Arvo Pärt at 75  
(pre-concert talk, BBC Hoddinott Hall, Cardiff, September 9, 2010)  
Vale of Glamorgan Festival  
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‘Unfortunately [...] composers often think that because they think a lot they have something to say. They don’t realize that the opposite is true. Underneath all this complexity there is only a lack of wisdom and no truth.’ ¹

Thus Arvo Pärt in an interview with Jamie McCarthy published in the Musical Times in 1989. Think of it what you may, but I will hopefully not be risking contradiction if I contend that few composers in the modern era have said so much ... with so few notes.

It is a great privilege to be here in Cardiff on behalf of Soli Deo Gloria for this event and for our organization to be participating in the first performance of the arrangement of In Spe that we will be hearing later this evening. The Latin title translated into English reads ‘In Hope’, so I would briefly like to pay tribute to the hope that Arvo Pärt’s music has brought to our world, as consistently reflected in the three works on tonight’s programme. At first sight it may seem contradictory to talk of hope, given the deep sense of lament that is one of this music’s most striking characteristics, but I would like to stress that with Pärt, hope and suffering are actually intimately linked. This is clear from the words of Psalm 137, the song of the people of Israel in Babylonian exile to which Pärt refers in the 1984 version of In Spe entitled An den Wassern zu Babel (‘By the Waters of Babylon’):

‘For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song ; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.’

Pärt’s music mourns precisely because of a refusal to acquiesce to the world as we see it; as in Psalm 137, the grief of the exile is inseparable from the memory of Jerusalem. It is Pärt’s hopeful vision of redemptive beauty and truth which unmask the ugliness and untruth, the ‘pain and hopelessness of this world’ to which he alludes in the notes to his Lamentate for piano and orchestra of 2002. The lamentation stems from a belief that things can and should be different – to quote a memorable phrase of theologian Jürgen Moltmann, ‘when freedom is close, the chains begin to hurt ... for we already sense that we have the power to break them.’ ² Contrary to the description I found on one internet blog when googling the words In Spe, this is no ‘IKEA coffee table spirituality’ but something far more substantial, vital, transformative.

In Spe is a short work but highly significant in Pärt’s output, the first piece fully written in the style known as ‘tintinnabulation’ that Pärt discovered (or which perhaps discovered him) in 1975 – composition with the bare bones of diatonic scales and triads as they interact with one another. This radical simplicity, a sort of ‘voluntary poverty’ [freiwillige Armut – a key term in Pärt’s thought], was his exit

from the artistic dead-end that he and many of the more lucid avant-garde composers sensed at various points after World War II. In his first compositional decade, Pärt had already run the gamut of twentieth-century styles, from the enforced Socialist Realism of his very first pieces, through neo-classical piano works, serialism and chance procedures to what one might call ‘postmodernism’ before the term had even been coined. This took the form of consciously disparate collages featuring increasingly disturbing, even brutal confrontation between tonal and atonal music, reaching a paroxysm in the work *Credo* of 1968. In that year, he made comments to the effect that ‘progress’ may be an appropriate notion in science, but not necessarily in music:

‘Many art objects of the past appear to be more contemporary than our present art. How do we explain it? [...] I think the modernity of Bach’s music will not vanish in another two hundred years, and perhaps never will [...] the secret to its contemporaneity resides in the question: How thoroughly has the author-composer perceived, not his own present, but the totality of life, its joys, worries and mysteries? ... It is as though we are given a problem to solve, a number (ONE, for example), terribly complex when broken up into fractions. Finding a solution is a long process and requires intense concentration; but wisdom resides in reduction. In any case, if we want to reach to the core of a musical work, no matter what kind, we cannot forgo the process of reduction. In other words we have to throw out our ballast so to reach to one voice, to its ‘intonations’. Only there are we eye to eye [with the question]: ‘Is it truth or falsehood?’

Several years of relative artistic silence followed until Pärt found the unified musical language he was seeking. The solution demonstrated in works such as *In Spe* (written in the course of a single day, August 15, 1976) consisted of re-discovering the very roots of music, what he termed the ‘cosmic mystery hidden behind the art of connecting two or three notes.’ Pärt arrived there by intuiting that the way forwards was actually the way backwards, practising a form of retrieval that is sometimes termed *ressourcement*, a ‘return to the sources.’ This basically means seeing cultural history in terms of contingent or non-necessary developments rather than inevitable ones. What would have happened had our civilization taken a different path at a fork in the historical road other than the one that led us here into our present predicament? What if there are creative possibilities lurking in the past that we simply haven’t explored because our modern mindset is too arrogant to look for them. In Pärt’s case, this meant studying early music, just at the time when historical performance practice was arriving in Estonia. It speaks volumes that when *In Spe* and other *tintinnabuli* pieces were performed as a set in Tallinn in 1978, the second half of the concert was Dufay’s *Missa l’homme armé* performed by the Estonian early music group Hortus Musicus. Pärt wasn’t by any means the first twentieth-century

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3 Perhaps beginning with Messiaen’s confession in 1955-1956 as recorded by Alexander Goehr: ‘We are all in a profound night, and I don’t know where I am going; I’m as lost as you.’ (Alexander Goehr, *Finding the Key* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 56.)


5 Quoted in Universal Edition’s publicity booklet on Arvo Pärt, p. 7.

6 This term, denoting a contemporary and progressive re-appropriation of ancient tradition is a key concept of the renewal of Catholic theology leading up to Vatican II, paralleled in the Orthodox Church by Georges Florovsky’s ‘neo-patristic synthesis‘ embodied in the call to go ‘forward with the Fathers’. On the correlation between Pärt’s and Florovsky’s thought, see Constantin Gröhn, *Dieter Schnebel und Arvo Pärt : Komponisten als Theologen* (Berlin : LIT Verlag, 2006), pp. 104-105.
composer to be influenced by medieval and Renaissance techniques, but he did more than merely borrowing some devices such as hockets and mensuration canons. Instead he made a daring retrieval of the spirit of early music, whose power arguably derives not from individualistic self-expression but from its coherence with the fundamental sonic properties of note sounding against note. Pärt’s music from the mid-1970s is effectively stripped of everything except what is absolutely essential, in order to reach a musical bedrock that cannot be deconstructed because it is not man-made: the harmonic series, of which triads and diatonic modes are expressions. What emerges from Pärt’s notebooks filled with contemplative compositional exercises is something akin to the austere but crystalline mathematical beauty of geometrical proportion known to Pythagoras and Plato. Pärt appears to be saying that we need to recover a child-like sense of wonder at the seemingly simple yet infinitely rich phenomenon of sound itself, an awe of the same type as that of the physicist discovering that the fundamental constants of the universe (such as gravitational and nuclear forces) have to be ‘fine-tuned’ – proportioned – within an extremely narrow range in order for our world to exist at all. The miracle is that out of numbers comes life – and the miracle of Pärt’s tintinnabuli is that the aural expression of the mathematical ratios of the overtone series is intensely beautiful, capable of conveying deep emotion with a purity and authority apparently independent of the composer. The technique seems impersonal, but the language is one of the most immediately identifiable and individual in contemporary music.

This remarkable interplay of the objective and the subjective can also be seen in Cecilia, vergine romana, where the seemingly prosaic account of the text from the Roman Breviary gives rise to an intensely poetic piece. Written for the year 2000 for Myung Whun-Chung and the Accademia Santa Cecilia in Rome, it exemplifies a general movement towards the reintegration of harmonic generosity and subjective expression in Pärt’s music of the last decade or so (for example in the wonderful Spanish setting of Psalm 42 Como una cierva of 1999). It is as if, having undergone a radical purging, a time of ‘being dead to the world’, Pärt can now re-engage with the world’s human stories musically and thematically. Having looked for – and found – a rigorous objectivity functioning as his music’s unshakable foundation, his recent work shows how this can be synthesized with ‘a sphere of intimacy and warmth that no longer seems anonymous or abstract’, to quote his comments on Lamentate. This sphere is of great emotional depth but wholly lacking in sentimentality or self-indulgence (we find this same combination in Bach). This comes out very clearly in Dorian Supin’s 2002 DVD on Pärt entitled ‘24 Preludes for a Fugue’ which I found riveting viewing, not least for some fascinating footage of the rehearsal process leading up to the première of Cecilia in 2000. At one point the composer comments to a decidedly tense Chung that the strings are using too much vibrato. The maestro protests – but this is doloroso – but Pärt is insistent. This music is not emotional in the same autobiographical sense as Tchaikovsky’s Pathétique: the expression is not a sauce poured on top of the notes as in cooking recipes that conclude by telling you to ‘stir deliciously’. Just as with the extraordinary outpouring of grief that opens another ‘Italian’ work of Pärt’s, La Sindone (his 2006 evocation of the Turin Shroud), the expression arises from the notes themselves in all their stark simplicity. In this way

7 Satie, Messiaen and Webern are other examples whose philosophical approach has much in common with Pärt, regardless of the enormous stylistic differences between the music of the three composers. For Pärt’s positive appraisal of Webern, see the interview with Jamie McCarthy quoted earlier.
8 Here the correspondence with Messiaen’s ontology of music (set out in his Conférence de Notre-Dame of 1977) is especially strong.
Pärt’s music attains the same quality of universal emotion, Affekt, that characterizes Baroque music at its most profound (think of Purcell’s Funeral Sentences or the aria ‘Es ist vollbracht’ from Bach’s St John Passion).

The same combination of expressive intensity released by radiantly ringing sound, together with a deep sobriety also marks the Fourth Symphony, many of whose musical parameters are generated by an unsung written text (the Orthodox Canon to the Holy Guardian Angel, in case you weren’t aware that the work’s sub-title ‘Los Angeles’ refers to more than the orchestra which commissioned the piece). Here again the central paradox of Pärt’s music surfaces; on one hand the composer ‘lets go’, allowing some aspects of the music to write themselves, just as he had done with Passio thirty years earlier, a work he described as ‘programmed’ in an algorithmic sense, rather than ‘composed’. A form of self-erasure, if you like, but which gives birth – and this is the paradox – to an aural result wholly unlike a soulless computerized script. Instead, when shaped by the composer’s artistic sensibility (which is inevitably subjective, comprising an element of personal judgement), the outcome is almost overwhelmingly emotive.

For an example of the creative tension between mathematics and lyricism that I am trying to describe, think of another piece with an ‘angelic’ theme – Alban Berg’s Violin Concerto with its blend of twelve-tone calculation and rhapsodic melodic flight. The nuts and bolts of Pärt’s music and the means of its composition seem to illustrate a principle familiar to many of the world’s religious traditions, whether Abrahamic or Eastern, that true personality can only be attained by self-abandonment, that denying one’s ego is the way to authentic selfhood.

The Fourth Symphony’s dedication to Mikhail Khodorkovsky and ‘all those imprisoned without rights in Russia’ – and here I recommend reading the composer’s forceful statement ‘David and Goliath’ issued last month – has come as a surprise to some commentators who previously regarded Pärt’s work as ‘other-worldly’. I would however maintain that this dedication is in fact wholly unsurprising. Not only should it be remembered that Pärt had already dedicated all performances of his work in 2006-2007 to the memory of another Russian victim of political machinations, Anna Politkovskaya, but as all three of this evening’s works demonstrate, there is an underlying logic of resistance to oppression in Pärt’s music which is essential to its comprehension.

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9 As it had been in Pärt’s Silouans Song of 1991, where the same technique is employed.
11 In a 2009 newspaper interview prior to the European première of his Fourth Symphony in Helsinki, Pärt emphasized that this should not primarily be seen as ‘political’:

“We do not think about politics when we think about the crucifixion of Jesus. What those in power did to Politkovskaya and to Khodorkovsky is shocking, but our minds are always filled with pity and sympathy for the victims, instead of politics.”

But didn’t Pärt say in Los Angeles that Khodorkovsky would be a better president than Vladimir Putin?

“I was slightly misquoted. I don’t talk politics.”

Pärt goes on with his fiery sermon.

“Oppressors should also be pitied. They are already in hell, whereas the victims can also end up in heaven. Oppressors suffer more than we can imagine, sooner or later.”

With *In Spe*, it is important to realize that its first version was written while Pärt was still in the Soviet Union, where he had already attracted KGB attention years earlier. Because of Pärt’s early interest in the Western avant-garde, his first works provoked negative comments from party representatives such as Tikhon Khrennikov - arguably the ‘evil genius’ of Soviet music (awarded a Presidential Medal by Vladimir Putin in 2002), the nemesis of Shostakovich, Schnittke and Gubaidulina among others. It was *Credo*, however, which caused real trouble for Pärt in 1968, being banned on account of its religious text and the fact that its musical content (the violent maltreatment and subsequent triumph of Bach’s Prelude in C from Book 1 of the Wohltimperiertes Klavier) was interpreted by some as a metaphor for the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring uprising of the same year. In Brezhnev’s USSR of 1976, Pärt’s choice of religious themes for his first *tintinnabuli* works was a subversive act, so in order to get the pieces performed he resorted to camouflage tactics. What we now know as *Sarah was 90 years old* was given the neutral title *Modus*, while the music which would become the *Dies Irae* of Pärt’s *Miserere* bore the name *Calix* (meaning ‘cup’ or ‘chalice’ – which really ought to have alerted the authorities that something was going on …). The same is true of *In Spe*, which is in fact written according to the three-part structure of the *Kyrie* of the Latin Mass; Pärt masked this ingeniously by having the singers only pronounce the *vowels* of the text.

This association of camouflage with underground forms of Christianity is as old as Christian faith itself. One thinks of the use of the cryptic symbol of the fish by the first Christians to identify themselves without detection by the Roman authorities. ‘It would not have been hard for the Apostles to have lived in the Soviet Union’, Pärt remarks; given this connection across the ages, his decision to turn to the story of Cecilia’s martyrdom at the hands of Rome is totally logical. Like Christians in the USSR, believers under the Roman Empire were persecuted as political dissidents for their allegiance to a Lordship other than that of Caesar. Not to sacrifice to the Roman gods, as Cecilia refused to do, was to be guilty of treason.

It is unequally unsurprising that Pärt should have seen the same motif of oppressive power behind Anish Kapoor’s gigantic sculpture ‘Marsyas’ exhibited at the Tate Modern in London in 2002 which inspired his *Lamentate*. The myth of Marsyas tells of a flute-playing satyr who challenges the god Apollo to a musical contest; when defeated (with the help of biased judges, according to some versions of the myth), the satyr is flayed alive as a punishment. In the Finnish press in 2009, Pärt related his Fourth Symphony to the Marsyas myth in contemporary transposition – ‘did Khodorkovsky play better, which made it necessary to punish him’?, the composer asks.

It is clear that the impact of Kapoor’s 150-metre installation representing the flayed hide of Marsyas was huge:

> “It made a great impression on me. I thought that I am not yet ready to die. I thought about what I would need to change in myself, and how I should fix relations with people close to me and far from me. The human heart knows exactly what still needs to be done.”

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12 In Greek "ἸΧΘΥΣ" *ICHTHUS*, whose letters read acrostically correspond to "Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Saviour," "Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ", *Iēsous Christos, Theou Huios, Sōtēr*.


14 Sleeve notes to ECM recording (New Series 1930).
Does active humanitarian engagement sit uneasily with the musical contemplation and search for beauty described earlier? Only if we forget that the majority of Pärt’s output is devoted to the worship of one who was a political prisoner executed without rights under Pontius Pilate, and if we forget that a vision of the beauty of God is synonymous, in authentic Judeo-Christian tradition, with the search for justice.

‘The human heart knows exactly what still needs to be done.’ That is the call to repentance running through so much of Pärt’s music; if this word obviously has distinctively Christian connotations, it is also a call which transcends religious boundaries, one which should resonate with all who are prepared to look honestly at the world and who are passionate about true humanity.

_In Spe_ … ‘In Hope’. One of the most striking things about Arvo Pärt’s work is the hope that it has brought, not least through its capacity to grieve deeply over this world, to many in times of apparent hopelessness. I have personally known people who, in moments of crisis and disorientation, have clung fiercely, almost despairingly, to precisely this music, indeed describing it as the only music that they are able to hear in the midst of their experience. Arvo Pärt, you claim that you are neither a prophet, nor a monk, but only an ordinary person.15 That may be, but I believe I speak for all those who have found wisdom and truth in your music when I say that it is extraordinary, and in their name I thank you.

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