

## Arvo Pärt: Aspects of Spirituality, Music and Text in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

In discussing the music of Arvo Pärt, as with certain other composers active today, one inevitably encounters the word “spiritual”. The word is problematic in that it is extremely hard to define. Is it the same as “mystical”? Do composers frequently labelled as writers of “spiritual” music so consider themselves?

If one turns to a definition of the term “mystical”, or “mystic”, from such a readily available source as the Oxford English Dictionary, one discovers that it may mean a number of things: “Spiritually allegorical; occult, esoteric; of hidden meaning, mysterious; mysterious and awe-inspiring.”<sup>2</sup> I find this vocabulary, which is in many ways rather obvious, rather more useful for discussing music by a composer such as Pärt than the vague, saccharine notions of “spirituality” frequently suggested by radio stations and magazines, which have more to do with the phenomenon that has come to be called “New Age”. Whilst it is true that there are so many shades of meaning of the word that “mysticism” is one of those concepts likely to arouse only the most vaguely defined of ideas in most people – and, indeed, has often been used derogatively – one may therefore simply conclude that the popular perception of mysticism is subject to a mingling of terms, and that it is to do with mystery, whether or not that mystery also inspires awe. At any rate it is said not to be immediately comprehensible, and in that respect is little better than “spiritual”.

Returning to that troublesome word “spiritual”, then, I would suggest that it is often used as a synonym for “vapidly ethereal”, and that such an idea has nothing to do with what most listeners to music would in fact conceive of as “the spiritual”; they are, rather, fed a placebo. This in turn leads to the observation that, speaking from a Christian point of view, the spiritual is to be found in the incarnate. Music fulfils – or, at any rate, can fulfil – aurally the same function that an icon does visually. St John of Damascus, who wrote three treatises entitled *Against Those Who Attack the Divine Images* in response to the iconoclast heresy of the 8th century, wrote that “We use all our senses to produce worthy images of Him, and we sanctify the noblest of the senses, which is that of sight. For just as words edify the ear, so also the image stimulates the eye.”<sup>3</sup>

It is obvious from these words that an icon is not something vaguely or sentimentally ‘religious’, but, quite the contrary, very definitely incarnate. One of the problems in speaking of religion and the arts at all, but especially of religious mysticism and the arts, is that one is constantly subjected to a confusion between a genuine aspiration towards the sacred and romantic sentimentality. Bearing in mind, then, the incarnate conception of religious mysticism as proposed by St John of Damascus, I pose the question: can music also be a vehicle for “spirituality” or “mysticism” in a similarly incarnate way?

As a composer, I can answer in the affirmative, though there are inevitably perils in such an enterprise and one is, of course, not always successful. Orthodoxy speaks of the mind entering the heart<sup>4</sup> – this is the condition for real prayer – and this must at first sight be, at least partially, what is required for the composition of sacred music, as it is for the painting of an icon. Unlike the icon painter, however, unless he is actually writing chant (in which case he is probably a monk), the modern composer’s production is situated very largely outside

<sup>1</sup> Much material in this paper originated in a seminar given by the present author as part of the RTE Living Music Festival dedicated to the music of Arvo Pärt in Dublin in March 2008, and some of the discussion on silence appears in a different version in Ivan Moody, “Liturgy, Music and Silence”, in *CompaRes Yearbook for Iberian-Slavic Studies*, Lisbon, forthcoming 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary: see <http://www.oed.com/>

<sup>3</sup> St John of Damascus: *On the Divine Images*, English translation by David Anderson, Crestwood, New York 1980. For the original Greek text see J.P. Migne: *Patrologia Graeca*, vol 94.

<sup>4</sup> Cf Nikiphoros the Monk, “On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart”: after commentary on the hesychastic entry of the intellect into the heart, he adds the following, straightforwardly practical advice: “If, however, in spite of all your efforts, you are not able to enter into the realms of the heart in the way I have enjoined, do what I now tell you and with God’s help you will find what you seek and deliberate and formulate prayers, psalms and other things in our breast. Banish, then, all thoughts from this faculty – and you can do this if you want to – and in their place put the prayer ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me’, and compel it to repeat this prayer incessantly.” English translation in *The Philokalia*, Translated and edited by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard and Kallistos Ware, Faber & Faber, London 1995, Vol.4, 206. Further information on the life of Nikiphoros is available in Antonio Rigo, “Niceforo l’Esicasta (XIII sec.): alcune considerazioni sulla vita e sull’opera”, in Olivier Raquez, ed., *Amore del Bello: Studi sulla Filocalia*, Magnano 1991, 81-119. See also Ivan Moody, “Liturgy, Music and Silence”, in *CompaRes Yearbook for Iberian-Slavic Studies*, Lisbon, forthcoming 2011.

the Church. I should make it clear here that I am speaking specifically of the Orthodox Church, in which the problem of precisely what we mean by “Tradition” and how we implement it creatively has meant that modern-day Orthodox composers tend to feel that they are creating para-liturgically, on the edge of music actually used in liturgical celebration, though I should say too that it is also my conviction that composers of the Western tradition such as Henryk Mikolaj Górecki and James MacMillan are profoundly aware of, and share, these concerns.

That Arvo Pärt’s music concentrated for a considerable time on the setting of Latin texts from the Roman Catholic liturgy (whether or not intended for liturgical use) proved interesting indeed in that he brought an Orthodox perspective to bear on them. One of the most interesting, and certainly now one of the most famous of his works, is the *Passio Domini nostri secundum Iohannem* of 1982. This is, I submit, a mystical composition of the highest order, in the genuine, incarnate sense of that word. It is, then, perhaps curious that the composer’s treatment of the text is so deliberately ‘cold’. That is to say, his word setting is like that of the most syllabic kind of Gregorian chant or organum, and therefore on the surface ‘inexpressive’. Such austerity leads inevitably to a different form of listening and, as one must suppose was the composer’s intention, to the contemplation of higher things. While in this one may find a parallel with the deliberately flat, geometrical style of Byzantine icon painting, Pärt also seems to strip away any possible flourish or decoration, coming close the richness-in-austerity of a composer such as Heinrich Schütz, and so betraying a very northern European sensibility.<sup>5</sup>

There is nothing even Mediterranean, let alone from further east, in Pärt’s music. *Passio*, by treating its subject in this ‘black and white’ fashion, reveals its secrets only to those who are prepared to enter fully into its spirit; once again, it is a mystery, and therefore mystical. Much the same could be said of the far less ambitious *De profundis* (1989) or the *Stabat Mater* (1985). In both these works the text is set with absolutely no word painting, but with a stylized ritual solemnity: the tragedy is felt, but, as with the Passion, it is over a long time-span, an arch, as though one were waiting for a hammer to strike a gong. Time is suspended, and that is another important element of mysticism. In an icon there is no perspective, that is to say, it is not situated in earthly reality. Similarly, mystical music must suspend real time in order to create its own ‘two-dimensional’ level into whose metaphorical simplification the initiate may enter in order to understand the multi-dimensional mystery thus presented.

It is instructive, in this context, to examine in a little more detail a much shorter work of Pärt’s, namely *I am the True Vine*, from 1996. It is scored for unaccompanied mixed choir and its text is taken from the Gospel of St John, Chapter 15, in the King James translation. It is one of an extensive series of choral works, both *a cappella* and accompanied, that Pärt wrote from the 1990s onwards, during which period he widened the range of languages he chose to set. Up to that point he had used Slavonic, Latin and German, but in later works he has set Italian, Spanish, French and, increasingly, English. *I am the True Vine* is also related to other works that use passages taken directly from the New Testament, such as *The Beatitudes* (1990), *And One of the Pharisees...* (1992), *Tribute to Caesar* (1997), *The Woman with the Alabaster Box* (1997) and *...which was the Son of...* (2000)

In common with all of Pärt’s music, *I am the True Vine* is technically rigorous, the mathematical clarity of its structure transmitting musically the symbol of the vine employed by Christ in this passage, spoken to his Disciples after the Last Supper. It is a further refinement of the technique the composer calls “tintinnabulation”, which reached its apogee in the works he wrote immediately after his emigration to the West in 1980, and is built essentially on the exploitation of the bell-like resonance created by the mixing of diatonic scales and triads, with much use of inverted chord positions.<sup>6</sup> Pärt has said of this technique: “Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers – in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises – and everything that is unimportant falls away. Tintinnabulation is like this... The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.”<sup>7</sup> For Pärt, this revolution in his compositional methods was closely linked to his discovery and subsequently intensive analysis of music from the middle ages and the renaissance; amongst the composers he studied at this time were Machaut, Ockeghem and Victoria.

<sup>5</sup> See Wilfrid Mellers’s remarkable essay “Arvo Pärt, God and Gospel” in “Contemporary Music and Religion”, *Contemporary Music Review*, Volume 12, Part 2.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Hillier: *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford Studies of Composers, OUP, Oxford 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfgang Sandner: insert notes for *Tabula Rasa*, ECM New Series 1275 (1985).

In *I am the True Vine*, Pärt uses a pattern of pitches which repeats six times during the course of the work, the rhythms changing in accordance with the stress patterns of the text. As though representing the leaves of the vine, voices are added or taken away in systematic fashion, ascending and then descending over a total range of just over three octaves, from E to g". The apparently abstract quality of this procedure as it is described on paper is far from explaining the work's overwhelming cumulative effect, however, or its quality of intense yearning.

Several small but important details contribute to this apparent dichotomy. Firstly, there is the dramatic textural change that occurs with the introduction of a long pedal note (E in the basses) in bar 95, to which a soprano d is added nine bars later. The former disappears once more in bar 124 (but is effectively continued by the repeated notes in the bass part in the following 3 bars), and the latter in bar 129. The textures of the work's opening are subsequently taken up again. Secondly, there are four extremely important general pauses distributed throughout the work. The first occurs at bar 73, after the phrase "for without me ye can do nothing", the second in bar 131, after "continue ye in my love", and the third in bar 148, after "abide in his love". These three pauses serve not only to indicate the significance of the words just sung and act as structural pillars, but also suggest the enormous importance that Pärt attaches to silence itself, a subject to which I will return shortly.

The fourth and final pause occurs in bar 183, following the words "Greater love hath no man than this: that a man lay down his life for his friends." The subsequent phrase, "Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you." is given great emphasis by the insertion of this pause. [See Musical Example] Thirdly, there is the gradual change in musical character during the course of this final phrase, set over the final nine bars of the piece. The harmony stabilizes in a protracted cadence from B minor to E minor, with a pointedly dissonant clash on the second syllable of the word "command" in the penultimate bar. The basses and tenors have already settled on the bare 5th e-b in bar 189, while the sopranos and altos continue to move, cadencing only in the final bar, 192, and using a dotted semibreve for the first time in the piece except in the context of a pedal. This simple procedure provides an imposing resolution of the harmonic rootlessness of the work to that point (even the lengthy pedal notes on the fourth repetition of the pitch pattern are not tonally stable in that they outline a chord of a seventh, requiring resolution).

Arvo Pärt. "I Am the True Vine | für gemischten Chor a cappella"  
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This somewhat detailed analysis serves, I hope, to underline the very incarnate nature of the “spiritual” in Arvo Pärt’s music. I should like to end this discussion, however, with some mention of textless music, whose relationship to the “spiritual” is obviously far less clear-cut than that of texted compositions. Titles often reveal a possible “spiritual” intention behind the music (Pärt’s *Silouan’s Song* or James MacMillan’s *The World’s Ransoming* are two examples), but they may equally be more ambiguous, providing ample material for the popular sale of the “spiritual”. One of Pärt’s best-known compositions, *Tabula Rasa*, deals with silence: the second movement is in fact entitled “Silentium,” and is a contemplation of the spiritual depths of physical silence – an apophatic approach probably unique in the history of music. Having used the word “contemplation”, it is important to emphasize its active quality, as opposed to the passiveness of the idea of “meditation”. Pärt himself has said of meditation: “First of all I admit to not knowing what meditation is, having only rather vague ideas about it. Meditation seems to me empty and colourless; something unidentifiable, a kind of liquid solution that becomes ever poorer in substance. This is the direction that meditation takes. I take another path: one proceeding from the incorporeal to the corporeal, in order to make the solution more concentrated. [...] My aim is to write music that is the opposite of meditation, that is, concentration [...]”<sup>8</sup>

“Proceeding from the incorporeal to the corporeal” is, of course, a definition of incarnation. In addition, as Alex Ross has pointed out, “The quietude of Pärt’s music did not mean that he had become a quietist. References to him as ‘monkish’ miss the mark: behind his sad eyes and long beard is a steely will. In 1979 he performed the un-Shostakovich like gesture of donning a long-haired wig and haranguing the Estonian Composers’ Union on the subject of official restrictions. He defected to the West the following year.”<sup>9</sup>

Given, too, the monastic’s role in spiritual warfare, it would in any event be quite wrong to minimize the role of spiritual quietude. The silences built into the melodic structure of the later *Passio* (1982) reflect this more directly, being a paradoxically “active” element in this ritualistically austere telling of the Passion of Christ according to St John. Father John Breck has discussed the silence into which we accompany Christ during the services of Holy Saturday, noting that “in that stillness in the silence granted to our mortal flesh we contemplate the unfathomable depths of Jesus’ sacrificial love, for ourselves and for all mankind.”<sup>10</sup> Pärt’s silences may certainly be said to facilitate a similar – active – contemplation.

To finish, I return once more to the idea of incarnating the spiritual: while the approach of various composers concerned with the sacred, including Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki, John Tavener, James MacMillan and myself, may differ in detail, I feel that I am on certain ground in claiming that we all aspire to incarnate our faith. I would claim, indeed, that if it is not incarnate, it is of little use.

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Arvo Pärt’s music has popularly been frequently and easily associated with that of a number of other composers (in particular Górecki and Tavener) as part of a recent “movement” interested in the “spiritual”, and often described, sometimes pejoratively, as “holy minimalism” or “sacred minimalism”.

While this label is not without its uses, the way in which it so facilely categorizes Pärt’s work, and links it with that of other composers whose output is in fact demonstrably different in many ways, has led to something of an over-simplification in the public perception of his music or, perhaps more accurately, the way in which his work is presented to the general public. The composer’s own comments, to be found readily available interviews with him, clearly show that, while the way in which he talks about his work inevitably bears some relationship with other composers whose musical trajectory has largely intersected with their Christian beliefs, it also demonstrates a highly individual, as well as profoundly rooted, artistic conception.

However, it is also the case that Pärt’s work in specific relation to Orthodox spirituality has received only superficial attention, in large part on account of the unfamiliarity of most western commentators with the theological sources upon which the composer so often bases his work. It is my aim in this paper, based as it is upon not only my own musicological and theological research, but upon discussions with Arvo Pärt held particularly the recent festival of his work in Dublin (March 2008), at which I gave a seminar on the composition of sacred music with the public participation of the composer, to address these matters in a more direct fashion, linking the music with its theological grounding.

<sup>8</sup> Espen Mineur Saetre, “Microcosmo nella cattedrale. Intervista ad Arvo Pärt”, in Enzo Restagno, ed.: *Arvo Pärt allo Specchio*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2004: 249. Translation by the present author.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Ross: *The Rest is Noise*, Fourth Estate, London, 2008, 530.

<sup>10</sup> Fr John Breck, “Holy Saturday: ‘With Fear and Trembling’”, available at <http://www.goarch.org/ourfaith/ourfaith9165>

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## Santrauka

### **Arvo Pärtas: dvasingumo, muzikos ir teksto aspektai**

Arvo Pärto muzika yra dažnai ir lengvai asocijuojama su daugelio kitų kompozitorių muzika (ypač Góreckio ir Tavenerio) kaip dalis naujo „judėjimo“, besidominčio „dvasingumu“ ir dažnai vadinamo (kartais kritiškai) „šventu minimalizmu“ arba „sakraliniu minimalizmu“.

Kadangi ši etiketė lengvabūdiškai naudojama apibūdinant Pärto kūrybą ir siejant ją su kitais kompozitoriais, kurių kūriniai daug kuo skiriasi, jo muzika yra per daug supaprastinama arba, tiksliau, supaprastinamas pats būdas, pristatantis jo kūrinius plačiajai visuomenei. Kompozitoriaus komentarai ir interviu aiškiai parodo, kad tai, kaip jis apibūdina savo kūrinius, turi neabejotino panašumo su kitais kompozitoriais, kurių muzika ryškiai siejosi su jų krikščioniškais įsitikinimais, taip pat tai atskleidžia labai individualią bei giliai išsąknyjusią meninę koncepciją.

Reikia pažymėti, kad Pärto kūryba dėl savo specifinio santykio su ortodoksiniu dvasingumu sulaukė tik paviršutiniško dėmesio, daugiausia dėl to, kad daugelis Vakarų komentatorių nežino teologinių šaltinių, kuriais kompozitorius dažnai remiasi savo kūryboje. Šiame pranešime, pagrįstame ne tik mano muzikologiniu ir teologiniu tyrimu, bet ir diskusijomis su Arvo Pärtu, ypač jo kūrybos festivalio Dubline (2008 m. kovą) metu, kur man teko vesti seminarą apie sakralinės muzikos komponavimą dalyvaujant pačiam kompozitoriui, kalbama apie minėtus dalykus tiesiogine prasme, siejant muziką su jos teologiniu pagrindu.