

PROGRAM NOTES

By Emily Isaacson

When the world was on pause during the pandemic, I spent a lot of time thinking about the arts in our individual and collective lives—what has their role been and what could it be? What do we seek that music can provide?

One element of the performing arts that I value deeply is its ability to hold space: at a live performance you are asked to pause *doing* and focus on *being* in this moment, at this place, with these people.

Sustained stillness is a luxury in modern existence. We are habitually on call and on the lookout for incoming emails, messages, posts, and updates. Twitter holds our focus for 280 characters, TikTok asks us to think in 60-second increments. No wonder we feel overstimulated, distracted, and anxious.

There are many potential antidotes to this problem of modern being: meditation, yoga, pills, alcohol. Classical Uprising offers another remedy: live music. To attend a performance is to enter an emotional sanctuary, a refuge from the bombardment of the world. This is not to say that art is or should be disconnected from the rest of our personal and collective lives. When you attend a performance, you secure a space without to-do-lists and notifications, an inner sanctum to sit with your inner world.

Today we offer you the sanctuary found in the music of Arvo Pärt, a contemporary Estonian composer. To enter Pärt's world is to commit oneself to stillness, to a suspension of time.¹ Through slowly unfolding musical gestures, and mixing sound with silence, Pärt builds a sonic world that amplifies silence and embraces stasis. We are not alone in finding Pärt's music an antitoxin to the pace of the modern world: according to Bachtrack, a website that tabulates the number of performances of composers' works, Pärt ranks number two among living composers, right behind John Williams of Star Wars fame,² and Pärt has held this title for nearly a decade.³

Arvo Pärt was born in Paide, Estonia, in 1925. In 1939, the Nazi-Soviet Pact handed Estonia to Stalin, and as a result Pärt grew up under Soviet Socialist rule. As a young composer studying in Tallinn, Pärt experimented with the neoclassical and serial styles. His early music gained traction, with commissions from regional orchestras, but public response to his 1968 work, *Credo*, amputated this trajectory. *Credo* proclaims "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty," a statement which went against the Soviet mandate to suppress religious expression and outraged authorities.⁴ As a result, members of the Estonian Philharmonic were fired and Pärt's funding was cut off.⁵

Distraught but undeterred, Pärt abandoned composing from 1968 to 1971. He joined the Orthodox Church and studied early Christian writings, Byzantine chant, early Western polyphony, and the sonics of church bells.⁶ Out of this period of research, Pärt found a new compositional style: *tintinnabuli*. Elegantly simple,

tintinnabuli (the ringing of bells) consisted of two musical lines, a melodic line that moves by step and a *tintinnabulation* line that uses only the pitches of the tonic triad. A kind of compositional asceticism, *tintinnabulation* withdraws from the traditional use of harmony, rhythm, and form, focusing instead on the expressive qualities of inaction—homo(same)phonics, homorhythmics, homotempos, silence, and slowness. Pärt sought to create a mood “that could be infinite in time by delicately removing one piece—one particle of time—out of the flow of infinity. I had to draw this music gently out of silence and emptiness.”⁷

Te Deum (1984-85) was written in this *tintinnabuli* style for three choirs, string orchestra, prepared piano, and wind harp. The prepared piano functions as tuned percussion, so I have replaced it with prepared harp. The wind harp serves as a Byzantine ison or drone,⁸ and is sent by the publisher with the rental parts.

The *Te Deum* text is a Christian hymn of praise, believed to have been written in the fifth century. Composers from Handel to Britten have set the text as a joyous fanfare, often with trumpets and drums. Pärt’s interpretation is a different kind of celebration, one that is internal. Each verse is introduced in a chant-like manner by one or two sections of the chorus, then repeated, either in a harmonized version by the mixed chorus, or as a related meditation for string orchestra. The massed forces of strings and voices only come together at three points in the piece, underscoring dramatic moments in the text.

Te Deum is Pärt’s “quest for something evanescent, something long lost or not yet found, a quest for something believed to be non-existent, but so real that it exists not only within us but beyond our being as well.”⁹ As the last years have painfully retaught us, our time on earth is “evanescent”—short-lived and transitory—but connection—within us, between us, and beyond us—fills our time with meaning.

1. Steven Ziegler and James M. Keller, San Francisco Symphony Program notes. <https://www.sfsymphony.org/Data/Event-Data/Program-Notes/S/San-Francisco-Symphony-Chorus-J-S-Bach-Magnificat>
2. Bachtrack, Classical Music statistics 2019. <https://cdn.bachtrack.com/files/158143-EN-Classical%20music%20statistics%202019.pdf>
3. <https://estonianworld.com/culture/arvo-part-worlds-performed-living-composer-sixth-year-running/>
4. Stuart Greenbaum, Arvo Pärt’s *Te Deum*: A Compositional Watershed. <https://www.ywcp.org/arvo-parts-te-deum/>
5. Arthur Lubow. “The Sound of Spirit.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17part-t.html>
6. Arthur Lubow. “The Sound of Spirit.” *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17part-t.html>
7. Paul Hillier. Arvo Pärt. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Pg, 140.
8. Kenneth Levy and Christian Troelsgård. “Byzantine chant.” *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 3 Oct. 2022. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000004494>.
9. <https://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part/work/518/>