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Arvo Pärt

PAUL HILLIER

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TINTINNABULI

Introduction

IN the previous chapter I elaborated how, after *Credo*, Pärt did not entirely stop composing, but that this was an activity that consisted primarily of a series of explorations: how to write a single line of melody or combine just a very few notes. At first he studied Gregorian chant and early polyphony—and the Third Symphony and *Laul Armastatule* reveal his preoccupation with these styles, though at this point the result is largely mimetic. In further immersing himself in such music, Pärt sought not to imitate the mechanical devices of its composition, but rather to understand how and in what way these devices served the expressive function of the text. He had already ascertained that the triad itself (rather than simply ‘tonality’) was central to his purpose. To sustain the sounding triad, but be able to move within its all-embracing presence, required not only invention, but some form of regulating discipline, otherwise the energy accumulated within such a powerful and traditional source of stability would quickly turn into rigidity. Pärt has always demonstrated a need for the constraints of structure, not through lack of invention but from the threat of an excess of it.

During this period Pärt came to appreciate the special resonance of bells, both in combination and singly, particularly the small tinkling bells of the tintinnabulum. The nature of the sound of bells suggests a direction quite removed from the premisses of Western music, and is akin to the *Klang* which results from heterophony (and which likewise is familiar to us, though essentially rooted in non-Western music); both of these entail a complex of sounds, changing yet always basically the same. When a bell is struck, it continues to sound indefinitely: the ear cannot detect the point at which it ceases to vibrate. This sound-image may be compared to Pärt’s manner of articulating the triad from within a musical process, so that the sonority which accumulates is intrinsically clear yet contains overtones and undertones far more dense than the notes on paper would suggest. The combination of melodic lines and triadic notes provided two sorts of

continuity: one which leads step by step from one thing to the next, and one which rotates like a single object being viewed from different perspectives. Once these principles had been fused into a unifying technique, the first tintinnabuli could be written.

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. Tintinnabulation is like this. Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements—with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive materials—with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of the triad are like bells. And that is why I called it tintinnabulation.¹

Tintinnabuli—Basic Principles

The tintinnabuli style was announced with characteristic tranquillity in a tender piano solo: *Für Alina* (For Alina). This short work is reproduced here in full (Ex. 12), not least because it is technically easy to play. It also exemplifies that quality, which distinguishes so many tintinnabuli pieces, of sounding both ancient and fresh at the same time.

Für Alina highlights the basic manner of tintinnabuli composition: there are two parts in a fixed relationship, one moving mostly by step, the other filling in notes from the tonic triad; it is homorhythmic; there is no chromaticism and no change of key or tempo. It is, however, somewhat atypical of Pärt's work in that the melodic voice (right hand) is freely composed rather than adhering to some regular pattern or procedural method. The low B octaves are sustained by the pedal, which also permits an accumulation of overtones from the upper voices, dominated by the left hand's triadic B minor. This efflorescence is lifted away at just one point, marked by a single flower drawn in the score, where the left hand ventures outside the triad to play a *c#*".

The next few years, immediately prior to Pärt's emigration, produced a sudden spate of works in the newly created tintinnabuli style. Many of these works now appear to be something in the nature of

¹ Arvo Pärt, quoted in the sleeve-note to the ECM disc *Tabula Rasa*.

Allegretto

(For Alena)

ARVO PÄR
1976.

Спокойно, возвышенно, вслушиваясь

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études, working through a series of ideas or, rather, the different ramifications of one central idea: the tintinnabuli process. This is not to suggest that there is anything tentative or experimental about them. While they sometimes seem like parts of a larger process, each work

focuses on a self-contained musical concept and, with one exception, neither repeats nor depends upon any of the other works. The exception is the use of a mensuration canon to elaborate different statements of a melodic idea (very often a descending minor scale) and its attendant tintinnabuli pitches, a process which Pärt has used with eloquent effect in works such as *Arbos* and *Cantus*. But before proceeding to discuss any of these works in detail, it will be helpful to examine the precise workings of the tintinnabuli system itself.

The tintinnabuli style is based on a simple system for relating the horizontal and vertical manifestations of pitch—melody and harmony (scales and arpeggiated triads). In medieval and early Renaissance polyphony, the harmony is formed by the confluence of the constituent voices to such an extent that harmonic analysis becomes at best secondary. Similarly, in tintinnabuli music, where the harmony does not ‘move’, the harmonic framework has been tilted sideways to form a musical line, and the relationship between two different kinds of melodic movement creates a harmonic resonance which is essentially the triad and the fluctuating attendance of diatonic dissonances. What we hear might be described as a single moment spread out in time.

The characteristic sound of tintinnabuli music stems from a blend of diatonic scales and triadic arpeggios in which harmonic stasis is underpinned by the constant presence (actual or implied) of the tonic triad. This sound is not just a texture compounded of scales and triads, but the result of a very specific compositional technique evolved by Pärt in isolation, and deeply influenced by (though not based on) his studies of early music. As a technique, it has very lucid principles, which were not created arbitrarily, but arrived at intuitively through a process of observing and re-evaluating the meaning of tonality.

As we have seen, Pärt was irresistibly drawn towards tonality even while composing serial music; but at that point it seemed to offer him a symbol (of a truth that he sought), rather than a means of composing. Thus he felt free to use tonal elements within the context of a collage, and often began or ended a piece with a major triad; but this was tonality as an emotively charged musical allusion, a gesture among other gestures, powerful yet isolated. And in fact, not once from *Nekrolog* to *Credo* did he compose original tonal music, unless we except the prophetic *Solfeggio*, which uses the diatonic scale yet avoids any use of tonal harmony, and the brief baroque imitations in *Pro, et Contra*.

Pärt was certainly not alone in mixing tonal and serial or other modernist elements, or in quoting from earlier musical styles. Indeed, collage or, more generally, different levels of influence and cross-reference, may be regarded as a quintessential twentieth-century style, and not only in music. But with Pärt, it became increasingly clear that a synthesis of these different styles was not acceptable—not possible even. He desired a fully integrated means of musical expression that would come from within him, rather than be claimed from external sources. So he turned aside from composing (in the sense of producing new, finished pieces), in order to penetrate more deeply into the very nature of music, which has primordially been rooted in some kind of tonal or modal pitch centre. He sought to re-establish tonality as the common basis for musical expression, but without the functional stereotypes of the Classical and Romantic eras. This radical renewal of musical language has often been dismissed as a retreat into the past or as yet another twentieth-century example of recycling an earlier musical idiom. It is the contention of this book that such is not the case. Many composers in recent decades have felt a similar need for a redefined sense of tonality, though few have articulated a response as uniquely expressive or as self-defining as Pärt's.

The elements of tonal music can be reduced to the triad and the diatonic scale, which may be seen as two sides of one coin—a tonality which can be expressed both horizontally and vertically. A scale defines a particular set of intervals, moving by step from a central note either up or down. In tonal music, only two basic kinds of scale are used, major and minor, though the effect of these can be greatly varied by chromatic alteration, thus affording a means of modulating to another tonal centre or key. In this way we talk about 'functional' tonality, meaning the way in which a piece of music can be given a contrasted and dynamic structure through the elements of tension and release involved in the process of modulation.

In pre-tonal music, more subtle variations of scale were available, the different permutations of tone and semitone producing the various modes (which can be readily identified by playing scales on the piano starting with different pitches and using only the white notes). The problem with playing modal music on the piano is that its tempered tuning system does not allow the small modifications of intonation that are necessary (and which traditional singers and some choirs achieve naturally) for the music to function properly. Furthermore, 'traditional' modal music emphasizes movement by step or by intervals that outline the fourth, fifth, and minor seventh (the lowest

intervals in the harmonic series), and has little or no use for the triadic arpeggio. Where a triad occasionally occurs, it is usually by way of emphasizing the fifth, and only very rarely as a means of rising to the octave.

There are many aspects of tintinnabuli music which lead people to think of it as 'modal': it does not modulate, and there is virtually no chromaticism; the 'harmony'² is not 'functional'—it does not provide a structural sense of tension and release; and the constant triadic presence is suggestive of the drone that is frequently a feature of modal music. In truth, questions of tonality and modality are problematized by the confusions of terminology which already exist in music history. Pärt's tintinnabuli music is a new blend of tonal and modal forces. Its use of tempered tuning and its triadic emphasis categorically refute the idea that this music is neo-medieval. Equally, its tonal stasis sets it apart from conventional tonality, for the constant presence of the same triad neutralizes any functional capabilities of pitches outside it.

Pärt seems to have felt that the powerful force exerted by tonality in its simplest triadic state (and not, that is to say, as a revival of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century functional tonality) was a musico-acoustic fact which he should no longer avoid, and that only by entering its world completely could he now create a music of essentials, a music of few notes, but great strength and purity. To proceed from a knowledge of Pärt's religious disposition (evinced by his choice of texts and his own comments on music) and to connect his perception of tonality to a perception of God is both to state the obvious and to risk too bald an interpretation. In this sense we may regard 'tonality', embodied in the constant presence of a major or minor triad, not as a symbol, but rather as a manifestation of God. Such a sacralizing view of music is neither unique nor eccentric; it has correspondences throughout music history, and is found in abundance in non-Western musics—moreover, without the self-consciousness forced upon it by a secular and materialistic society.

The basis of tintinnabuli style is a two-part texture (working always note against note), consisting of a 'melodic' voice³ moving mostly by step from or towards a central pitch (often, but not always, the tonic) and a 'tintinnabuli' voice sounding the notes of the

² The word 'harmony' is to be understood here in its most basic sense as the vertical aggregate of pitches at any given moment.

³ I use the word 'voice' here and elsewhere to denote a single musical line.

tonic⁴ triad. For brevity these will be referred to henceforth as the 'M-voice' and the 'T-voice'.

The M-voice may be constructed in accordance with a textual pattern or a purely abstract musical procedure; very rarely is it composed freely. But however the M-voice is composed, the T-voice is fitted to it in a relationship that is never casual, but is ruled by a single principle which can function in various ways: the tintinnabuli note is always a note in the triad (other than a unison or octave) related in some specific and constant way to the melodic note. Once a particular relationship has been chosen, it is adhered to consistently.

Before embarking on an exposition of tintinnabuli practices, it is important to stress that these are best regarded not as rules, but as guiding principles from which 'rules' can be deduced from piece to piece. In other words, the 'rules' may change, or at least evolve, but they emanate from the central principle of vertical and horizontal combination which lies at the heart of tintinnabuli composition.

Constructing the T-voice

Ex. 13a shows a sample of very basic tintinnabuli technique in which the T-voice is alternately the next triadic pitch above and then the next below the M-voice. In fact, the T-voice may be in one of two 'positions' relative to the M-voice; and it may either remain fixed above or below the M-voice, or it may alternate above and below. Thus we arrive at the following list of positions:

1. The T-voice provides that pitch in the triad which is nearest to the M-voice: '1st position'.
2. The T-voice pitch is the next but one in the triad: '2nd position'.

There are then theoretically three possible manners in which these T-voice positions may be applied:

Ex. 13a



⁴ It is important to state that words like 'tonic', 'dominant', and 'subdominant' are useful here as familiar pitch indicators, but do not carry the conventional meanings we associate with them when we talk about functional, or common-practice, tonality.

- a. Alternating above and below the M-voice: 'alternating'.
- b. Remaining above the M-voice: 'superior'.
- c. Remaining below the M-voice: 'inferior'.

In practice, the 1st position is frequently used in the alternating manner, whereas the 2nd position is normally used remaining superior or inferior.

In addition to this is the option of beginning an alternating sequence from either above or below; as tintinnabuli music is built on principles of symmetry, this is a small yet significant detail. Ex. 13*b* shows the application of some of these basic positions to a simple scale of A minor. Any T-voice can be transposed to a different octave. One such transposition gives the illusion of a third T-position. In Ex. 13*c* the superior T-voice provides the most distant triadic pitch within the octave from the M-voice; but it is in essence an octave transposition of the inferior (1st position) T-voice. Which way the ear actually registers this is a moot point.

Ex. 13*b*

Ex. 13*b* displays four staves of musical notation, each showing a triad in a different position relative to the middle voice (M-voice). The notes are represented by circles on a five-line staff.

- 1st position, superior: The M-voice is on the middle line (F4), the T-voice is on the space above (A4), and the B-voice is on the space below (C4).
- 2nd position, superior: The M-voice is on the space above (A4), the T-voice is on the middle line (F4), and the B-voice is on the space below (C4).
- 1st position, inferior: The M-voice is on the middle line (F4), the T-voice is on the space below (C4), and the B-voice is on the space above (A4).
- 2nd position, inferior: The M-voice is on the space below (C4), the T-voice is on the middle line (F4), and the B-voice is on the space above (A4).

Ex. 13*c*

Ex. 13*c* shows a single staff of musical notation. It features a triad in the 1st position, inferior, where the M-voice is on the middle line (F4), the T-voice is on the space below (C4), and the B-voice is on the space above (A4).

Constructing the M-voice

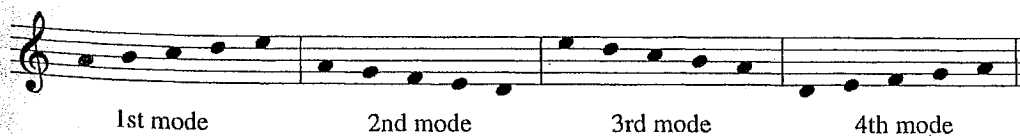
Although the composition of the M-voice always comes first, it is much more variable from work to work, and may range from the most basic pattern of scales moving strictly by step, to varieties of reiterated pitches or variations on the scale pattern with small interval leaps and melodic turns. None the less, the range of possibilities for M-voice construction can be condensed into four basic patterns, which are quite simply scales ascending or descending, to or from a central pitch; this central pitch is often the tonic (i.e. the tonic of the tintinnabuli triad), but it may also be another pitch (normally one of the other pitches in the tintinnabuli triad). In speaking of the M-voice I will refer to its 'pitch centre', to distinguish it from the triadic tonic of the T-voice (e.g. the T-voice may use the notes of the A minor triad, while the M-voice may use C as its pitch centre).

I have designated these M-voice types 'modes', because they are indeed scalar models; the word 'mode' has accumulated so many different meanings, rhythmic as well as melodic, that one more will surely do no harm! The fact that this is abbreviated to M, which can be conflated with 'melodic', only strengthens the meaning of 'mode' as used here (just as T can be seen to imply both tintinnabuli and triadic).

Ex. 13d shows the four modes, or ways of moving by step from or towards a central pitch—in this example, the tonic in A minor. In maintaining a systematic balance, the natural relationships between these four modes are clearly important: modes 1 and 2 are often combined in creating a melodic phrase, as are modes 1 and 3; we similarly find 3 and 4 as a pair, or 2 and 4. Less likely is a combination of 1 and 4, or 2 and 3.

When we add to these basic models the possibilities of different kinds of M-voice (the use of reiterated pitches or a melodic line that is not purely by step), the use of different pitch centres for the M-voice, octave transposition, and tacets for either of the two voices (these will be discussed later, especially in Chapter 7 on *Passio*), the manifold subtleties of this fundamentally simple concept will become quickly apparent.

Ex. 13d



The need to create this small technical vocabulary arises not from any undue complexity in the subject at hand, but for the practical purpose of avoiding the repetition of cumbersome descriptions of musical procedures, simple enough in themselves, but for which we lack any distinct terminology. Equipped with this vocabulary, it will be easier to delineate clearly and succinctly the basic uses of tintinnabuli at any given point; it will also help to reveal the more subtle variations in technique from work to work and the precise scope of compositional choices with which Pärt has fashioned music out of a given text or musical idea.

As the reader examines the various examples of different tintinnabuli combinations, it should become apparent that, despite an overall similarity, subtle and even strong differences emerge, and some T-voices are clearly more effective in a particular context than others, or effective in different and significantly useful ways. The tintinnabuli system may be simplicity itself and appear easy to copy, but the burden of choice and invention is laid immediately upon the composer; as with all rules and systems of composition, the tintinnabuli style is only as good as the person using it! Further study of both the system and the music that Pärt has generated with it will only serve to strengthen our appreciation of the powerful and expressive *variety* of Pärt's achievements. Although Pärt discovered the tintinnabuli principle and codified it in his musical works, he regards it as something more than a subjective invention, something having indeed an objective reality of its own. Finally, I should point out that the terminology I have proposed is my own, and is offered simply as a vade-mecum within the confines of this book.

In one of our discussions about tintinnabuli, Pärt described to me his view that the M-voice always signifies the subjective world, the daily egoistic life of sin and suffering; the T-voice, meanwhile, is the objective realm of forgiveness. The M-voice may appear to wander, but is always held firmly by the T-voice. This can be likened to the eternal dualism of body and spirit, earth and heaven; but the two voices are in reality one voice, a twofold single entity. This can be neatly though enigmatically represented by the following equation:⁵

$$I + I = I.$$

⁵ Proposed by Mrs Pärt, and warmly endorsed by the composer.

The intensity with which Pärt represented these ideas to me should be allowed to colour the entire preceding discussion of tintinnabuli 'technique'. In particular, he felt strongly that this equation expresses the kernel of the style, and is fundamental to the music's operation, and that it both precedes and dominates the actual process that underwrites each individual tintinnabuli composition.

Finally, it should be emphasized that Pärt's tintinnabuli style was developed intuitively. The association between the triad and the lingering manner in which bells resonate was initially made by Nora Pärt (and discussed in a 1977 concert programme note), so that the name tintinnabuli was adopted only after the technique itself had already been formulated.