Resonant Silence: Is Arvo Pärt's Music Orthodox?

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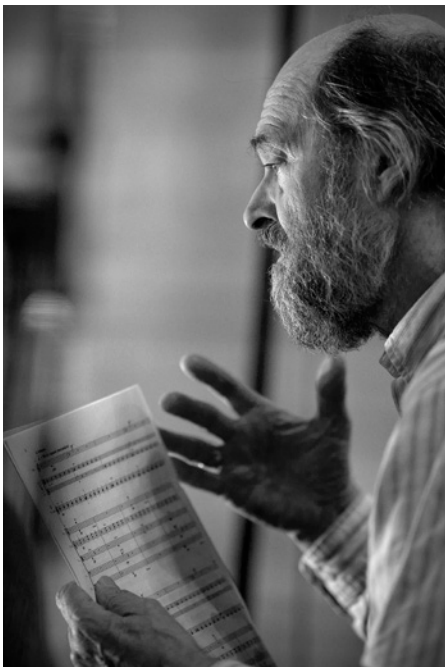

Arvo Pärt. Photo: Kaupo Kikkas / Arvo Pärt Centre.

Many factors led me to the deeper study of Arvo Pärt's music that I have undertaken during recent years. First among them was the music itself which has made an indelible mark on me for the past quarter-century. Another stemmed from my early encounters with the composer himself during visits to an Orthodox monastery, where we forged an enduring connection. But in recent years my admiration for his art and my sense of a significant kinship were joined by a fascination with the nature and scope of his appeal in the wider world. I had experienced him as a fellow Orthodox pilgrim in a monastic setting, and later found that he had fervent admirers from all walks of life: classical music buffs and hipsters, religious, atheist, "spiritual but not religious." Perhaps most interesting to me was that people of all faiths and of no particular faith have used strikingly similar language to describe his music's effect on them—words like "angelic," "oceanic," "contemplative," "reflective," "mystical," "ethereal," "transcendent." Together these words describe music that brings people into an encounter with something or someone immeasurably greater than they are, so that they are left humble, speechless, reverent. In short, the music of this Orthodox Christian has provoked in all kinds of people, religious or not, what they have called "a spiritual experience."

I saw this as a fruitful paradox: universal spiritual resonance emanating from a particular spiritual tradition. Yet both sides of this equation need exploring. As to the universality, what is the nature of this "spiritual resonance" experienced by such a va-

riety of listeners? What do they mean by "spiritual?" It would be too easy for a seriously observant Christian to trivialize people's vaguely "spiritual" aspirations, and I have no interest in doing that here.

How, then, exactly does Pärt's music emanate from Orthodox Christian tradition? He converted to Orthodoxy, but does his work bear a palpable "Orthodox identity"? Although that question has been at the core of my own recent study of the composer, there are some Pärt fans who are decisively uninterested in probing this spirituality, especially its roots in "Traditional Christianity." True, the vast majority of his pieces are set to sacred texts, but to them the music is spiritually potent despite those religious underpinnings. A different set of listeners has been awaiting insight from the Orthodox Christian world about what makes Pärt's music tick. Some have written gropingly on the spiritual character of his work, but because his Orthodox Christian affiliation is so well known—that "mystical, Eastern faith" has been mentioned in almost everything ever written about him—they either seize on Ortho-stereotypes like icons or bells or they remain silent.

Evidently, then, there is a void to be filled. But addressing the connection between Pärt's Orthodoxy and the spirituality of his music has been anything but straightforward. The composer himself embodies the paradox of the particular and the universal: he is a committed, faithful Orthodox Christian who reads the scripture and the fathers, prays the Liturgy, and cherishes his retreats at monasteries. Yet he is also adamant that he not be pigeonholed as "The Orthodox Composer Arvo Pärt," for this would betray both the breadth of his reach (making his music into something exclusive), and the catholicity of his musical influences. As to the latter, Pärt consistently acknowledges that he has been steeped in the sacred music of the West far more than that of the East. Complexities like this are welcome in that they help keep us from fetishizing Orthodoxy, as if it were a discrete and exclusive imprint. That being said, it remains of interest to explore how his Orthodox faith and life has affected his work (a) in his life's odyssey, (b) in his choice of sacred texts, and (c) in the "inner life" of his music.

Born of an Orthodox father and a Lutheran mother, Pärt was raised in a Protestant tradition during Estonia's Soviet period. What began leading him towards a genuine and adult faith was his study of music during his conservatory years, music that had included Masses, Requiems, Passions, and other devotional works of Western classical composers. The pivotal years between 1968–1976, during which he composed almost nothing, were years of turmoil and ferment involving personal, musical, and spiritual transition—sometimes all at once. Western sacred music played a still more central role during this time: his immersion into medieval and renaissance music, and particularly his discovery of Gregorian chant, was for him a musical revelation of the purity of the single line. But it was also a spiritual one, in that he came to realize that this music, which had emanated from an ethos of prayer and faith, could best be "received" in the listener who is him- or herself on a journey of prayer and faith.

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Through a series of personal encounters, and through a transformative engagement with the texts of the *Philokalia* and other early Christian writings, Pärt's journey to Orthodoxy culminated in his reception into the Church in 1972. It is important to note that he saw this as an entry into the life of the Church and its faith, rather than a renunciation of anything "Western," nor an affiliation with Russianness, nor a political statement of any kind.

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His reemergence as a composer came in 1976, since which time his numerous compositions, in the style he has called *tintinnabuli*, have nearly all taken on explicitly sacred themes.

His earliest tintinnabuli works, from 1976–77 include several of his most enduring and well-known. These are among his very few compositions that are not set to any text: *Für Alina*, *Spiegel im Spiegel*, *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, *Fratres,* and *Tabula Rasa*. Concurrently with these, and then for the following decade, there are works set either to scriptural passages or to Western (Latin) liturgical texts and prayers. These include major works like the St. John *Passio,* and *Miserere* (Psalm 51), both in Latin.

In the 1990s, there was a flourishing of works using texts in Church Slavonic taken from the Orthodox liturgical and prayer tradition (for example, *Bogoroditse Djevo* [*Rejoice, O Virgin Theotokos*], *Trisagion*, *Litany*, *Kanon Pokajanen* [*The Canon of Repentance to Our Lord Jesus Christ*]), as well as from the writings of St. Silouan the Athonite (Silouan's Song). This latter piece is one of two so far that testify to Pärt's close relationship to the legacy of St. Silouan, particularly as conveyed by Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov) and his monastic community in Essex, England. More recently, his 2010 composition *Adam's Lament*, set to St. Silouan's eponymous meditation, has become one of Pärt's most significant compositions.

Although the 1990s saw a proliferation of compositions set to Slavonic (and identifiably Orthodox) texts, this was not a period of Orthodox exclusivity. Those above-mentioned works developed alongside others in Latin, English, Italian, Spanish, and German, with origins in Scripture as well as in both the Eastern and Western prayer traditions.

Text plays a critically important role for Pärt's compositions—he has spoken of his compositions as merely translations of the texts, their ultimate content and meaning. The texts and their languages would thus seem all the more to be a crucial way of conveying spiritual content. For many of his listeners, however, the texts are not what speaks spiritually. It is the music. They are not hearing Christian music, whether "Eastern" or "Western," they are hearing music that evokes the transcendent.

If not the texts, then, what enables the music to operate at that level? Since the sacred texts mean so much to the composer, perhaps the music that so completely relies on them somehow manages to breathe their inner meaning across the divides of language and faith, so that the text itself somehow recedes in importance. If this is the case, his music has succeeded in its stated goal of translating the text. Orthodox listen-

ers will resonate in a particular way with the texts coming from their tradition, Western Christians likewise from theirs, and those outside these traditions will hear music that mysteriously bears the traces of a particular, Christian tradition. As at Pentecost, each will hear it in their own language.

But there is also something else within Pärt's music that speaks universally, something lodged deeply within the tintinnabuli method that he developed in 1976.

The dynamic of the tintinnabuli style means that the music, which tends towards the somber or even the sad, is able to convey an inextricable interweaving of suffering and hope. This two-natured character often appears in listeners' descriptions. The configuration of pain and consolation, fall and redemption, death and life, shines through. Audiences often feel as though the music is listening to them, hearing out their grief. The delicate but somehow inevitable interweaving of suffering and hope is a universal, archetypal reality, even as Orthodox Christians will justifiably identify it within the particular framework of the Cross of Christ, the defeat of death by means of death, the ethos of "bright sadness," and the great saying revealed to St. Silouan: "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not."

Through their overarching ethos as well as through the texts that serve as their basis, Pärt's compositions have embraced a catholicity of spiritual and linguistic origins. Together with the texts, the music itself is of a character that is unique to the composer while bearing traces of Slavic and Western traditions. The music expresses the character of human suffering and sadness that have been irrevocably redeemed by hope. What we have in Arvo Pärt is a man who is steeped in Orthodoxy, who takes his faith totally seriously, but who is at the same time open to the spiritual and artistic riches of the Christian West, a man who speaks to the ambivalence of the fallen-yet-redeemed human condition in ways that are relevant to anyone. His Orthodox Christian identity is undeniable, it nourishes his soul and feeds his music, but it is not worn as a badge of identity. And he is embraced by audiences that the Orthodox Church itself has yet to reach. ✠

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