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Aesthetics and Style of Arvo Pärt's Work: Revolution or Evolution?

ABSTRACT

In its present form, the Arvo Pärt style appeared in the mid-1970s. The composer was then about 40 years old, he was a mature artist, known for his avant-garde works of the 1960s. He used techniques of serial dodecaphony and total serialism, *Klangfarbenkomposition*, extended instrumental playing, collage and polystylistics. The last composition of such kind was *Credo* (1968) whereupon there was a period of almost complete silence, which lasted about eight years. Pärt called his new style *tintinnabuli* (lat. little bells). It was in sharp contrast to earlier avant-garde writing, based on binary oppositions: variability — stability, dissonance — euphony, chromatic — diatonic, new techniques of playing and notation — traditional (or old) ways of playing and scoring. However, we can see continuity of various levels between the two styles of Pärt; its investigation is the main purpose of the present study. In the first place there are relations on the level of aesthetics and creative psychology, and then in the field of compositional techniques which are permanently marked by a high degree of rationality. For example, the development of *tintinnabuli* patterns is similar to rotated serial matrices; moreover, the numerical proportions play a decisive role in the form construction.

1. INTRODUCTION

The music of Arvo Pärt is widely known by now throughout the world; the composer's works are popular in various social and professional circles.

Pärt was born in 1935 in the town of Paide (in Estonia). He received his musical education first at a music school and later at Tallinn Conservatoire where he studied with Heino Eller, graduating in 1963. From 1957 he worked as a sound editor on Estonian radio, and then from 1967–1978 taught theoretical disciplines at Tallinn Conservatoire. In 1980 he left the USSR and, after a short stay in Vienna, settled in West Berlin. Now Pärt is living there, and also in Estonia.

In its present form the style of Pärt appeared only in the mid-1970s. The composer was then about 40 years old, he was a mature artist, known for his avant-garde works of the 1960s. He used techniques of serial dodecaphony and total serialism, *Klangfarbenkomposition*, extended instrumental playing, collage and polystylistics. The last composition of such kind was *Credo* (1968) whereupon there was a period of almost complete silence, which lasted about eight years. Pärt called his new style *tintinnabuli* (lat. little bells or hand bells — *tintinnabula*, to say correctly).¹ It was in sharp contrast to earlier avant-garde writing, and this contrast based on binary oppositions: variability — stability, dissonance — euphony, chromatic — diatonic, new techniques of playing and notation — traditional (or old) ways of playing and scoring.

Leaving the USSR, Pärt willingly gave interviews, and one of the important topics became for him a sharp criticism of the

avant-garde. Pärt's *anti-avant-garde* position was very definite and sometimes formulated very harshly: 'Modernism is a kind of war. Postmodernism, therefore, is the ruins of the post-war period'. Or: 'There are millions of composers who are so creative that it is terrifying. One could drown in the sewage of contemporary music. The ability to select and the need to select are vital' (Elste 1988, 338). Later, Pärt began to refuse to interview, and even later, his sharp critical position softened.

1.1 Binary Oppositions

It is interesting that Pärt first grasped the conflict of the avant-garde and tradition much earlier, in one of his works of the 1960s, that is, not in an ideological but in a purely musical form. This is Pärt's very popular opus — Concerto for cello and orchestra (1966), with the programmatic title *Pro et contra*, where the above-mentioned binary oppositions are presented in a laconic and exhaustive form. It is no accident that the Cello Concerto served as a basic example in the theory of polystylistics which Schnittke was then formulating. The principle of *pro et contra* is exposed at the very beginning of the work. The ancient harmony of D major chord falls into dissonant chaos of cluster *tutti* which symbolizes, so to speak, 'a portrait of contemporary world'. The both stylistic elements exist in an exaggerated, almost absurd form here; the past and the present 'do not hear' one another and so the solemn conclusion is humorously perceived as 'out of place' — a semitone higher than it should be (E-flat major instead of D major). The author, not without irony, allows the listener to decide for himself what is *pro* and what is *contra* in this piece.

1.2 Sacred Words

Two years later, in *Credo*, the *pro et contra* dilemma was solved by the composer — with straightforwardness, worthy of the Gospel words, which are the basis of the cantata. Pärt borrowed its text from the Sermon on the Mount: only two phrases of Jesus, which include the gospel's antinomy of the 'old' law, which leads only to the chaos of transgression, and the new wisdom of love and forgiveness. 'You have heard it said: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you: do not oppose evil'. In addition, the words 'I believe in Jesus Christ' and 'I believe' are heard. Even though all of this is in Latin, the appearance of the *Credo* created a scandal in the Soviet Tallinn and any performance of the work was virtually prohibited.

The musical material exposes its own antinomy, the sharp contrast of total disharmony and of the divine law's beauty, which symbolizes the C major Prelude from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Neither before nor after Pärt created such an unambiguous concept, almost a declaration. Nevertheless, it was in *Credo* that he discovered, as a composer, the space of Christian ethics, in which, somehow or other, he continues to exist. Therefore, *Credo* is not only an explosion before a long silence, but also a bridge to the music that was born from this silence. The cantata was the first Pärt's composition on sacred text, and in it, as it will be later, 'the words write

¹ About *tintinnabuli*, see Brauneiss (2006), Hillier (1997) and Tokun (2010).

music' (composer's own sentence). The music is still descriptive, even naïve, but the way is already clear. Then, in 1968, the appearance of the Credo created a scandal and any performance of the work was virtually prohibited. The only reason was the Gospel text.

2. MEDIATION

Now we turn to the forms of realization of the aforementioned binary oppositions and try to consider them differently, taking into account the moments of continuity, or mediation, if we use the term of structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

2.1 Thematic Construction

Obviously, tintinnabuli patterns retain a connection with the serial matrices, representing their diatonic version (Brauneiss; Tokun). In addition, a more particular serial principle of rotation acquired universal value in the tintinnabuli style. However, the point here is that in a duet of melodic and tintinnabuli parts, both lines are fused into a single organism. This is the very 'number one', which Pärt believes to be the basis of everything. In terms of thematic construction, this paradoxical type of writing is close to the serial formula 'everything is a theme'; the strictest rationalism of its implementation goes back to the evolution of Pärt in the 1960s, which went towards more and more crystallization of serial structures, with the active use of the principle of similarity and symmetry. In the Second Symphony, for example, the series is made up of a sequence of three segments with identical intervals: F-sharp–A–G–G-sharp/B-flat–C-sharp–B–C/D–F–E-flat–E. The B–A–C–H motif within it is a regular feature of Pärt's serial structures, and the way in which this emblematic motif is treated is also specific. Its melodic individuality and, accordingly, the semantics are veiled by the permutation, and the motif represents, first of all, a structural interval complex.

The formulaic character of the pitch cells is particularly noteworthy in the *Credo*, where the twelve-tone structure is made up of just one type of interval: perfect fifth at the opening and augmented triads at the climax. There are also elements of total serialism based on different rhythmic progressions and regressions and on *Klangfarbenmelodie* technique.

In general, Pärt, like many of his peers, followed the path of Webern: series for him is not so much a thematic structure, even a special kind, as a procedure, a model of an acoustic microcosm created according to certain objective laws. It is important for him in the B–A–C–H motif that it is a stable formula, its symbolic meaning recedes into the background. The diatonic tintinnabuli structures acquired later a similar meaning.

2.2 Sound and Timbre

The sphere of sound and, accordingly, of timbre and texture is very important for Pärt's music. We would like to distinguish the group of instrumental works, particularly those for string orchestra, which represents the sonoric variant of tintinnabuli style. It arose in the context of orchestral polyphony, where the superimposition of many independent parts leads to their acoustic fusion into a moving diatonic cluster. Examples include Double Concerto *Tabula rasa*, *Cantus in memory of Benjamin Britten*, *Festina lente*, *Arbos*, 'If Bach bred bees' and the *Dies irae* from the *Miserere*. The roots of this kind of writing are obvious: we can see them in the avant-garde *Klangfarbenkomposition*. The cluster structures occupied a prominent place there, and in combination with proportional

canons, the basic type of writing in the pieces of tintinnabuli style. The very purest form of proportional canon we can see in *Cantus*, which, in complete accordance with the funeral meaning, represents one great *catabasis*: a descending lamento sung by the string orchestra and accompanied by the blows of the funeral bell.

If the words for Pärt do indeed write the vocal music, then the instrumental shape of the composition is created by the timbre color, the choice and combination of which is the substantial part of composer work. The nomenclature of instruments and vocal voices is composed like a thematic material. The first cycle of tintinnabuli pieces, created in close contact with the ensemble 'Hortus musicus', was associated with the sound of old instruments; hence arose a shade of stylization, which disappeared in the later works of Pärt. Moreover, the composer applies to inventions of new music — to the prepared piano in *Tabula rasa*, to an electronic imitation of Aeolian harp in *Te Deum*. The techniques of extended instrumentalism, such as the scale of percussion effects on the cello, which was demonstrated in *Pro et contra*, remained in the past, but they have been replaced by 'invented' scoring. As examples we could name *Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem* for tenor, bass, vocal quartet, chorus, organ, and instrumental quartet which consists of oboe, bassoon, violin and cello. Or in *Miserere*: oboe, clarinet, bass-clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, two electric guitars (solo and basso), two percussionists, organ, plus soloists and chorus.

3. VARIATION

Even more remarkable is Pärt's inclination to create different instrumental versions of his works, principally of his chamber compositions. Sometimes we can explain the appearance of the various versions by practical considerations. In most cases, the new versions are associated with artistic reasons, especially as the timbral and dynamic aspects of the composition changed rather decisively. Like the old masters, Pärt allows the variation in the performing forces, underlying the fact that he considers musical colouring to be a secondary purpose. However, the composer is far from indifferent to the specific timbral aspect of each version — he always thinks it through carefully and never simply farms out the existing parts to his performers. The extent to which Pärt makes demands to musicians is not accidental or exceptional. The tiniest details of the sound-production are important to him; the phrasing, bowing and dynamics are delicacies in comparison with the pharmaceutical gradations of electronic music. 'If it is played staccato then it produces harmony, if it is played legato then it will produce polyphony', said the composer in a television documentary dedicated to his work. A mannerism-like refinement of intonation is inherent in those recordings of Pärt's music, which were made under the supervision of the composer himself with first-class soloists and groups. In other words, Pärt's music exists in the space of sonoric colors, in *Klangfarbenkomposition's* aesthetics. The effect of sonoric, purely timbre techniques, of sonoric chiaroscuro which also articulate a structure, is noticeable even in strict compositions like *Passio*. On *Te Deum* the composer spoke in terms of color, emphasizing the inner wealth of the 'One'.

4. CONCLUSION

Having renounced avant-garde aesthetics, Pärt not only did not abandon its foundations, he gave them universal significance. It happened in the sphere of pitch and motive organiza-

tion and in the field of sound itself. Specific serial techniques transformed into a more general matrix principle. The historical role of Pärt's works for the European tradition is still waiting for comprehensive assessment.

KEYWORDS

Arvo Pärt's Work, Tintinnabuli Style, Binary Opposition, Serial Method.

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