

9 The minimalism of Arvo Pärt: an ‘antidote’ to modernism and multiplicity?

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Curious and well-organized people are often characterized by the desire to group things together. As musicologist Jim Samson has contended, a tendency to classify objects according to a set of shared properties allows knowledge to be both “manageable and persuasive.”¹ This is as true for the music of everyday life as it is for the rarities which form the subject of arcane typologies; in all circumstances people feel the compulsion to analyze the music they enjoy. Anyone who has worked in schools will know that few subjects ignite debate between young people as much as the eternal delimitation of popular music genres. The arguments that rage between those in the know about the differences between ‘dubstep’ and ‘grime’ are motivated by the same spirit of enquiry that leads those in other more institutional spheres to discuss the categorization of Arvo Pärt as minimalist or ‘holy minimalist,’ modernist or postmodern. In recent years, however, these labels, like a moth-eaten cardigan, have begun to wear slightly thin in academic discourse. Useful and enlightening criticism is often deferred in favour of tortuous defining, redefining, and qualification of these irksome terms to the extent that many academics simply sidestep them. There is a section of the audience, however, for whom the words modernist and postmodern may yet prove helpful to their appreciation of music. Many of us care deeply for music but sometimes the ability to identify and articulate why this is the case lies beyond our competency. In grappling with these words, and with the meanings which orbit them, we may begin to understand what it is about Pärt’s music that makes it precious to so many listeners.

My purpose here is to show how Pärt’s minimalism corresponds (or clashes) with received notions of modernism and postmodernism. Given that there is a rich and vast literature already on these terms, this chapter cannot hope to be exhaustive, but it is my intention to provide a (small) number of observations which show how Pärt’s music is set apart from familiar theoretical models of elite modernism and the multiplicity of postmodernism. No doubt, my portrayals of both terms are characterizations; brief by necessity, but hopefully not skewed or unhelpful in providing a sketch of the way that Pärt’s ideas and approach fit into the landscape of new musical aesthetics.

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Pärt's status today as one of the world's preeminent composers should not obscure the fact that, in the grand scheme of music, his compositional career is remarkably recent. Although he composed throughout the middle of the twentieth century, tintinnabuli emerged in the 1970s and it has only been since the 1980s that this particular compositional system has become popularly and internationally acclaimed. Pärt's success has been dependent on his audience's ability both to register his particular voice in the jostling tumult of contemporary musical culture, and to follow it. Indeed, he has a fan base of considerable size and fidelity, a characteristic that is readily recognizable in the consumption patterns of pop. Arguably this is because his strong individual idiom – his *style* – has served as a compass for audiences, enabling them to navigate the unfamiliar realm of new music, even within a short space of time.

The idea of style in the early twenty-first century is itself problematic. Writing in relation to the music of previous ages, the late theorist Leonard Meyer defined style as “a replication of patterning, whether in human behaviour or in the artefacts produced by human behaviour, that results from a series of choices made within some set of constraints.”² Meyer's definition articulates the presence of two central and competing forces within style: forces of human choice (which are relatively unrestrained creative actions), set against constraints of culture (which take the form of ‘unbreakable’ rules). A style may be said to exist when such constraints are established by artistic consensus, which, at certain times in music's history, have resulted in the limitation of personal choice. In the case of the classical style of the late eighteenth century, for example, the rules of composition were “especially coherent, stable and well established.”³ Of that age, Meyer asserted that it was a relatively simple task for the style to be taught and internalized, which explains the prodigiousness of a figure such as Mozart, for whom only a “small portion of his choices could have involved a deliberate decision among possible alternatives.”⁴

This may have been true in pre-Enlightenment Europe, but today ‘style’ has resulted in a paradox, for, while the desire to categorize other things (including music) and other people is strongly felt by most intelligent beings, so too is our contemporary resistance to *being* categorized. Very few of us enjoy being grouped together as merely one example of a standard model, just as a small number of composers appreciate the labels which are thrust upon them by theorists or journalists. To have one's music aligned with that of another implies that a similarity has been registered, and similarity or – worse – imitation remains the enemy of originality.

Pärt is connected to the idea of ‘style’ on a variety of levels. Across the corpus of his own works, he has developed his own personal style since 1976 in the form of tintinnabuli. As a form of musical grammar,

tintinnabuli relies on the repetition of certain rules regarding the M- and T-voices. Critic Wolfgang Sandner, writing an explanation for *Tabula rasa* (the recording which announced Pärt's entrance into the Western musical consciousness in 1984), conceived the blend of individual characterization within an overarching generic style, tintinnabuli, as the "curious union of historical master-craftsmanship and modern 'gestus.'"⁵ By this he suggested that the individual works are conceived with the goal of presenting a recognizably unified attitude, each resembling a single strand within a thicker compositional fabric. Similarity between works is essential to Pärt's broader artistic aim, but it has meant that he is in constant danger of being perceived as the dupe of powerful capitalist agents, mass-producing works of identical value and character, and sacrificing his originality to a template sanctioned by an insidious recording industry.

On a second level, his style is often associated with the works of composers John Tavener (b. 1944) and Henryk Górecki (1933–2010) as part of the New Simplicity, and by extension as part of the global phenomenon that is minimalism.⁶ The term 'minimalism' has courted almost entirely negative responses from those artists and musicians who are saddled regularly with it, and clearly Pärt does not conform to the most widely held understanding of that term as music of constant, fast-moving figuration and generally sporting "bright tone colours and an energetic disposition."⁷ This style, associated with Steve Reich (b. 1936) and Philip Glass (b. 1937), was nurtured by them in the urban centres of the USA and is in many ways the exact opposite of Pärt's far less frenetic handling of rhythm. If minimalism is understood, however, as a broad aesthetic distinguished, according to musicologist Elaine Broad, by "the conception of the *non-narrative work-in-progress*," then Pärt can be grouped in a minimalist category.⁸ In any case, the association with music of limited material has subsequently shaped Pärt's standing within the narratives of twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. Often his labelling as a 'postmodern' composer is the result of the casual assumption that minimalism in its entirety is anti-modernist. An authority on the subject, Keith Potter, characterized minimalism as a "major antidote to modernism," and Pärt has been invested with some of that anti-modernist feeling.⁹

So what kind of sickness is modernism that requires such an antidote? A simplified image or even caricature of what it means to be a modernist composer continues to influence contemporary musicians both within and outside high-cultural institutions. When people talk in general about an idealized type of composer, they are most often referring, unconsciously perhaps, to the modernist figures of the early to middle twentieth century. It was, after all, these personalities who had the rigid self-belief to re-fashion the fundamentals of music so audibly at the beginning of the twentieth

century. This caricature is a conflation of Schoenberg, as the figure most commonly associated with such an attitude, with any number of *enfants terribles* – Stravinsky, Boulez, Birtwistle – who populate accounts of the twentieth century. Forcefulness, typical both of modernists' characters and their music, is like an intoxicant to their supporters who regard the more abstruse compositions as evidence of some magical and secret power. Modernists are proud, bordering on the arrogant, and concerned principally with their own creations without too high a regard for their public.

As with many popularly held ideas, the sense that modernist composers are sustained by a self-belief in their inherent rightness without the need to bend their style to a public is not entirely without proof, as borne out by the writings of some of the most prominent modernist composers. It would be negligent to overlook Milton Babbitt's contention that composers are comparable to specialists in physics, working within their own secluded laboratories without the obligation to explain their inner workings to the amateur. "The time has passed when the normally well-educated man without special preparation could understand the most advanced work in, for example, mathematics, philosophy, and physics. Why should the layman be other than bored and puzzled by what he is unable to understand, music or anything else?"¹⁰

It is somewhat ironic that the word 'modernism,' whose Latin root (*modo*) implies 'just now,' is still employed today, even though it is associated with compositional attitudes which were 'just now' a century ago. The label modernist, or 'high' modernist, continues to conjure the same aura of avant-garde originality that still shapes the reception of Schoenberg and his contemporaries. At the same time, modernist implies institutional respectability. Michael Nyman, himself a composer whose style is not always embraced by the institutions of high culture, classified the following as the central avant-garde column of the post-renaissance tradition: Boulez, Kagel, Xenakis, Birtwistle, Berio, Stockhausen, Bussotti.¹¹ Their music continues to be thought of as hard, complicated, and at the cutting edge even while most are now in respectable late age or deceased.

Musically, the modernist composer is at total liberty to compose works that are bizarre to the innocent listener, for this only strengthens their standing. Such a listener, who may wish to partake in modernist music but has neither the education nor the benefit of musical literacy, will find the creation of a musical sound-world that embraces the unfamiliar a source of bemusement or, potentially, of offence. An infamous example of such effrontery occurred at the first performance of Harrison Birtwistle's strident work for solo saxophone and drum kit with wind orchestra, *Panic*. Performed for the traditionally conservative audience in attendance at the 1995 Last Night of the Proms concert in London, it was greeted with howls

of derision. “Unmitigated rubbish” was the *Daily Express*’s headline, and it was “an atrocity of epic proportions” according to *The Spectator*.¹² Noise, it was assumed by the concert-going public, is a different thing from music, unworthy of the cost of a ticket. According to Babbitt, the confusion which is felt outside of the profession need not be lamented, but the movement from incomprehensibility to hostility in the minds of the public is less forgivable. He wrote that “it is only the translation of this boredom and puzzlement into resentment and denunciation that seems to me indefensible.”¹³

At times in his history, Pärt himself has composed music that seemed to adhere to a modernist attitude, closer to a headstrong radicalism which is commonly (if perhaps incorrectly) identifiable with the likes of Birtwistle or Babbitt. As an example, Pärt’s *Collage über B–A–C–H* (1964) obeys its own rationality at the expense of its audience, who, almost the object of a joke, are presented with a baffling alternation of reorchestrated Bach and twelve-note heterophony. In this work, the Sarabande (instrumentally modified) from Bach’s *English Suite in D minor*, BWV 811 is juxtaposed with twelve-tone clusters that ape the characteristic rhythmic pattern of this stately dance. *Collage über B–A–C–H* comes from a period before the decisive turning point of Pärt’s career in which he stepped back from the constant production of new works in order to reflect deeply on his development. The result was a fashioning of the system for which he is best known, tintinnabuli. The pre-tintinnabuli period is often described in Pärt’s biography as more explicitly ‘modernist’ because of his adoption at this time of a collage principle which mingled music from the past with his own, and it is difficult to deny the strangeness of these works, or to ignore the alienating effect they have on their audiences.

The identification of Pärt’s earlier compositional life as modernist is made problematic, however, in light of the fact that he was working in a political environment which inhibited the kind of innovation which is regularly associated with the term. A decade after Pärt’s birth the tone of Soviet aesthetics was set by one of the most important directors of cultural policy, Andrei Zhdanov, in his concluding speech at the Conference of Soviet Music Workers, in which he described modernist music as a second, unhealthy alternative to healthy progressive principles:

The other trend [modernism] represents a formalism alien to Soviet art, a rejection of the classical heritage under the banner of innovation, a rejection of the idea of the popular origin of music, and of service to the people, in order to gratify the individualistic emotions of a small group of select aesthetes.¹⁴

While Zhdanov’s prejudice against what he termed “formalism” was the result of an overpowering nationalist ideology, this does not mean that

his comments were totally unperceptive. The commitment to composing music that satisfies the “individualistic emotions of a small group of select aesthetes” is a fair description of the motivation for many modernist artists. Pärt has not always been celebrated by as broad an audience as today, and he was castigated by the authorities for his *Nekrolog (Obituary)*, which was basically reliant on twelve-tone technique.

To support modernism is, however, to accept not only that certain music is composed, performed, and sustained by a small minority of people in comparison to the broader audience, but that this music is seen as a more advanced stage of musical development conducted by specialist musicians who have been highly trained for the task. Specialization, according to philosopher Jürgen Habermas, is one of the distinguishing aspects of modernity, occurring within three autonomous spheres: science, morality, and art. Such a separation became necessary for eighteenth-century thinkers in light of the collapse of a unified world conception of religion and metaphysics, in whose place was erected the specialized domains of scientific discourse, theories of morality and the production and criticism of art. Habermas suggests that

This professionalized treatment of the cultural tradition brings to the fore the intrinsic structures of each of the three dimensions of culture. There appear the structures of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and of aesthetic-expressive rationality, each of these under the control of specialists who seem more adept at being logical in these particular ways than other people are.¹⁵

The project of the Enlightenment was dependent upon a necessary division between expertise and everyday praxis, but it had as its ultimate aim the filtering through of the ‘cognitive potentials’ of those three specialized domains to the betterment of the organization of everyday life. While a form of elitism is inevitably bound up within the specialized languages of modernity, accumulation of specialized culture was intended as the means of enrichment for everyday existence, to further an understanding of the world and to promote the happiness of human beings. Unfortunately, few would argue that modernist music, which is generally supported financially by a small number of wealthy institutions such as university composition departments or ‘research laboratories,’ has managed to fulfil its utopian goal. The experimentation which takes place within IRCAM, for example, remains hermetically sealed from the majority of its neighbours who populate the streets of Paris.¹⁶

It is principally for this reason that Pärt’s music after 1976 seems to resist the modernist moniker. Unlike many new compositions, tintinnabuli has become ubiquitous through a wide range of channels and, significantly, is a

musical style well-loved by the non-academic press. The shift after 1976 in Pärt's style is often understood as an about-turn. His music before this date is commonly understood as 'modernist' because of his exploration into the tenets of his own musical language, experimenting with serialism, collage, and pastiche. Consequently, tintinnabuli, as with minimalism generally, is situated as a counter-modernist reaction.

Defenders of modernist music cannot accept such a minimalist style on the grounds of its simplicity. For example, a composer such as Robin Holloway asserts that music should be constructed by its composer with "all the skill and experience he can command."¹⁷ To Holloway, artistic maturation, as with academic and emotional development, is a process through which the individual learns from experience and is able to deepen his or her response. "Why should intelligent people prefer anarchy over order, destruction over construction, frivolity, portentousness, arid vacuity over genuine content and palpable significance?"¹⁸ He describes Pärt's music as "simplistic wallpaper" as a means of drawing attention to the minimal and recurring palette in use.¹⁹ A more extreme reaction to minimalism is that of Elliott Carter, who views any musical style based on incremental variation as contributing to the gamut of objects and ideas that make up evil ideologies: "about one minute of minimalism is a lot, because it is all the same. One also hears constant repetition in the speeches of Hitler and in advertising. It has its dangerous aspects ... In a civilized society things don't need to be said more than three times."²⁰

Composer David Matthews, while not an advocate of the purely musical techniques of Pärt and Tavener, does at least recognize that their music might be valuable, even if their value lies outside of the 'pure' musical experience. He writes that theirs "is a somewhat artificial stance, though the strength of [their] religious convictions gives a depth to their music which might otherwise sound dangerously thin."²¹ Indeed, because Pärt's music is founded on theological belief, it could be understood as a recoil to a previously uncivilized and unenlightened society. Pärt particularly bemoans this situation and the inevitable shadow cast on his own work as a result, remarking that "if people simply hear the word 'God' they become sad; but what is sad is when it has that effect."²² Pärt's somewhat flimsy standing within certain enclaves of the intelligentsia is the result of his exclusive reliance after 1976 on a religious framework, a connection which was dependent upon both his acceptance of key commissions and his development of a 'spiritual' musical language, tintinnabuli. This only adds to the sense among skeptics of Pärt that his use of religion is a substitute, and not just a motivation, for musical creativity.

While the language of faith can hinder a purely empirical discussion concerning music's construction, it can also lead to new theological

discussions which may elucidate the real value of a work. In relation to Pärt, the term ‘holy minimalist’ is particularly deserving of discussion because of the gamut of possible meanings implied by the indefinite epithet ‘holy.’ The drive to be precise over spirituality is indicative of a period in which issues of religious identity are becoming increasingly tangible through the political language in which they are couched. Conflicts fought as an expression of religious intolerance have characterized the turn of the millennium, as has the cry to examine and identify national and racial alliances, with the result that much self-analysis as to the question of faith has appeared in the media. As a recent notable example, Pope Benedict XVI’s tour of the United Kingdom in 2010 spawned a national public debate on the relationship between, in his words, “secular rationality and religious belief.”²³ His words seem to underline a central discourse concerning identity formation in the twenty-first century, and one which must be faced by a civilization undergoing shifts at a rapid pace not only in religious matters but throughout the whole of its social fabric. As urban geographer Robert Beauregard puts it, we live in a “world becoming simultaneously disarticulated and rearticulated under the onslaught of corporate globalization, ethnic social movements, state violence, massive waves of immigration, and intellectual upheaval.”²⁴ Consequently, it seems vital to distinguish *religion* as the shared use of ritual which leads to cultural identification with a particular group, in contrast to the language of *spirituality*, which is contingent upon the individual.

It is emblematic of the generally liquid manner in which postmodern belief now operates that while Pärt is confirmed within a specific religious tradition, Orthodox Christianity, his music is simultaneously heard as an example of eclectic, spiritual mysticism. To be sure, from a casual listener’s viewpoint, there is a confluence between the styles of Pärt and Tavener, a perceived parity which, regrettably, is too commonly echoed by composers and critics.²⁵ Tavener’s tendency to engage with a broad collection of sources, librettos, or texts, however, casts doubt on the validity of drawing the two composers together under a single description. There are some similarities between the two Orthodox composers in generic musical processes, not least in their continual reliance on repetitive verse-forms, pedal pitches, and espousal of modality.²⁶ All of which have contributed to the perceived quality which is central to their success; namely, their provision of “oases of repose in a technologically saturated culture.”²⁷ Aside from these techniques, however, the two composers are characterized by substantial differences in their personal understanding of religious dogma, which has resulted in clear musical contrasts. Crucially, and unlike Pärt, Tavener perceives his acceptance of numerous musical styles as the

necessary counterpart to a spirituality which is equally plural, commenting that “I do feel that music cannot be exclusive, neither can religion be exclusive anymore.”²⁸

The slogan of holy minimalism covers up differences in approach but it has aided Pärt’s popular reception just as it has benefited a number of composers: Henryk Górecki and Georgian composer Giya Kancheli (b. 1935), for example, whose styles may be only tangentially connected to each other. The commercial success of this ‘brand-name’ can best be understood in the context of spirituality as it developed in the second half of the twentieth century, a period in which interest in pre-Christian paganism in Western Europe and the USA grew as the result of a reaction against both Christianity and capitalist modernity.²⁹ Spiritual non-exclusivity owes much to the expansion of various forms of New Age practices that exist in a symbiotic relation with capitalism, the media, and public figures who champion them. This ‘neopaganism’ is the result of various social factors which anthropologist Brian Morris lists as:

the drug cultures of the 1960s and 1970s; an increasing interest in non-Western religions coupled with a general disenchantment with Christianity; a search for new forms of spirituality in an era of global capitalism when nihilism, consumerism, and instrumental reason seem to be all-pervasive; the rise of the human potential movement with its emphasis on counselling, self-help, and self-realization; and finally the feminist and ecology movements that have critiqued the dominant tendencies of Western capitalism and its culture.³⁰

The holy minimalists are often marketed as prophets for the postmodern, but while this image suits Tavener, it is in tension with Pärt’s own view. Tavener presents himself as a figure that has exposed the religious neuroses of Western modernity, and actively engages with numerous subjects in a manner which shows him to be an itinerant explorer, rather than a monotheistic believer. Tavener’s preference for the ‘East,’ a term he uses to embrace Christian Byzantium, Sunnism, and Hinduism, is one example of this ideological inclusiveness, which can be understood as a vital aspect of Western postmodernism.³¹ This is also the context of Tavener’s popularity, which is of a different kind of support than Pärt receives from his patrons. Tavener’s 2007 royal commission by his ‘close friend’ Prince Charles, entitled *The Beautiful Names*, was a setting of the ninety-nine names for Allah and courted much press coverage.³² Contrastingly Pärt, living an incongruously humble existence “cares little for fame or fortune, preferring to live quietly and simply in a leafy suburb of Berlin ... [composing] in absolute isolation.”³³ His purposefully barren style serves to bind him to a message of monastic discipline.

Hillier employs the term ‘hesychastic’ purposefully to suggest the absolute control over the passions which can only emerge through tranquillity.³⁴ The word, which stems from a name for a sect of fourteenth-century quietists on Mount Athos, suggests that this discipline is a facet of Pärt’s Orthodox affiliation. “The term ‘hesychasm’ implies stillness, silence, tranquillity, and also stability, being seated, fixed in concentration. As early as the fourth century it was used to designate the state of inner peace and freedom from bodily or mental passion from which point only one might proceed to actual contemplation.”³⁵ For Pärt, passions are to be controlled rather than yielded unto, in order that God may have a receptacle through which to speak. This suggests a measure of impartiality and detachment while maintaining the potential to be moved by suffering and prayer. While the temptation to caricature Pärt as a hermit removed from modern life should be resisted, he does not conform to images of progress and egoistic glory which infuse numerous strains of modernity. The kind of artistic therapy in which Tavener allows his passion free flight is not encountered in the detached approach of Pärt. A familiarity with Pärt’s religious scores reveal that, as with Stravinsky, he is a composer who prefers to create within strict limits rather than being directed by his own emotional response.

The image of the icon is pertinent here for, like the painters behind the production of those objects, Pärt continues to grapple with the challenge of creating an artwork which may express divine beauty without allowing it to become the focus of a form of artistic idolatry. Artists who are sensitive to the theology of their work continue to be confronted by the human follies of creativity – the egoism of the artist and the decadent sensuousness aroused in the body – in contrast to the super-human purity of God, which is part of the object of their adoration. Tavener has countered this by actively striving towards resolution in Eros, producing music that is unashamedly luxurious in sonority. For those committed to the patristic tradition, however, music continues to act as a lure away from the metaphysical. The human body is tempted by music when, as voiced originally by Saint Augustine, it resonates with the physical nature of longing.

When I love you [God], what do I love? Not the body’s beauty, nor time’s rhythm, nor light’s brightness ... nor song’s sweet melodies, nor the fragrance of flowers, lotions and spices, nor manna and honey, nor the feel of flesh embracing flesh – none of these are what I love when I love my God. And yet, it’s something *like* light, smell, food, and touch that I love when I love my God – the light, voice, fragrance, embrace of my inner self, where a light shined for my soul. That’s what I love when I love my God!
(*Confessions*, Book X: 6, 8)³⁶

From Augustine's words it is clear how un-texted music could become the instrument of the mind's manipulation by the body for the early church. Paradoxically, the strongest analogy for loving God was rooted within a language of the senses because, like God, these drives operated unconscious of linguistic constraints; at the same time, suspicion was cast upon the physical and sensual aspects of religious devotion because they were in danger of leading the mind astray to worldly passions. Music, flowers, and flesh had the capability, therefore, of affecting the body in the same manner as religious devotion but with a less redemptive purpose. Augustine's deep attraction to music, which he articulated through the language of doxology, was therefore intermingled with an inherited platonic suspicion of physicality and the body. This is a conflict which has previously been encountered by Russian Orthodox composers who attempted to combine the strictness of Eastern liturgy with artistic values incorporated from the West. Rachmaninov's *All-night Vigil* has, in the past, been an unpopular work in the Western choral repertoire because "for some, its restraint effaces the composer's public identity, a hindrance to an artist in an age of individualism."³⁷ Likewise, Tchaikovsky's *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* is uncharacteristically muted due to its intention as a liturgical work. In part this is due to the Augustinian trepidation of composing music which works against the liturgy. One audience member at Rachmaninov's version of the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* remarked that it was "absolutely wonderful, even too beautiful, but with such music it would be difficult to pray; it is not church music."³⁸

Pärt is equally aware of the possibility of overpowering his audience with virtuosic sonorities that might propel his own artistic personality into the work. For example, with the exception of the opening and closing choral sections, *Passio* exists as a work founded on subtlety rather than grand gestures, in an effort to subjugate its own musical materials to the Christian narrative and text. Arguably the rhetorical power of the *exordium* and *conclusio* is necessarily grand in order to construct a frame that throws into relief the sacramental words of the Gospel. Only in these outer, clamorous sections does Pärt permit himself to produce music in which can be glimpsed a more human desire for an excessive emotional gesture in comparison with the spirit of humility, which is to be found in the pared-down forces of the gospel narrative. Even in this outer framework, however, the retention of tintinnabuli means that the 'message' of humility in the face of a larger form is never totally abandoned, or, as Wilfrid Mellers described it, "the total effect is grand, yet pain-ridden."³⁹

While discipline lies at the centre of Pärt's musical character, its significance is often papered over by the success which his and Tavener's music has attained in a popular sphere, a situation which has perhaps caused his

critics to be too hasty in consigning him to the abyss of ambient music. Pärt's dissatisfaction with serialism has led Hillier to position tintinnabuli as one of the "forces displacing the hitherto central language" of modernism, yet his reliance on processes that operate on mathematical principles elevates him above the level of a casual dilettante and moves him towards a modernist attitude.⁴⁰ His admiration for Webern, which is audible in his fascination with the smallest qualitative changes in sound, challenges his reception as an abstruse mystic. On the contrary, Pärt's development was reliant upon his encounter with serialism, for it was here that he discovered an earnestness in the purpose of art which he himself shares:

Why is Webern's music so highly regarded by contemporary composers? Because it's so simple; disciplined and rigorous, but simple. (That isn't to say that there aren't also very complex things in his music.) Unfortunately, however, composers often think that because they think a lot they have something to say ... Underneath all this complexity is only a lack of wisdom and no truth. The truth is very simple; earnest people understand this to be so.⁴¹

Here is encapsulated Pärt's approach to composition, which is directly connected to his broader understanding of faith. The "truth" to which he refers above is a religious truth, namely a belief in the existence of an exclusive relationship between God and humankind through an incarnate Christ.

The belief in an absolute truth sits uneasily with relativist notions of spirituality, and Pärt's insistence that his music gives voice to a single Christian truth is a significant reason for questioning his labelling as essentially postmodern. In this sense, the minimalism of Pärt's music stems from this theology, itself a kind of 'minimal orthodoxy' that treats anything outside of the relationship as needless and self-indulgent. Having undergone a transformation from his earlier secular modernism to this new sacred stage, Pärt speaks with the authority of a convert and recognizes that the intense freedom of technique found in his earlier works emphasized the skills of human creativity rather than the beneficence of God in bestowing such skills. Serialism, through its heady fascination with its own intramusical techniques, draws attention away from a work's greater metaphysical claim. Pärt's minimalism, meanwhile, provides a "cool sense of purity and discipline" as a counterbalance to the "decades of intense expressionism that characterised high modernism."⁴²

It is a purity formed through technique (tintinnabuli), and through subject (the narrative of Christianity). In this sense, to experience Pärt's music is to partake in the reenactment of medieval music and to become part of a catholic community which has existed throughout history. According

to Hillier, *tintinnabuli* provides a counterbalance of values in a cultural marketplace of excessive speed and variation.

A culture that attempts to live without the sustaining power of myth is a culture that is not whole, that has no connection with the past. And it is in this manner that we may understand Pärt's sense of purpose: as an attempt to reconstitute art within a sense of past and future time, to fly in the face of the disconnectedness of postmodernism and seize a cultural meta-narrative from time so distant, yet so potently realized that it has the force of new life.⁴³

In positing a musical subject which is unified and integrated, Pärt's project is essentially an old-fashioned one, encouraging the convergence of critiques of capitalism with religious philosophy in a manner which is rare outside of the pulpit. *Tintinnabuli* is an indictment of the detritus of contemporary living; it regards musical complexity as vanity and eclecticism as the symptom of boredom, and underlines the tragedy of a society whose majority exalts in brief and snappy tunes. The theologian and ordained minister Don Saliers is one of the small number of thinkers today to cling to the possibility of music retaining a utopian and redemptive core: "Surely it is still the case that what moves us most deeply (rather than merely entertains us) has both contemplative and prophetic powers, and is visionary, carrying with it a 'sense' of life and world."⁴⁴ The daubing of 'mere' entertainment in such negative tones recalls a Kantian philosophical heritage which adhered to the belief that art should achieve something beyond decoration, a quality termed *sacramentality*:

This [sacramentality] can occur when we cease to be interested in music only for entertainment or 'back-ground' purposes, and begin to pay attention to how music points towards the deep elemental facts of our existence. Music may point, for example, to our mortality, our capacity for love and suffering, or to a sense of mystery beyond the commonplace or the mere appearance of things.⁴⁵

The language employed here by Saliers to describe the potentially elevating properties of music is drawn from an attitude which is no longer current in musicological thinking, namely one which rests on the notion that music should aim to contain the values of love and suffering in its structures.

It is one thing to accept that music should be sacramental, but in practice it is much harder to conceive how music might be able to embody such values. Is it, for example, purely a question of dissonance? It is too crude to claim that the most abrasive and unremitting dissonance symbolizes the value of suffering, and neither can love, as an unbounded and profound emotion, be reduced or pinned down to being heard in only one form of

musical structure. Values such as love and suffering emerge musically in an infinite number of ways just as creativity – and humanity – are infinitely variable. It is not my intention (nor Saliers's) to claim that only one type of music can be sacramental. In the case of Pärt, however, there are qualities of his music which seem to ask for a specifically sacramental interpretation.

Crucial is the way in which Pärt treats the perception of time within the structure of his music. It is characteristic of his minimalism that dramatic contrast, and particularly rhythmic contrast, is eschewed, a feature which is typically viewed as a weakness:

Pärt's *Passio* (1982) is a setting of St. John's version of the Passion Story in which each vocal part moves along its same few pre-allotted notes for the entire 70 minutes. All voices move together in the same rhythm, and all the rhythms are built from the same basic cells. Thus the piece sounds remarkably consistent from beginning to end; what comes out of your CD player on 'Scan' is not much different from what comes out on 'Play.'⁴⁶

It is disconcerting that *Passio* can be portrayed in such a way. Firstly, it is a distorted presentation of the material to imply that difference does not exist, since the various figures in *Passio* (the Evangelist, Christ, Pilate, and the crowd) are distinguishable from each other through the use of contrasting tintinnabuli voices and rhythmic patterns specific to each character. A more worrying aspect of Fisk's characterization, however, is the absence of a considered opinion as to why Pärt deliberately 'measures time' and draws it out over a relatively long period. The answer, I would suggest, lies in the qualities of love and suffering, which are themselves temporal. Unlike the fleeting stab which accompanies a stubbed toe or the elation of a holiday romance, suffering and love are both subject to endurance.

My understanding is not a wholly isolated one. The appropriation of Pärt's music in a variety of contexts reveals a common association between the enduring temporality enacted through his style with the notion of 'deep' emotion. A significant example from recent years is the television play *Wit* adapted by Emma Thompson and Mike Nichols from the stage play by Margaret Edson. The narrative of *Wit* follows the final illness and death of Vivian Bearing, a notable John Donne scholar, as she undergoes aggressive medical treatment. Of interest from a Pärt perspective is the regular use of *Spiegel im Spiegel* as an aural backdrop for the subject of Bearing's suffering. This music emerges at various times of both emotional anguish (as when Bearing re-lives memories of her time with her father), and physical distress (as the illness eventually and painfully overtakes her body).

The very presence of music within a television play which deals with this subject might be considered crass since it serves to detract attention from the epicenter of human suffering, which is otherwise presented

with almost documentary objectivity. Furthermore, the choice of this particularly beautiful Pärt work is suspect, presenting the experience of the cancer patient in a perversely prettified light. Consequently, the music potentially turns the viewer into a charlatan, relying on the film as an *excuse* for emotion rather than centering genuine emotional intelligence towards it.

While these reservations may be true of the use of some music in films with a highly emotional subject, it is worth considering whether *Spiegel im Spiegel* operates technically in the same way that other music regularly does within film. Unlike conventional film scores, minimalist music tends not to comply with the contour of the narrative and in fact is more inclined to obey its own abstract momentum: once the musical process begins, not even the visual imagery of the film can affect it. As Mervyn Cooke has written,

The mechanical nature of such repetition [minimalism], in which the music sometimes pursues a path quite independent from the suggestions of the visual image, could readily foster emotional neutrality and distanciation.⁴⁷

This is particularly notable in Nichols's reliance on Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* in *Wit*.⁴⁸ This work is constructed from sixteen phrases which develop from an initial interval of a rising second. Each couplet of phrases includes an inversion, with the pitch 'A' as the plane of reflection. The piano writing accords to tintinnabuli with a chord of F major in ordered inversions providing a constant harmonic sonority. The cycle of events (by which I mean the sequence of movement from one note to next in the melodic part, the point at which the tintinnabuli note is articulated and the sounding of notes at the extremity of the keyboard) accords to a fixed rhythmic ordering within each phrase. The process once initiated runs autonomously. It is this regularity, the series as it were, of the music which is the route of attraction in certain kinds of minimalism. The purity of the structure as it evolves through cellular growth provides an enjoyment which is experienced across a wide number of disciplines, not least mathematics, but is also derived from artistic cultural moments that emphasize grace, regularity and good construction.

What saves the use of *Spiegel im Spiegel* within the film from crass sentimentality is its relationship to time. It does not contain contrasts or dramatic melodic content that would make the passing of time into a dynamic and enjoyable experience. Instead, the crotchet pulse is unwavering, marking time without decoration. The passing of time is made inescapable, as well as cyclic, and therefore the double-edged nature of existence as something at once beautiful but also inextricable is underlined. This is fitting for

the subject. As Professor Bearing, lying in her bed, narrates while *Spiegel im Spiegel* is played:

You cannot imagine how time ... can be ... so still.

It hangs. It weighs. And yet there is so little of it. It goes so slowly, and yet it is so scarce.

If I were writing this scene, it would last a full fifteen minutes. I would lie here, and you would sit there.⁴⁹

Pärt's music is not sentimental, but it does represent a form of unflinching honesty and in this, perhaps, it fulfils Saliers's understanding of sacramental significance. Life, not only that of the individual but of humanity across time, is wrought from the persistent interplay of suffering with love.

Both a modernist form of music criticism and recent 'theo-musicology' emphasize the importance of transformative potential in music. In each it is a requirement that music is examined and evaluated through a particular mode of specialized listening. A passivity of listening, which results from the commoditization of musical works, is not appropriate for perceiving the depths of human experience, its complexities and near-infinite thought processes, which are enabled through this artistic medium. Jonathan Harvey lights on this idea when he suggests that "we [society] need more acknowledgement of the state of *receptor* in the Arts – the wide-open consciousness Buddhists call 'suchness' where everything that happens is vivid and important."⁵⁰ While Harvey's position is not singly Christian, his attitude is in alignment with Saliers, who upholds the idea that in order for music to be the bearer of theological import, there must be a sensibility for hearing music "as revelatory."⁵¹ This accords strikingly with a modernist vision of music: Babbitt "demanded increased accuracy from the transmitter (the performer) and activity from the receiver (the listener)," and in his *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, the arch-modernist Theodor Adorno described a number of increasingly sophisticated listening approaches with the intention of discovering something 'revelatory' about society within musical structure.⁵² Such modernist theo-musicology asserts the need for receptivity in the listener to the theological and social potential in music, which is predicated on the "reciprocity of sound and life through time."⁵³ This involves listening to the musical content in such a way as to hear in its development a representation of the processes which shape spiritual and social development. As Saliers asks, "could it be that music offers, in both its structures and its improvisations, an image of how life may be lived?"⁵⁴ This is the same challenge which Adorno posed in an entirely non-religious context but without hope of a resolution. On the contrary, for Saliers, the belief in a Christian teleology means that "the

venerable terms beauty, goodness and truth still hover over us.”⁵⁵ It is these values which Pärt’s music strives to make audible.

Pärt’s music leads us to reconsider the contours of the contemporary music landscape. While there are confluences of outlook with serialism (the best-known example of modernist aesthetics), it is also apparent that Pärt’s music is shaped by a paradigm of accessibility of material, stemming from his belief in simple truth, rather than an evolving complexity. He thus challenges an antagonistic reading of modernism and postmodernism, instead conforming to John Barth’s model in which specialized and accessible elements coincide:

My ideal postmodernist author neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist grandparents or his nineteenth-century premodernist grandparents. He has the first half of our century under his belt, but not on his back ... He may not hope to reach and move the devotees of James Michener and Irving Wallace – not to mention the lobotomised mass-media illiterates. But he should hope to reach and delight, at least part of the time, beyond the circle of what Mann used to call the Early Christians: professional devotees of high art.⁵⁶

What seems vital to this understanding of postmodernism is the replacement of an oedipal complex (or anxiety of influence) with the ability to hold on to elements of modernism while transforming them, indeed to exist betwixt and between them. This multi-directional capability to look back towards the shore of modernism as well as towards the line of an unbreached horizon means that Pärt’s music is intrinsically optimistic. It contains the possibility of being part of a ‘sacral community’ (a membership which alienating music thwarts) and, through the surety of its form and theology, it offers a promise of release from the confused plurality which characterizes the postmodern.

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