

## Arvo Pärt

### *Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem*

**Arvo Pärt** was born in 1935, during the short-lived first Estonian Republic. Just five years later, the Soviet Union effectively annexed the Baltic country, with the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact. Pärt studied at the specialist music secondary school in Tallinn and subsequently at the city's conservatory, with the celebrated Estonian composer Veljo Tormis. After completing his military service, Pärt worked as a sound engineer and composer for films, theatre and children's TV programmes (his soundtracks for these are worth looking up on YouTube!). Indeed, before developing and devoting himself to the so-called **tintinnabuli** technique – the compositional approach he is best known for today – Pärt explored the broadest possible range of different styles, traversing virtually the entire gamut of aesthetic trends of the time. In the earlier years of his career, Pärt composed works that variously employ folk influences, strict serialism, experimental counterpoint (heavily under the influence of J.S. Bach) and a kind of collage-based style.

But around 1976, Pärt began experimenting with an approach to composition that he termed **tintinnabulation**. The system is essentially based on the ringing of bells, with which the composer found himself increasingly captivated. In an interview, he described the resonances of the technique and what it meant to him at the time in aesthetic terms:

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.

On a practical level, Pärt's tintinnabulation is a deceptively simple technique. He takes two musical lines at a time: one (the melody voice) playing or singing a scale with the notes rising or falling by a single step at a time, while the other (the so-called tintinnabuli voice) leaps around it with an accompanying broken chord. The two voices are always ordered to present an alternation between consonance and dissonance. This relationship often manifests itself in unusual and striking ways, leading to a completely fresh-sounding, luminous harmonic language. At times, it seems to completely invert the very concepts of consonance and dissonance. The purest (and perhaps most profound) example of Pärt's tintinnabuli can probably be heard in the short but crystalline solo piano piece *Für Alina* (it's worth watching [this video](#), which shows the score and beautifully illustrates how the practice works in real-time). But Pärt went on to work with this technique in progressively larger-scale works, employing it at multiple levels simultaneously between several instruments and/or voices.

On the one hand, Pärt's post-1970s music owes little to the Estonian tradition. It is a fusion of the Western classical tradition's disparate elements, with the unmistakable influence of the Russian Orthodox church's musical soundworld and its liturgical chant and bells. However, on the other hand, such music could never really have come from anywhere else. At various times in its history, Estonia has been under the rule of the Danish, Swedish, Germans and Russians. The majority religion is, in fact, Lutheranism (the church in which Pärt was brought up, rather than the Orthodox church to which he only turned later in life).

After the Soviet annexation, the new regime worked hard to reduce the previously vibrant Estonian cultural communities' influence, which it always regarded as potentially subversive. Estonia's creative community of writers, composers and artists therefore had a particularly complex relationship with the latest twentieth-century modernist developments, maintaining links to both the USSR and the West. Pärt's later music (i.e. post-1976) brings these elements and cultural conditions together in equal measure, creating something wholly different – a genuinely unique soundworld.

*Passio* was completed in 1982, not long after *Für Alina*. But it took tintinnabulation to a different level. *Passio* isn't really easy listening. It's attracted criticism and been held up as an example by Pärt's critics as a work entirely based on a formulaic approach, devoid of creative imagination. It is certainly a different thing altogether from J.S. Bach's Passion settings, which, to most listeners, are probably the paradigm (although we know that Passions were sung since at least the thirteenth century). Whereas Bach's Passions borrowed their musical language directly from the opera house, in *Passio* Pärt strips away all the rhetoric and depersonalises the characters.

Pärt employs a quartet of four singers (soprano, alto, tenor and bass) to deliver the Evangelist's narrative. They are often accompanied (but just as often not) by a quartet of violin, oboe, cello and bassoon. The only two individuated voices in *Passio* are those of Christus (bass) and Pilatus (tenor), who always sing alone accompanied by the organ. And while Pärt does employ a chorus to sing the so-called *turba* or crowd choruses, these are short outbursts rather than the large-scale dramatic tableaux of Bach's Matthew Passion, which you might have heard us perform recently.

Pärt sets John's Gospel in the Latin Vulgate translation. The church fathers traditionally believed John the Evangelist was the only one of the Apostles actually to witness Christ on the cross. In comparison with the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), John's account is terse, and Pärt's pared-back musical language matches this accordingly. *Passio* reflects John's matter-of-fact style in numerous ways, but most obviously in its simple three-part structure. The piece opens with a choral 'exordium' and closes with an exquisite prayer, exactly as laid out in John 18. Between these short, self-contained sections comes the main narrative, introduced *a cappella* by the baritone of the Evangelist quartet.

Pärt identifies the different musical groups in sharp contrast using a series of tonal and rhythmical tropes. Pärt's music is often described as being 'modal' – i.e. using the tools of the medieval world, before flats and sharps became part of the harmonic language. But this is only partly true. What Pärt actually does is allude to *both* the modal and tonal systems simultaneously and play off the resulting tensions between the two. This has a powerful effect, as past, present and future are heard to collide. While the Evangelist and instrumental quartets (and Jesus) are confined to the plangent Aeolian/Hypodorian mode, the chorus interjects with E-major chords, as if coming from a different world. The respective singers' vocal registers never change, even as the organ accompaniment does, going from playing a supporting role to being inverted and floating ethereally above (particularly in the case of Christ).

Rhythmically, Pärt uses a codified formal structure based on the syllable lengths and punctuation marks that end each clause or sentence. Commas, periods and colons are set

to progressively slower note values. In turn, these cadences are punctuated by extended silences, a trademark of Pärt's tintinnabuli style. It is as if he provides time for the bell sounds to completely dissipate before he feels ready to introduce the next musical phrase. The other thing to note in rhythmic terms is how both the crowd chorus and Pilate always begin with a syncopated figure — like they are somehow at odds with the other groups' musical perfections. Pilate's part is the most random (in a very literal way!) of the whole piece. His line joins together a series of strange angular melodic leaps and the consistent implication of the tritone between B and F (something that was forbidden in medieval music, and known as the *diabolus in musica*). This perhaps offers some insight into Pärt's reading of Pilate the politician's internal psyche. But don't worry if you're not a music theorist: you'll hear it as well as you'd see it on the score.

While all this might seem a bit contrived when described in prose, in performance Pärt's carefully constructed formal devices help define a natural dramatic pacing, faithfully preserving the syntax of the text. And whereas Bach's Passion settings actively seek to persuade the listener with missionary zeal, *Passio* makes no such attempt. Instead, it offers a more objective presentation of the narrative, inviting the listener to meditate on all the implications and ambiguities of the text from a 20th-century perspective, whether they may be a believer or not.

– David Lee 2021

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