80TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

ARVO PÄRT

How the composer’s sacred sounds have captivated a generation

Debussy’s Images
The best recordings of the piano masterpiece

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Ivan Hewett reports from Moscow

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Should concerts really be relaxing?

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The celebrated cellist on his favourite music

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ON THE SEPTEMBER CD

Our in-brief guide to this month's Arvo Pärt cover disc

Arvo Pärt
Cantus in memoriam
Benjamin Britten
Adam's Lament*
The Beatitudes**
Trivium***
Summa**
Which was the son of...**

Artists
BBC Symphony Orchestra
Tallinn Chamber Orchestra
Estonian Philharmonic
Chamber Choir
"BBC Singers"
*** Iain Farrington (organ)
Edward Gardner (conductor)
Kristjan Järvi (conductor)
Paul Brough (conductor)

FEW COMPOSERS OF ANY period have been held in such high esteem by audiences, critics and academics during their own lifetime as Arvo Pärt. Recordings and sheet music of his latest opuses appear almost as soon as the creative ink is dry on the page, his music has been adapted for countless films and documentaries, and tellingly he is the only living composer to have been accorded a separate entry in Cambridge University Press's prestigious 'companion' series.

Such universal recognition would have seemed little more than a pipe dream (had he worried about such things) when Pärt first started out as a composer during the 1950s. Like his fellow composers John Tavener and Henryk Górecki, his early music revelled in high complexity, often challenging his audiences to the limit. Following the official banning of his Credo (1968), he withdrew from the creative limelight only to re-emerge in 1976 with an entirely new aesthetic outlook he called 'tintinnabuli' - a reference to the sound created by bells - combining at its most elementary level a melodic line moving by step and another outlining the notes of a basic triad. 'Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers - in my life, my music, my work,' Pärt once reflected. 'The complex and multifaceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity.'

I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is played beautifully. I build with the most primitive materials - with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I called it tintinnabulation.'

Paring away all expressive inessentials, he arrived at a perfect solution to the universal dilemma of how to combine a purely expressive narrative with impregnable formal rigour. Underpinning even the most seemingly spontaneous and temporally free-floating of the meticulously crafted pieces on this month's disc is a logic as analytically robust as the 12-tone music Pärt had composed in the 1960s. It's this tantalising combination of foreground simplicity and profound structural integrity that gives his music its deeply affecting emotional potency and a strange sense of the infinite opening up before us.

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Haydn Symphony Nos 1 & 104,
Cello Concerto No.1
Silver Aminé (cello), The Tallinn
Chamber Orchestra/Risto Joost
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Vivace - works by Max Reger
& Rudolf Tobias
Estonian Phil Chamber Choir/Daniel Reuss
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A PORTRAIT

Peter Bouteneff celebrates a composer whose music has had an extraordinary impact on us all

Arvo Pärt is a composer whose music transcends classifications and their usual audiences. He is not everyone's favourite; some are left cold by his music or are irked by their inability to place it. But his admirers tend to be ardent, even zealous in their devotion. They turn to Pärt in order to think—or to stop thinking. They listen to him in order to create their art or to commune with their God. And as countless separate accounts attest, people facing terminal illness seek out his music as they approach their hour of death, finding in it a voice that understands them, a trusted companion on their journey. His compositions underlie scenes in countless major films, in choreography, and in performance art. There aren't many artists alive today whose effect has that degree of depth.
PERFORMING A PÄRT

Peter Quinn talks to three acclaimed interpreters of Arvo Pärt’s music

STEPHEN LAYTON (choral conductor)

‘Pärt is very strict about the sound he wants. His music looks so simple on the page, and professional singers can waltz through it, but he sees through that very easily. He’s very hands on. I don’t think there’s a piece I’ve recorded for the first time by him that hasn’t had changes made from the published edition in the recording session. For me, a piece that encapsulates the essence of his music is Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten. Using a sparse amount of material, just descending scales in different metres, it seems to conjure up images of the 20th-century world of conflict and sorrow, with a resolution that somehow says there’s something stronger than all of this which binds things together. I see this music as a celebration of the Christian faith in an ongoing way from JS Bach.’

GIDON KREMER (violinist)

‘The premiere of Tabula Rasa in Tallinn in September 1977 – with violinist Tatiana Grinenko, myself and conductor Eri Klas – was magical. The message of the composer had a strong effect on everyone present. At the end of the second movement, “Silentium”, there was complete silence, followed by a standing ovation. I have been able to experience this on many subsequent occasions, all around the world. Pärt’s music doesn’t allow any narcissism. You have to serve the message which is implanted by its creator. Pärt once said in a rehearsal – and I am still trying to follow his words – “Do not try to save my music”. It eliminates the self-indulgence that many composers embellish their stage presence with. Pärt’s music is able to transform your soul. It has cleansing qualities. Listening to it, or playing it, you feel affected by some “truth”, the search for which is part of his personality. His music doesn’t contain any unnecessary notes. Somehow Anton Webern comes to mind.’

PAUL HILLIER (choral conductor)

‘When I first met Arvo Pärt in 1984, he impressed me. We had a very practical discussion about his music, knowing that we only had a 25-minute train journey from Victoria Station to Gatwick airport. The early “tintinnabuli” works have a rigour to them, and these are the ones which capture me the most. I’ve performed his Passio many times and regard it very highly: the more I looked into how it was put together, the more I came to admire it. Pärt found a new way of writing tonal music. He doesn’t use modulation to juxtapose tonalities, it’s static. His music feels both familiar and yet still fresh. All his best pieces have somewhere in them a point at which you feel a deep compassion coming out of them for the human condition. I think that’s what attracts people.’

CHORAL COLLABORATION: conductor Paul Hillier and Arvo Pärt meet in London, 1999

OR BREADTH. The most-performed living composer in the world, he looms large within the classical world. He is familiar to audiences at the Proms over the past decade, and this summer Credo will be featured on the final evening. Yet Pärt’s audience goes well beyond classical music aficionados, extending to rock stars, avant-garde artists, and hipster types, people transcending national and socioeconomic boundaries. Many of them couldn’t name a single other contemporary classical composer but will drop everything to attend concerts featuring his work, or acquire his latest recordings.

One might even ask: is Arvo Pärt a classical composer? His contemporaries like Philip Glass, Steve Reich or John Luther Adams (or the composers Pärt is usually lumped together with – John Taverner and Henrik Górecki) do not cite Pärt as an influence as much as an admired friend. Far more likely to cite his indelible mark on their work are ambient, electronic and metal artists like Björk, Sigur Rós and Stars of the Lid. Jazz compositions have quoted Pärt’s Prayers, a rap song samples his De Profundis. Yet his own musical grounding is squarely within the classical tradition, primarily early European composers. He justly belongs within the canon of 20th-century classical music, yet his reach obviously extends far and wide beyond its usual listenerhip and influence.

Classical music critics have been known to be wary of Pärt’s work, sometimes to the point of disdain, usually for one of two reasons. One is that he is popular. The rule seems to be that dead composers are allowed to be successful and loved; as for living composers, the extent of their popularity runs in inverse proportion to their ‘seriousness’. The other reason is that he doesn’t fit into people’s conceptual narrative for the history of music. In their rush to place him, critics call him a ‘minimalist’, adding the qualifier ‘holy’, in a nod to the sacred themes of his work.

That said, there are legitimate ways to make sense of Arvo Pärt within the landscape of the mid-20th century, especially in his early period. Together with several other East European composers of the late 1950s and early 60s, Pärt was ensnared first within serialism, and subsequently with the search for a way out of it. After the success of early 12-tone compositions that included two symphonies, he became estranged from the enforced alienation of serialism: “The sterile democracy between the notes has killed in us every living feeling,” he said of that period.

György Ligeti and Krzysztof Penderecki plotted their own escapes from dodecaphony, as did Pärt’s fellow Estonian composers Veljo Tormis (by way of Estonian folk songs) and
Eino Tamberg (by way of neoclassicism). Pärt’s searches took the form of collage compositions that juxtaposed serial passages with quotations from Bach and Tchaikovsky. These appearances from the past functioned something like skin grafts: a healing of the barren, an indication of how beautiful music used to sound before its modern sterilisation. Pärt’s early period culminated in the stunning Credo (1968), which pitted cacophonous tone-rows and ferocious choral shouting against sublime passages from Bach’s Prelude in C.

With that landmark composition he parted company with his peers, first of all by going silent. For the next eight years Pärt composed next to nothing. He had arrived at a creative dead-end, exacerbated by political censure. These are years of crisis during which he was unsure whether he would ever compose again, and yet we can now see that it was a period of ferment that would shape all his subsequent creative output.

Three elements of this near-decade-long crisis would make their mark on the post-1976 music for which Pärt is best known. The first

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is the silence itself. The unchosen mutedness of creative deadlock developed into a quietude that would characterise his music. The second is Pärt’s discovery of early music and chant. During that period Pärt immersed himself in Ockeghem, Josquin, Dufay, and Palestrina, and eventually in Gregorian Chant. The purity, honesty, and the explicitly sacred character of this music made an indelible mark, helping lead to the third pivotal characteristic of this period: Pärt’s journey towards committed Christian faith and his entry into the Orthodox church.

His engagement with early sacred music was partly a matter of being captivated with its pristine character and, in the case of Gregorian chant, with the lyrical possibility of the uncluttered single line. But the deeper reality of this music was also becoming clear to him: these compositions and chants emanated from devotion and worship, and that meant that in order properly to receive and internalise them, he in turn had to seek his own disposition of faith and prayer.

Arvo Pärt’s musical search, together with the influence of certain pivotal persons and sacred texts, led him to be received into the Orthodox church whose worship life, texts,
FOLLOWING THE COMPOSITION of Credo (1968), Pärt reached a creative impasse and underwent a dramatic reorientation of style. The impulse for this was twofold, springing from an inner musical necessity brought about by his encounter with plainsong and other early music, and by his religious awakening. Anything that had no properly audible, as opposed to merely textural, purpose no longer had a place in his work. With plainsong offering him a way to proceed, Pärt wrote reams of technical exercises using just a single line of music.

Apart from its innate inner strength, what impressed the composer most about plainsong was its cohesiveness, clarity and flexibility. From working with just a single line of music, Pärt began to investigate using two voices, before discovering the simple two-part homophonic unit—a generally stepwise ‘melodic’ line accompanied by a triadic harmony—that became the basis of what he calls his ‘tintinnabuli’ style (after the Latin word tintinnabulum, meaning ‘small bell’). By combining the triad and the diatonic scale in a single plane, Pärt had uncovered a method of fusing the harmonic and the melodic.

The new style was announced in 1976 by the crystalline beauty of Für Alina, with an outpouring of works including Canticum prooffertur benedictum, Tabula rosa and Fratres following in 1977. The most perfect realisation of the style came with the St. John Passion (1977-82), one of the most transcendent works of 20th-century sacred music, in which the Passion text yields the entire melodic, harmonic and rhythmic substance of the work.

Pärt came to the realisation that a melody line could be paired with a second line, one that would be constrained to the notes of the underlying triad. It may not sound to us like much of an innovation, but this configuration struck Pärt like thunder out of a blue sky. His wife Nora recounted the day:

‘It was the 7 February 1976. And I was going to go out with a pram with Immanuel, because it was the first sun and the birds were singing. And Arvo says to me, “Wait! Don’t go anywhere.” And that was when Alina was born. The moment of birth that day was the discovery of the second voice, like the “Big Bang” of creation.

At this point, it would help to find and listen to a recording of Für Alina, the breathtakingly simple piano work that was the first to emerge from that discovery. Each note of the melody – the right-hand upper line, in B minor – is accompanied by a note in the left hand from the B minor triad. Played separately, these are pretty, but unremarkable. Played together, they create a sonorous unity, sounding like the little bells that give this new music its name: tintinnabuli.'
The 90-odd works that Pärt wrote after 
Alina are nearly all composed in stricter 
or looser obedience to this basic melody-
plus-triad rule. These take a wide variety 
of forms and tonal colours, from the sparse 
Missa Syllabica (1977) and austere 70-minute 
masterpiece Passio (1982), to two works that 
play dramatically on the juxtaposition of 
major and minor tonalities, Te Deum (1985) 
and the Berliner Messe (1990).

Tintinnabuli is but one of the rules that 
Pärt applies to his compositions; others are 
generated by the shape of the underlying texts, 
or by other factors. But tintinnabuli is more 
than a rule. It is an echo, such that Pärt calls it 
'a space I sometimes wander into ... where 
everything unimportant falls away.' The two 
voices of tintinnabuli are at the root of what 
gives Pärt's music its inimitable character, the 
particular tensions and resolutions created by 
the melody-triad intervals, yet the 'rule' is also 
endlessly adaptable in its diverse applications.

While he justly shuns the (often pejorative) 
characterisation of 'holy minimalism,' Arvo 
Pärt has made his tintinnabuli style into a 
precision instrument for the reduction of all 
that is extraneous. The result is music that is 
intensely concentrated in its effects; everything 
unimportant has fallen away. It speaks to deep 
and complementary human emotions, of loss 
and hope, of sorrow and consolation and, as 
Pärt himself puts it, 'sin and forgiveness' and 
'the human and the divine.'

Indeed, the vast majority of Pärt's post-
1976 music is openly sacred in its character. 
Apart from some of the earlier iconic works 
such as Alina, Spiegel im Spiegel, Fratres and 
Cantus, nearly every composition is set to a 
sacred text, taken from scripture or Christian 
prayers and liturgies. He is an Orthodox 
Christian, something explicitly represented 
in his settings of texts by St Silouan the 
Athonite (Silouan's Song and Adam's Lament) 
and from the Eastern prayer tradition (Kanon 
Pokajajen, Triodion, and many others). But 
he is as likely to set texts from the Latin Mass 
and Roman Catholic prayers, as well as from 
the Bible that is common to East and West.

The spiritual character of Pärt's work is 
received by a broad diversity of listeners with 
or without their own religious affiliation. 
Whether or not they care to access the 
underlying texts, the music itself says enough. 
It has managed to translate the words of a 
particular religious tradition into a universal 
language. Neither this, nor the curious world of 
tintinnabuli, nor the essential and stirring 
character of his music, is fully understood 
by anyone. For Arvo Pärt's devotees, he has 
changed and deepened their inner lives. ■

'Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence' by Peter Bouterseff 
is out now, published by SVS Press