

1 | Prelude: Resonant Texts

There is a resounding beauty to Pärt's music. Performers and listeners have responded to it in huge numbers, making Pärt one of the most significant and popular contemporary composers. According to statistics provided by the website Bachtrack (based on their comprehensive concert listings), he was the most performed living composer in the world between 2010 and 2016.¹ His fan base is large and diverse and includes segments of the population not normally inclined toward classical music (who call themselves "Pärtisans" and accord the composer the status of pop icon). This success is principally because of a new compositional technique he developed around 1976 called "tintinnabulation." There is, however, much more to Pärt than the small number of pieces that have become canonic, such as *Spiegel im Spiegel* and *Cantus*. To date Pärt has written more than sixty pieces for choir and/or organ and many orchestral works in his unique style.

The principal aim of this book is to survey the horizons of Pärt's choral and organ music, paying special attention to the texts on which they are based, and contextualizing it within his complete oeuvre. By careful analysis of Pärt's tintinnabuli style and technique, I demonstrate how he is literally re-sounding the music of a previous age in a contemporary reimagining. First, "re-sounding" in the sense of "ringing" (which matches Pärt's tintinnabuli style). Second, in the sense of "unqualified," because although some critics may have concerns about the implications of Pärt's music, very few of them seem to actively dislike it, and it has clear and unambiguous popular success on many levels. Finally, in the sense of "re-sounding" musical materials derived from chant, and from Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque musical techniques. This perceptual resonance is also applicable to the texts Pärt uses, which are intensified and enriched by the sonorous splendor of his music.

My text is, of necessity, limited. It does, however, have several goals: first, an analysis of the choral and organ repertoire (with reference to Pärt's other music), using different techniques; second, provision of descriptions of this

¹ <https://bachtrack.com/statistics-more-top-tens-january-2017>.

entire repertoire designed specifically for the listener; third, a survey and dissemination of scholarly literature on Pärt and critical engagement with it based on current tropes about his life and work; fourth, essays interspersed between the descriptive and analytical work that develop themes about Pärt and theology, and about the issues of performing Pärt; and fifth, situating tintinnabulation in the narrative of metamodernism (a term that has become a viable substitute for the clumsier “post-postmodernism”). My framework for this is based on the definitions of the term by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, who situate metamodernism “epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism.”²

To this end, Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9 are a chronologically organized discussion of the music. Unlike previous biographical essays on Pärt, they include some information on the circumstances of the composition and premieres of the choral and organ music, but only as they relate to analysis and interpretation of the music or to issues of performance practice. The text is organized chronologically to convey a developmental history of Pärt's style and technique.

Each of these analytical chapters is titled for a significant work that represents a culmination of specific compositional phases in Pärt's life and that is discussed in detail. What I am effectively doing is dividing Pärt's compositions into five developmental phases:

Phase 1: Pre-tintinnabulation

Juvenilia (1956) to *Credo* (1968) – A period of learning and development as a professional composer.

Phase 2: Tintinnabulation

Für Alina (1976) to *Passio* (1982) – A period of development of tintinnabulation and of strict adherence to its compositional rules.

Phase 3: Expanded tintinnabulation

Es sang vor langen Jahren (1984) to *Kanon Pokajanen* (1997) – A period in which the rules of tintinnabulation are less rigorously applied and in which experimentation in form and timbre are apparent.

Phase 4: Synthesized tintinnabulation

The Woman with the Alabaster Box (1997) to *Lamentate* (2002) – A period in which tintinnabulation is still present in the sound but synthesized with other compositional features that denote a mature style.

Phase 5: Freedom

In Principio (2003) to *Kleine Litanei* (2015) – A period in which there are few if any constraints to composition as Pärt draws on a lifetime of training and experience.

² Vermeulen and Akker, “Notes on Metamodernism,” 2.

The change in writing style after *Credo* is clear-cut and dramatic. After that, distinguishing alterations in compositional style is a difficult task. I therefore do not present these phases as categorical or immovable, merely as an expedient way of presenting the material for this volume.

The order in which I present the works follows the chronological listings on the Pärt Centre site, which does not always follow the same chronology as the Universal Edition web site with regard to pieces that were composed in the same year.³ The aim of this chronological description is manifold:

- to provide an overview of his entire oeuvre to date
- to move beyond the few works that have become canonic or representative and to expose other pieces that are worth performing and hearing
- to view changes and developments in the use of tintinnabulation
- to demonstrate the extraordinary diversity and flexibility of tintinnabulation and its integration with other compositional techniques.

Some information on Pärt's biography is included, based on previously published accounts that have been authenticated by Pärt himself. This information is limited partly due to issues of space, but principally because I do not believe that biographical details add much to our real understanding of a piece of music. As George Steiner correctly notes, "To invoke biographical, historical or cultural context, in order to make out and stabilize possible meanings, is a naïve subterfuge. There can be no determination of texts by contexts."⁴ Pärt has indirectly given his own approval of this approach. In conversation with musicologist Stuart Greenbaum he noted with regard to analysis of his music, "it is one thing for me to do this, but how it is interpreted by the listener is another thing altogether, and a third person writes an analysis that reflects yet another interpretation again."⁵ Other background material is included where relevant so that we are able to situate the individual works not only within the context of Pärt's own life, but also in a broader cultural and historical framework.

Of the intervening chapters in this text, Chapter 3 provides an overview of the theoretical explanations of tintinnabulation, including a summary of current scholarship, and presentation of some thoughts for advancement. Chapter 5 is dedicated to a theological discussion of Pärt's music. I broaden the scope from Pärt's personal theology to provide ways to engage with Pärt's music at different levels, including meditational and spiritual, and suggest ways for non-Christians to understand and appreciate Christian

³ <http://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part-2/works/chronological/>.

⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences*, 123.

⁵ Greenbaum, "Arvo Pärt's *Te Deum*," 119.

texts. Chapter 7 is a discussion of performance practice because this has become a complex issue by virtue both of our proximity to the composer and of the implications of a radical new musical technique. In the final chapter I propose four ways in which the discourse for Pärt and his music should be reoriented in a way that coincides with notions of the metamodern.

In the remainder of this chapter I will define the scope of the ensuing analytical work, discuss the implications of the Pärt Centre, explore the current situation regarding Pärt's sketchbooks, diaries, and reminiscences, and acknowledge his large sphere of influence.

Analysis

In Chapter 2 I describe the choral and organ works that predate the emergence of tintinnabulation, and I utilize traditional analytical techniques to explain both style and content. In Chapter 3 I deal with the mechanics and analysis of tintinnabulation, presenting a summary of the technique in ways that explain its essence, relating it to Pärt's descriptions, which are either technical or philosophical. An example of the latter is Pärt's notion that "The M-voice always signifies the subjective world, the daily egoistic life of sin and suffering; the T-voice meanwhile, is the objective realm of forgiveness . . . This can be likened to the eternal dualism of body and spirit, heaven and earth; but the two voices are in reality one voice, a twofold single entity."⁶ In the remainder of the text I engage with Pärt's compositional philosophy as well as with his new technique because the two are intrinsically linked in his own mind, and both are required to fully understand his music. In the subsequent chapters I provide various different analytical approaches to Pärt's music, showing especially the move away from strict procedures in the early tintinnabuli works to a freer style.

Pärt takes an indirect approach to questions about his music. There are many examples of quotations by the composer regarding the content of his music (both spiritual and technical), but his response in an interview with Stuart Greenbaum is typical in its genuine lack of both ability and desire to comment further. Greenbaum asked a series of questions about the use of major and minor modes in *Te Deum*, and the possible use of the wind drone as a pedal point. Having not gotten very far with indirect questioning,

⁶ Hillier, *Pärt*, 96.

Greenbaum asked directly what Pärt thought about it. Pärt replied: “You know it’s very difficult for me to say. It would be the same as to ask ‘why does one hold some notes for longer than others,’ ‘why andante or why allegro’ and what kind of function does this have. It is purely a musical language, and a musical sensitivity. Even if I explain it with words, the words mean nothing. This has for me absolutely no significance.”⁷

What Pärt does frequently allude to is deconstructive analysis, a kind of reverse engineering being the secret to discovering the “truth” behind his music. Regarding *Te Deum*, for example, he said:

Every note and every sentence (phrase?) has a reason and also a foundation, and its form follows strict calculations, but I cannot explain these now, because although I tried to find an old plan which explains the entire form structure, I could not find it. In this is written exactly why a section is in minor key, and why others are in a major key, why one section is in four voices/parts and why other sections in three etc. etc. Why in one particular section a male chorus is used, and in others a female chorus. This all has a regularity ... the entire construction, but this can all be realized in a correct analysis.⁸

Hopefully the compositional plan for *Te Deum* has been rediscovered and is being archived by the Centre. If not, as Pärt notes, deconstructive analysis will reveal how he conceived the piece.

In his essay “Analyzing Pärt,” theorist Thomas Robinson explored the application of current analytical techniques to Pärt’s music and in particular the difficulties of their application to tintinnabulation. In this text, therefore, my basic discussion of each work uses the principles of style analysis as outlined by Jan LaRue.⁹ His method suggests that we can account for the constituent elements of music using five headings:

- (1) Sound, which includes everything other than pitch or duration: orchestration, timbre, register, dynamics, and “sonorous density.”
- (2) Harmony, which is broadly defined to embrace not only the simultaneous occurrence of pitches but also the phenomenon of pitch successions that form a more or less cohesive, homogeneous entity. In the case of tintinnabulation this includes the $1 + 1 = 1$ formulation of the pure tintinnabuli voices, but I also take it to mean something about the succession of dissonance, which is at the heart of tintinnabulation.
- (3) Melody, encompassing everything heard as line in a musical fabric.

⁷ Greenbaum, “Arvo Pärt’s *Te Deum*,” 119.

⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁹ LaRue, *Guidelines for Style Analysis*.

- (4) Rhythm, a vast, multifaceted category that includes all aspects of duration.
- (5) Growth (form). For Pärt this includes precompositional plans, especially those concerning text.

I also experiment with other types of analysis, presenting an array of analytical techniques paired with works that lend themselves in some way to a specific approach. This does not preclude the fruitful application of other techniques to any of these pieces. It does, however, offer a starting point.

Conscious that this entire volume could be devoted to just one piece and still not say everything about it, I have therefore tried to avoid some of the problems involved in analysis and interpretation: first, the supposition that these pieces have meaning; second, fixing that meaning in a description that both defines and (worse) confines its meaning for others; and third, limiting the possibility for any piece to speak new truths to us in the future.

The Pärt Centre

At some point it occurred to Pärt that preservation of his estate would be better started by him than left until after his death. So, in 2010 he and his family took the bold and innovative step of founding the Arvo Pärt Centre, which is currently housed in Laulasmaa, around thirty-five kilometers from Tallinn, Estonia. The project began with the aim of “creating opportunities for preserving and researching the creative heritage of the composer in his native land, Estonia, and in the context of the Estonian language.”¹⁰ It has developed into an exciting and groundbreaking initiative that will be “an open meeting place where the content of our activities will harmonise with an architectural form that suits the local natural environment.” To this end a competition was held for a new building and won by Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano from Nieto Sobejano Arquitectos, S.L.P. (Spain).¹¹ The building opens to the public in 2018, the year that Estonia celebrates the 100th anniversary of its independence. The new building has a mandate to “work with researchers, organise educational programmes, hold exhibitions, conferences and film nights, and [house] an auditorium [that] will accommodate concert and recording possibilities.”¹²

¹⁰ www.arvopart.ee/en/.

¹¹ www.arvopart.ee/en/kellasal/about-kellasal/.

¹² Ibid.

The Pärt Centre has established a series of connections that speak to some of the ambitions of the Pärts for the archive. These include partnerships with the institutions one would expect, including UE and ECM, but also (more surprisingly) a strong relationship with the Estonian Tourist Board. For many years Pärt has been one of Estonia's biggest exports, and the opportunity to join man and country has been seized at every chance. The DVD *Adam's Passion*, for example, includes a page devoted to publicizing the country under the tagline "Estonia – Positively surprising."¹³ The Centre also has a series of sponsors, including Swedbank and Mercedes-Benz/SilberAuto.

The Centre has instituted a concordat with The Arvo Pärt Project at St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York, which lends some theological and musicological weight to Pärt studies.¹⁴ The Project was set up to investigate the Orthodox foundation of Pärt's music and is promoting a series of concerts, lectures, and conversations with Pärt, and a number of publication projects.¹⁵ As with the Pärt Centre itself, the Project should, in years to come, be able to add significantly to the literature on Pärt and his music.

It is an extraordinary advantage to future scholars that Pärt has chosen to make use of technology to document his own life. Pärt's tendency to save and collect is a boon, but the Pärt Centre is just the culmination of a long history of self-documentation and preservation that extends back to the 1970s and is evidenced by the continued existence and availability of the sketchbooks and diaries from his career. From the early notebooks (most of which he kept and are now being preserved) to the more recent work of the Centre's archiving work, this documentation will be an important source of material for future scholars and will, we hope, mean that many questions that remain unanswered for other composers will be answered by Pärt for himself.

So, in due course we are going to have unprecedented access to the life and thoughts of this man. But what exactly does the archive contain? There have been tantalizing glimpses of Pärt's diaries and sketchbooks for his compositions. Details from the Pärt Centre about the extent of the collection are not public though the Centre has confirmed what has been evident (though in subtle ways) from a variety of sources. This includes information from Pärt himself, from their publications, and from details in the

¹³ *Adam's Passion* (Accentus Music, ACC 20333, 2015).

¹⁴ www.arvopart.ee/en/2015/06/arvo-part-centre-and-st-vladimirs-orthodox-theological-seminary-sign-a-concordat/.

¹⁵ <http://arvopartproject.com>.

three widely distributed documentaries by Dorian Supin, an Estonian film maker who is Pärt's brother-in-law and has had unprecedented access to the composer since the late 1970s.¹⁶ These films, though idiomatic and at times frustrating (by virtue of their insistence on promoting an aesthetic for Pärt rather than on discourse), have shown, for example, some of the sketchbooks and some of the recorded interviews by journalist Immo Mikhelson, who has been transcribing Pärt's musical diaries.¹⁷ The interviews alone are extraordinary. What might in other instances have been edited and collected into books are now just hours and hours of unedited talking that scholars will be free to consult in due course.

The Pärt Centre is unwilling at present to allow publication of excerpts from these primary sources, preferring instead (and justifiably) to reserve that privilege for themselves. They have, however, begun to make some of the information available in print. Most recently the collection of texts used by Pärt (published under the title *In Principio: The Word in Arvo Pärt's Music*) contains several illustrations from his musical diaries and sketches, including, for example, an outline for the "Sanctus" from his *Missa Syllabica* from a contemporaneous musical diary dating from 1977.¹⁸

Of course, there are potential dangers to preserving information in any archive, especially regarding rights to access. To date, scholars and critics have largely been positive about Pärt's music, but it will be interesting to see how the Pärt Centre reacts to more critical engagement with the composer in years to come, and how they will find ways to be impartial in their sharing of materials while at the same time maintaining a certain level of judicious engagement.

Authorial Intent

The notion of the "intentional fallacy," that "the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of art," is a comparatively easy subject with regard to its application to Pärt and his works since he has repeatedly stated that he has no opinion on his music or that his opinion is only one of many

¹⁶ Dorian Supin: *And Then Came Evening and Then Came Morning* (1990); *Arvo Pärt: 24 Preludes for a Fugue* (2002); *Even if I Lose Everything* (2015). For a detailed list of films about Pärt or that use his music (including other films by Supin) see www.arvopart.org/film.php.

¹⁷ Some of this can be seen in Supin's film *Even if I Lose Everything*.

¹⁸ This text is hereafter referred to as *The Word in Arvo Pärt's Music* to avoid confusion with the piece *In Principio*. For the "Sanctus" diary page see the color illustrations, no. 8, and the cover.

possibilities.¹⁹ He entertains a multiplicity of possibilities regarding interpretation (in the broadest sense) of his music: “it is one thing for me to do this, but how it is interpreted by the listener is another thing altogether, and a third person writes an analysis that reflects yet another interpretation again. This is all possible.”²⁰ Pärt’s reticence in discussing his own music is both a philosophical and theological position, which I discuss further in Chapter 5.

Although some things Pärt has said are both useful and relevant to the present work, I move away from recirculating many of the composer’s quotes that have been overused. I have therefore largely avoided quoting from published or private accounts of what Pärt has said and instead have expanded on the possibilities for analysis and understanding of Pärt’s music along the lines of current tropes and, I hope, have begun to point out new directions. I have concentrated on what Beardsley and Wimsatt describe as “internal evidence,” that is, the details present inside a given work. Certainly some external and contextual evidence is useful; however, my belief is that discussion of the composer (to update Beardsley and Wimsatt) leads away from the composition, and the preference here is to discuss the music. It is also the case that more than enough material is at hand for the purpose of this text, which is intended both as a reference work and an overview.

Pärt’s Sphere of Influence

Although not the focus of this text, it is important to acknowledge that Pärt has an ever-growing presence in popular culture, and it is therefore inevitable that his music is manifest in interesting ways. For example, an idiosyncratic interview with Björk is available on YouTube, and many musicians outside the classical sphere cite Pärt’s music as inspirational, including Radiohead and Sigur Rós.²¹ Two specific examples demonstrate the range of Pärt’s influence and the complex and multilayered associations brought about by his music.

One of the most interesting engagements with Pärt’s music is the use of the Hilliard Ensemble’s recording of *De Profundis* by the Chicago hip-hop

¹⁹ Wimsatt and Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy.”

²⁰ Greenbaum, “Arvo Pärt’s *Te Deum*,” 119.

²¹ <http://classicalbumsundays.com/radiohead-kid-a-musical-lead-up-playlist/>; www.scaruffi.com/vol6/sigurros.html.

artist Lupe Fiasco for the track “Little Weapon” (featuring Bishop G and Nikki Jean) from his 1997 album, *The Cool*. The violent lyrics of this track decry both gun violence and child soldiers, from those in Africa to high school shooters. Pärt’s music is clearly heard twice in the 4’06” track as a sample; however, it is aurally present in the tonality and the beat, and the alignment of the text of the psalm clearly mirrors the sentiment of Fiasco’s lyrics.²²

There are many fascinating uses of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, which has been adopted as the sound track for numerous professional and personal videos. It was effectively used for the official teaser trailer and extended trailer of the 2013 movie *Gravity*, which won seven Oscars.²³ Over spectacular shots of the earth from space, *Spiegel* lent that familiar calmness and engaged detachment that has become a trope with use of Pärt’s music by art house directors. A few months after the movie was released, the couch gag sequence in the opening titles of *The Simpsons* featured an homage to the movie in which the weightless family struggle to make it on to the couch.²⁴ The parody references the movie trailers through use of a pastiche version of *Spiegel*.

In the film world Pärt’s music has become for many the equivalent of an Instagram filter, changing the emotional temperature, contrast, and saturation of many videos and films, especially at the amateur level. A systematic analysis of representative writings on Pärt’s music, spanning his career, contains many repeated key descriptors. These adjectives (“melancholy,” “longing,” and so on) map onto specific works to provide descriptions of the kind of Instagram filters that his music provides. Of course, several pieces by other composers offer similar aural enhancements that have become both cliché and codified (including “O Fortuna” from Orff’s *Carmina Burana* and Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”). As a corollary, I suggest that Pärt’s music is perhaps “colorized” by its associated CD artwork (especially the ECM recordings), and this in turn impacts its use in sound tracks.

²² www.songlyrics.com/lupe-fiasco/little-weapon-lyrics/.

²³ Alfonso Cuarón (dir.), *Gravity*, Warner Brothers, 2013.

²⁴ Michael Polcino (dir.), “Yolo,” *The Simpsons*, episode 534, original air date November 10, 2013.