, captured the imagination of the listening public and performers alike. So what is it that is attractive about this music? At a certain level the equation of simplicity = profound, and spiritual = release/escapism seems plausible. For a populace saturated and overloaded with information and particularly with the imposition of aesthetic signification, a music that seems to

denude itself consciously of labels provides humanity with an opportunity for emptiness, for clarity, and to recognize something of its spirit or essential nature.³⁵

Even if this were true, and it is clear from the above discussion that the spirituality of Pärt's music comes with its own complex ideological baggage, this perspective still locates music and spirit as external agents that do something to a person. When Pärt himself states of tintinnabulation that he had "discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played," and that "one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me," it seems that he is speaking not of external stimuli but of an internalization of sound, and an internal response.³⁶ What, then, if the spirituality of Pärt's music can be located in the body itself? Through its delicacy, and its sensitivity to the preciousness and freshness of organized sound itself, his music could be understood and experienced as embodied. Pärt's music invites the listener to listen more intently not just to the music, but to oneself, and in this sense a work such as *Pari intervallo* (1976) may, for the first minute or so, seem strikingly boring. That the listener is induced to alter his or her metabolic rate is essential to its poetics, but this does not fully explain this embodied experience, which does not just entail something being done to the listener, nor a response or reaction, but a form of active, somatic participation, and even a making of the sense of spirituality.

In their book *The Embodied Mind*, Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch identify the 'folk meanings' of meditation as:

- (1) a state of concentration in which consciousness is focused on only one object;
 - (2) a state of relaxation that is psychologically and medically beneficial;
 - (3) a dissociated state in which trance phenomena can occur;
 - (4) a mystical state in which higher realities or religious objects are experienced.
- These are all altered states of consciousness; the meditator is doing something to get away from his usual mundane, unconcentrated, unrelaxed, nondissociated, lower state of reality.³⁷

Behind this kind of dialogue is the theological trope of 'fallenness,' which Pärt attests to himself when he describes tintinnabulation as a perpetual dialogue between the self and forgiveness.³⁸ Jeremy Begbie is right to be suspicious of the implications of this convenient theological ideal when he cautions against "the belief that the more deeply we relate to God, the more we will need to abstract ourselves from time and history."³⁹ But any belief that meditation, as much as Pärt's music itself, is not undemanding would be misleading. If indeed Pärt's music asks us to reflect on our own state, it might indeed also embrace, in a theological sense, what Begbie poignantly describes as "our vocation to share in Christ's sufferings (Romans 8:17)" as part of "what it means to be conformed to the image and likeness of Christ

Example 8.4 Symphony No. 4, opening

A *Con sublimità* ♩ = c. 66
3 ♩

Harp
Violin I
Violin II/
Viola
Cello

pppp
(Percussion tacet)

13

(2 Cor. 3:18).⁴⁰ An embodied experience of Pärt’s music is of course possible for Christian and non-Christian alike, and may be one in which mindfulness is both somatic and transcendent, contingent and searching.⁴¹

The opening section of Pärt’s Symphony No. 4 “Los Angeles” (2008) attests to what this experience might be. The sense of becoming and overcoming, linked to the ideal of traditional development, is weakened throughout. Instead, the tintinnabulation technique blurs two chords (the ‘tonic’ A minor and the ‘dominant’ E major) to effect a shifting density and intensity of consonance and dissonance. This contingency works in tandem with a searching descending A-minor scale in the bass that implies direction and fulfillment (notes circled in Example 8.4). However, the irregular appearance of the scale steps, their (later) registral displacement, and a plateau of relative harmonic stasis in measures 68–81 within this section fulfills such a promise. A mindful experience of this music might be one in which the listener experiences and participates in the dialogue of stasis and progress in this music. This passage might also provoke memories or a realization of pain and a resignation to the world, together with the

creation of a renewed utopian desire that it should be otherwise: all essential elements of Pärt's spiritual poetics.

The sense of the sublime (implied by Pärt's performance indication) is one in which the self is not passively sublimated in the sound, but rather embodied and active. Varela, Thompson, and Rosch describe this embodied experience as a "reflection in which body and mind have been brought together ... reflection is not just on experience, but reflection is a form of experience itself – and that reflective form of experience can be performed with mindfulness."⁴² Put another way, the disenchantment linked to modernity offers rational knowledge *about* the self, the world and even God, while the spirituality of Pärt's music is associated with an intuitive knowledge *of* these things, through a consciousness that is "open to possibilities other than those contained in one's current representations of the life space."⁴³ This is not merely a "dance of sympathy" as Roger Scruton calls it, in which, as Jeremy Begbie explains "when music moves us, a significant part of what we are doing is responding to musical embodiments of bodily movements."⁴⁴ Participation is more than mediation of musical structure and cultural meanings through kinaesthetic mimesis.⁴⁵ It would involve the way in which past memories, sensations, and feelings (of oneself and the world) are taken up to inform new meanings, new possibilities, and new realities, that, even in a therapeutic vein, may entail new qualities of alienation and excess congruent with spirituality.

As such, one of the purposes of Pärt's music would be to show humanity, in a Christian sense, what it would be like to live as though it were possible to be resurrected. Through the imagination, humanity is required to realize something of and beyond itself. This is the essence of the music's enchantment. It is not necessary to be a Christian to understand this sense of transcendence, or indeed to enjoy the music of Messiaen, Pärt, or John Tavener, any more than it is necessary to be a Buddhist, Hindu, or Jew to feel the power of Buddhist chant and bells, the sanctity of a Hindu temple, or the sincerity and sanctity enshrined in the incantation of the Torah. But to be more than a cultural tourist, knowledge about the technical, cultural, and aesthetic aspects of Pärt's music is a precondition for the contextual knowledge of its spirituality.

The spiritual enchantment offered by Pärt's music is deeply consonant with a search for a more rational, harmonious, and profound way of living that is part of a planetary ecology of revival sometimes regarded as 'new age,' but which is in fact another reactionary tributary of modernity. It has been argued that Pärt's music is even commodified to promote this counter-cultural spiritual purity, or what Pärt calls "the neutral."⁴⁶ That such music is a threat to the critical orthodoxy and core values of modernity is etched in some of the more critical responses to this music.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly,

however, the degree to which spirituality is interpreted as manufactured (and for what purpose) may be contentious for some. Likewise, the degree to which a seemingly secular work such as the Symphony No. 4 can be understood as a sacred work (inspired by Christian religious texts), or a manifestation of a secular narrative of sacralization (as a protest or lament considering its dedication to Mikhail Khodorkovsky and “all those imprisoned without rights in Russia”), will depend largely on the images, iconography, and language that are attached to it.

For many, however, the transcendent experience of Pärt’s music might be described most closely as that of the sublime.⁴⁸ The romantic experience of the sublime was bound up with images and constructions of the artist as divine mediator, as well as heroism, nature, and death. It was an experience that, culturally conceived, pointed to a peak human experience that was a secular substitute for God. Late twentieth-century studies of peak human experience in sports or the arts, known as ‘flow,’ point in a radically different context, to an experience of the sublime as embodied.⁴⁹ Through engagement with a specific activity, a person experiences himself or herself and the world free of constraints, and with a sense of an expanding or infinite horizon of possibilities.

Experienced in this way, the spirituality of Pärt’s music would be life-enhancing.⁵⁰ Perhaps Pärt’s music is deeply comforting to the living because it provides an intimation of, indeed a preparation for, our own death. If this is so, then surely it can prepare us and show us how to live our lives.⁵¹ The contingency of enchantment that I have identified as essential to Pärt’s music and modernity is commensurate with an embodied experience of the music that is fragile, vulnerable, and human. To experience this is to exist on a fulcrum, or a tipping-point that both embraces and may transfigure a resistance to the transcendent, while embodying a desire and a search for the divine that is intrinsically modern. As a soundtrack of our age, the significant popularity of Pärt’s music may be attributed to its intimation that life with, or knowledge of, the divine is not only for the unspecified future, but is a pathway for the here and now.

Further reading

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