

in memoriam JEYP

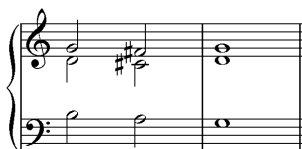
A Brief Introduction to Pärt-writing

Arvo Pärt and his unique musical formula

The world is divided into those who love the music of Arvo Pärt, those who loathe it, and those who simply haven't heard it yet. By "the music of Arvo Pärt" I mean the pieces he has written since discovering his own unique compositional technique in the mid-1970s to which he gave the name *tintinnabuli*. The earlier part of Pärt's serious compositional career had encompassed stylistic and technical experimentation with just about everything from serialism (*Nekrolog*, 1960-1) to collage (*Credo*, 1968), while his jobbing film music taught him to be if not melodically and sonically profligate, at least highly fertile. But what gave him iconic status in the late 20th Century, and now promises his own page and possibly chapter in the history of Western music, is his completely new way of writing music.

Western music has always been written within the confines of a set of continuously-evolving customs and rules. It is the actual writing down on parchment, paper or PC which firstly requires a common understanding of what the notation signifies, and secondly provides a general compositional framework which can gradually be extended and altered by trial and error. These rules of language and literature are helpfully analysed and pigeon-holed by theorists, and what had been a possibility hardens into a necessity or melts into an anachronism – for example, the double leading-note cadence which came and went in the late Middle Ages – from one generation to another.

Ex. 1



In the 20th Century, however, musical notation was developed such that it became possible to write almost anything down, and at the same time the rules of taste or literature widened to admit almost any noise as music. Each composer or school of composers, challenged by this exceptional burden of liberation, was forced to mark their own boundaries, to lay down their own arbitrary set of rules, most notably the serialism of Arnold Schoenberg and his followers. As Igor Stravinsky put it: "My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action".

Born near Tallinn in Estonia in 1935, and subsequently living under Soviet occupation, Arvo Pärt listened to as much music from the outside world as he could – both as a radio listener and later as a recording engineer for Estonian Radio. In fact, he became the first Estonian composer to apply the serial technique, and consequently had his first taste of official disapproval from the musical authorities. At the end of the 1960s his piece *Credo* was banned across the Soviet Union, but this time for the

open declaration of Christian faith rather than the musical content. Nevertheless, the music itself is quite shocking: Bach's C major Prelude (from Book I of the '48') is transformed into an extraordinary orchestral and choral chaos – an apocalyptic vision of music and mankind under the yoke of tyranny – and yet somehow one of the purest figures from the musical past turns the other cheek and overcomes.

Credo was an endpoint for Pärt – he could go no further down that route – and he spent several publicly fallow years sifting through layers of musical history, all the time seeking the essence of musical expression. His digging away uncovered two principles behind the simplest of shapes and forms: firstly that a single note - however innocuous on the page - contains a virtually unlimited richness of overtone combinations and acoustic reflections in performance; secondly that the basic triad (which in its major form radiates so intensely from the natural harmonic series) is the context for all melodic development, whether sounded or not. In other words: the two – the foreground and the background – are one. These two discoveries were first demonstrated in the piano miniature *For Alina* (1976): one voice moves by step from and towards a central note, first up then down, and the other voice articulates the three notes of a triad. Thereafter, Pärt formalised this technique and gave it the name of *tintinnabuli* – “little bells” – after the bell-like sounds of the triad.

Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* technique is of the same order, if not the same character, as the serialism he sampled and discarded. *Tintinnabuli*, just as much as serialism, establishes a relationship between the first event and all those that follow. With or without rules, the first question is “How do I begin?”, but the next question of “How do I go on?” becomes increasingly perilous in a compositional world without order: unless there is a definable relationship between one event and another, the result is randomness – very dull after a while. There is a difference, however, between randomness (which is a tendency rather than an absolute) and the chaos of, for instance, the natural world – such as the eddies of a river; or the tangled lines of a bush in winter which are not random, but natural outcomes of a relatively small set of rules coded in the cells and determining the angles, the number of segments, the colours, the shapes. The appearance of chaotic detail is achieved simply by the multitude of iterations of these basic patterns.

In the same way, the music of Arvo Pärt shimmers like the surface of the sea in sunlight: there is almost infinite and unpredictable detail, yet it is one sea rocked by the interface of aerial and underwater currents and one sun unyielding in its heavenly gaze. Which brings us back to the actual elements of *tintinnabuli*: one constantly-changing up-or-down movement heard against one constant ‘harmony’ (a reconciliation of the horizontal and the vertical; a symbol too, perhaps, of the Incarnation – God become Man).

The first or ‘melodic’ voice is like the surface of the sea: it goes either up or down. How much it moves depends on the wind and the tide – the words and the sentences of the text.

Ex.2

(John 18:17)

Alto 

Di - xit er - go Pe - tro an - cil - la o - sti - a - ri - a:

The second or ‘harmonic’ voice is like the sunlight: its source is unchanging, but what we see are the reflections of that source on the surface of the sea, just as different pitches of a major or minor triad are irrevocably linked with those of the ‘melodic’ voice.

Ex.3

(John 18:17)

Soprano
Di - xit er - go Pe - tro an - cil - la o - sti - a - ri - a:

Alto
Di - xit er - go Pe - tro an - cil - la o - sti - a - ri - a:

“*Tintinnabuli* is the mathematically exact connection from one line to another...
...*tintinnabuli* is the rule where the melody and the accompaniment [accompanying voice]...is one. One plus one, it is one – it is not two. This is the secret of this technique.”

Thus Pärt’s own definition of how these two lines (usually a pair of voices or instruments) make together one soundworld, worked out across the passage of time. And it’s here that the analogy with the natural world goes deeper and further back – back to the very beginning of the world and beyond to the Creator Himself. Pärt has compared his own composing of a ‘formula’ for each piece to the creative work of God outside our experiential dimensions of Time and Space and Matter.

“My focus is what was ‘before’ the Big Bang...where God had created the formula...
...During the writing I come several times back to the very beginning idea and I can rewrite...the formula shorter and clear... ..If I have found it, then I can leave the free walk for music after the rules of this formula, because nothing can happen wrong then.”

Pärt’s *tintinnabuli* technique is rather more than just a technique: it’s a whole way of thinking about music – a self-contained philosophy, and yet it is a technique with as universal potential as the fugue. *Invenit et fecit* – Pärt is both the discoverer of the technique and the craftsman of each particular piece of music. Which is why he is able to compose very different pieces on very different texts and for different occasions and combinations of musicians, and also why some pieces are perhaps more successful than others. If one is able to see past the halo and judge one of Bach’s fugues as better-written than another, than we are also able to consider that Pärt’s outworking of his own technique is at times better than others. Further, as a technique independent of its creator, *tintinnabuli* can be explored by other composers...

As the summit of his early *tintinnabuli* oeuvre, Pärt’s *St John Passion* (*Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem*, or *Passio* for short) is, all contention aside, a masterpiece. But what exactly is the formula? First of all and foremost, there is the text. The text with its sacred subject, cultural and liturgical history, and framed by a long title and a short prayer. It’s from the text of John’s account of Jesus’s betrayal and arrest, mistrial and crucifixion, that both the structure of the piece and the microscopic details are all derived. The text divides into a narrative (sung by the Evangelist Quartet with accompanying instrumental quartet) and spoken interjections

by Jesus, Pilate and all the other characters including the crowd (sung by the soloists and chorus with organ). This division sets both the pace and the fluctuation from one tonal area to another, as each has its own harmonic framework and rhythmic scheme (for instance, the Evangelist Quartet moves twice or even three times as fast as the characters in the drama). On the less macroscopic level of sentences in the text, there are rules dictating which stressed syllables are to be lengthened, and how punctuation is to interrupt the rhythmic flow; at the level of the very words, the number of syllables determines how far up or down the melodic voices will go – in one of four basic patterns around a central note (down and away, up and away, down towards, up towards).



So far so good, but how do these simple factors result in an ever-varying texture? The answer is mathematical. Every two phrases the texture of the Evangelist Quartet changes – an instrument or voice is added or taken away; every word with more than one syllable begins an alternating pattern of down and up, while each pair of phrases alternates between movement away from the central note A and movement towards it. Unless the number of words and the number of syllables in those words recurs in precisely the same pattern at a point when precisely the same combination of voices and instruments are involved, the music will always be different.

For example, the Evangelist Quartet begins with phrases of the following number of syllables:

(bass)

1 1 3 2, (movement away)

3 1 1 4 2 1 3 2, (movement towards)

(bass + cello)

2 2 2, (away)

1 1 4 2, (towards)

(bass, cello + oboe)

1 4 2.

The full stop ‘rule’ means that both syllables in the final word are lengthened to a semibreve each, and the bar is followed by an instrumental echo bar of half the length.

The bass, cello and oboe continue:

3 2 1 2,

(bass, cello, oboe + violin)

1 3 2,

2:

(bass + tenor)

2 3 2 4 2 1 4 2.

2 2 1 4 3,

(bass, tenor + oboe)

1 1 5,

1 4 3,

(bass, tenor, oboe + violin)

2 2 1 3,

1 4,

(bass, tenor + alto)

1 2.

2 3 2 3

(bass, tenor, alto + violin)

1 3 2 2 2 3,

1 2 2:

At this point the bass soloist enters with the words of Jesus (“Quem quaeritis?”), and then the complete Quartet (bass, tenor, alto + soprano) continue:

4 2:

The chorus enters for the first time (“Jesum Nazarenum.”), and again the Quartet continue:

2 2 2:

Ex.5

(John 18:5)

Soprano
Di - cit e - is Je - sus:

Alto
Di - cit e - is Je - sus:

Tenor
Di - cit e - is Je - sus:

Bass
Di - cit e - is Je - sus:

It is instructive to note that this (the twentieth phrase for the Quartet) is the first time that a phrase has the same number of syllables as one that has gone before (the third phrase – see the example below). Even so, the music is not the same for the three reasons outlined above: the instrumentation and number of melodic lines is different (bass, tenor, alto, soprano rather than bass, cello); the melodic movement is different (towards the central note A rather than away from it); the rhythm is different (in the later instance it is the beginning of a new sentence – therefore a lengthened stressed syllable in the first word – and there is a colon rather than a comma, resulting in a lengthened final bar).

Ex.6

(John 18:1)

Bass
u - bi e - rat hor - tus,

Violoncello

In fact, most of the countless combinations of notes and syllables in the Evangelist part are heard only once each, despite the apparently small range of possibilities. Pärt himself remarks on the fecundity of this simple interaction between the text and his rules, “I am surprised when I listen to this music what are doing the words...even when the rule was very simple”. What other composer would find a genealogy so inspiring, as Pärt does in his *...which was the son of...* (2000)?

I first came into personal contact with Arvo Pärt when I asked if I could interview him for Composer of the Week on BBC Radio 3 in 1996. As is his habit, he said no, but for some reason, we ended up agreeing that he should instead record his first public *tintinnabuli* piece *For Alina* specially for the series. This was apparently his recording debut as a pianist and took place in one of the BBC's studios at Maida Vale in London. What was remarkable was his care over the sound of the piano, in particular, the quality and quantity of artificial reverb which we should use. It was during supper after that session that the slightly awkward topic was broached of how we intended to broadcast *Passio* – broken up into five segments across the course of the week (one programme each day from Monday to Friday); again he surprised me with his willingness to go beyond the conventional. Apart from using *Passio* (in the Hilliard Ensemble's pioneering recording) as the basis for the structure of the week's programme, there was another point to this exercise: simply to demonstrate how unifying the *tintinnabuli* principle is, even when the listening is interrupted so radically. Rather like Brighton rock, the character of Pärt's music in general and of *Passio* in particular is stamped throughout, and yet the different episodes in the narrative vary enormously in emotional intensity and acoustic texture.

The key, it seems, to using the *tintinnabuli* technique is to refine the rules of the system so as to allow the text and meaning of the piece to be most perfectly expressed, without ever (or almost ever) needing to relax the rules to characterise a word or moment individually. There's one moment in *Passio* where the crowd call for Barabbas to be released instead of Jesus (John 18:40), and the *tintinnabuli* rules produce the most appropriately hollow-sounding first inversion G major chord with the basses on a high D in the middle of the texture.

Ex.7

(John 18:40) (3 x 6/4)

Soprano
Non hunc, sed Bar - rab - bam.

Alto
Non hunc, sed Bar - rab - bam.

Tenor
Non hunc, sed Bar - rab - bam.

Bass
Non hunc, sed Bar - rab - bam.

At another point the alto sings up to his or her highest note – an F – as the soldiers lead Jesus out to be crucified (John 19:16); but this is no ordinary word-painting, rather this is the result of the rules and a word – “Crucifigeretur” – which has the (equal) highest number of syllables in the entire text of the *Passio*.

(John 19:16) Ex.8

Violin

Alto
Tunc er-go tra-di-dit e-is illum ut cru-ci-fi-ge-re-tur.

Bassoon

When it came to making a new recording of *Passio* with TONUS PEREGRINUS in 2001 (released in 2003), there was another aspect of Pärt's music and the *tintinnabuli* technique which occupied us both in the preparation of the recording and afterwards in the editing process: the silences between the alternating sections of the characters in the narrative and the Evangelist Quartet. Our initial approach was to take the durations of the silent bars literally, in accordance with the care with which the rhythm of each of the sounded bars had been determined. The composer himself listened to early edits of the recording, and finally decided that a slight modification of one of the rules of his formula needed to be made: if the final word in a section (with a full stop) has one or two syllables, then the following silent bar should be of the same duration (as in the printed score); if the final word has three or four syllables, then the silent bar should be exactly half as long (thus the modification). Arbitrary this decision may seem at first, but on reflection, it points to that careful balance between theoretical order and acoustic reality which so consumes Pärt's creative life: it's a rule, but more importantly, it's a rule that works, that binds together the entire score into a temporal structure that is both inevitable and tenderly variable. It underlines too – just as Pärt's performance in the studio – how much more than black dots on a page the notes really are: each note is a world of its own, with no more uniformity and mechanical regularity than a roomful of human faces, or a bed of roses.

Antony Pitts
December 2003

The TONUS PEREGRINUS recording of Arvo Pärt's *Passio* is available on Naxos 8.555860
The music of Antony Pitts is published by Faber Music and online at www.tonusperegrinus.co.uk

(Quotations taken from a conversation between Arvo Pärt and Antony Pitts recorded for BBC Radio 3 at the Royal Academy of Music in London on 29 March 2000)