

Reflecting the Music of Arvo Pärt in films – Echoes of Mind, Meditation and Mythology

Kaire Maimets-Volt, *Mediating the 'idea of One': Arvo Pärt's pre-existing music in film*. Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre Dissertations 4, Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, 2009, 237 pp.

Jarmo Valkola

Kaire Maimets-Volt's dissertation *Mediating the 'idea of One': Arvo Pärt's pre-existing music in film* deals with the experience of encountering of Pärt's compositions like *Für Alina*, *Spiegel im Spiegel*, *Variationen zur Gesundung von Arinuschka* and *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* in film soundtracks. Maimets-Volt thinks that in these films Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music had been used with rather similar purposes in a rather similar context. Thus the main hypothesis of this research is twofold: first of all, in films Pärt's music often occurs in narrative situations where it is necessary to express one single unambiguous idea or emotional content, or emphasize this over something else; secondly, this content tends to be very similar in films otherwise diverse in terms of plot or genre, and it tends to be so regardless of which particular *tintinnabuli* work is used.

Maimets-Volt focuses on two representative examples of early instrumental *tintinnabuli* style, namely on the use of *Für Alina* (1976) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) in film soundtracks. The principal aim of Maimets-Volt's work is to examine the use of Arvo Pärt's pre-existing *tintinnabuli* compositions in contemporary film soundtracks in order to determine the aesthetic reception of this music in film art. This will be achieved primarily through film analyses that explore the functions of *tintinnabuli* music in film and the expressive meanings this music is considered suitable to communicate.

Two questions underlie this dissertation. First, what kind of expressive meanings may be communicated through *tintinnabuli* music in film? Secondly, what musical attributes make *tintinnabuli* music suitable for expressing such meanings?

Because Maimets-Volt has taken her methods from the Tartu-Moscow-School of Semiotics,

she claims that musical meaning depends on certain semiotic codes used to interpret it, that the meaning is subject to change over time and in different interpretive communities (e.g. cultures). While it is true that music has many cultural associations, and maybe even codes, it is quite another matter whether semiotics alone is sufficient to clarify all the meanings in question, especially if one thinks that with musical meanings we are dealing with perceptual and logical schemes connecting phenomenology, lifestyle, social practices, styles and special ways of executing musical techniques with a unique interpretation, and so on. Certain codes are definitely there, but these do not always explain the whole system of how meanings work. Maybe a psychoanalytic viewpoint towards music, understanding music as symbolic process, might offer a bridge to shift the emphasis on to a purely formal, semiotic level, though in music the content and formal levels are in many ways interactively connected.

Another issue is that, from a musicological point of view, the author's aim in introducing films that have made use of Pärt's pre-existing *tintinnabuli* music is to present contexts that could open up alternative analyses and interpretations of his music. This is a definite enlarging, since it brings in the idea of an interdisciplinary approach in researching film music. For Maimets-Volt, her research combines film music studies with a cognitive musicological perspective together with film analysis and cultural semiotics. The main films to be analyzed are Tom Tykwer's *Heaven* (Germany/Italy/USA/France/UK, 2002) and Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (USA/Argentina/Jordan, 2002). There are, of course, other examples, but these are analyzed less rigorously. Mike Nichols's TV-film *Wit* (USA, 2001) provides one example, and we can realize how differently these three films, all featuring Pärt's music, work in terms of image and sound combination.

Proceeding further, Maimets-Volt introduces more material, claiming that the compositional structure of narrative consists of two planes: the expression-plane, which in this dissertation is synonymous with 'form (of text organisation)', 'formal structure', 'signifier', 'technical' aspect; and the content-plane, which in this dissertation is synonymous with 'content', 'thematic structure', 'signified', 'expressive' aspect/meaning.

This is important, and accordingly, among film scholars, the work of narrative has often been likened to all sorts of things, not simply to cinematic procedures but also to varying types of literary and aesthetic practices. The comparisons between music and film could be based on a host of factors, which may or may not be interrelated.

The musical and cultural landscape

To begin with, the appeal of Pärt's music - be it the minimal Orthodox reflections upon the listener or the divine decree that directs the charm of it - finds a ready analogy in the audience, who essentially play a significant part in the production of the meanings. Consequently, the effect of the Pärt's musical connotations, the pleasure of the music's final effect, mirrors the audience's feelings toward the outcome of the special *tin-tinnabuli* sound, which contains all these ideals in it.

The topic of the dissertation is excellent. The author draws on a wide range of theoretical resources to interpret and expand the meaning of Pärt's music and its cinematic usage. The dissertation engages with a variety of conceptualizations of Pärt's music. At the core of this is an interweaving of various approaches. Its contribution to this field works through a detailed analysis of the film material in question to illustrate the various meaning-making activities that are likely to be relevant in other contexts as well. Maimets-Volt's work also takes forward the field of musical and cultural landscape through its theoretical elaboration of the various meanings of the interconnections between music and film. The text is sufficient and original in the way in which it interweaves Pärt's musical structures and wider theoretical discussion.

The theoretical basis of *Mediating the 'idea of One': Arvo Pärt's pre-existing music in film* develops progressively through successive chapters, which are themselves framed and organized

carefully. This framing draws on various sources and, with its evocation of a reliable and secure point of reference, comes to represent her search for inner direction and meaning. The prologue clarifies the direction and intention of the dissertation, namely to consider the range of ways in which to give meaning to Pärt's music, which is explored empirically and theoretically throughout the text. Somewhat problematic is Maimets-Volt's notion that music as an art form adds to the aesthetic or artistic effect of the film in acoustic terms, as well as by contributing to the integration of the film text. Partly this is true. For example, in *Gerry*, the use of long-takes creates spaces that have been modified with a special sense of deep-focus cinematography. It is useful to notice how the action takes place on different levels of the composition. This makes it possible to use stylized camera calligraphy. This shows how sounds (and especially Pärt's music) create spaces (on- and off-screen) in the film. This means that stylistic, social and semantic changes are all present simultaneously. A useful remark is that due to the specific ways of setting this music to interact with the other means of expression in both films, the music is displayed not only as characterizing the particular nature of that "third presence"-perspective, but as simultaneously representing that very timeless sphere itself, from which the eye is cast on the characters and their actions. This is how the music affects us on the level of the mind. The spiritual and mythological value of Pärt's music is, in this sense, evident.

If we turn to phenomenological fields, say to the area of phenomenological description, we would discover that Maimets-Volt's *Mediating the 'idea of One': Arvo Pärt's pre-existing music in film* fulfills many of its original promises and functions to establish and disclose important elements of Pärt's musical poetics. The relation between drama, music and film is very close in this work. It is helpful that the author speaks of artistic text as a complexly constructed meaning, and this is why the presumptions of codification and of interpretation are inseparable from this concept.

Furthermore, an important vision is Maimets-Volt's suggestion that analyses of the kinds of expressive meanings pre-existing music might communicate in film could be based on reading the images and speech as actualisers of music's

semantic potential, or on reading music as if reproducing the already existent meanings.

Related to this, we could speak of cinematic semantics, by which we can understand the exploration of cinematic meanings, concentrating on specific cinematic things like exploring the meanings of moving images, succession, montage-combinations and camera-effects. So, in this connection the interest focuses on all kinds of visual and stylistic meanings of cinema. Theoretically speaking, it would have been possible to enlarge the cognitive perspective and bring in ideas of more subtle views of how our perceptive apparatus responds to different stimuli within a framework of schemata which guide perception. Consequently, cognitive research could be brought into line with phenomenological notions about relating to a reality beyond the immediate field of perception and experience.

Towards a philosophy between image and sound

The readings in Maimets-Volt's text are remarkably consistent, insofar as they repeatedly return to notions of Pärt's music. We can state that the author traces convincingly the musical attributes behind the special echo and sound of Pärt's *tinnabuli* music. In general, these notions remain fixed in a positive way and receive the needed nuances. The analyses of *Heaven* and *Gerry* are well handled, neatly packed interpretations, which bring in many essential ideas. In *Gerry*, especially, we are dealing with a thorough speculation of landscape-cinema, an idea of figures in a landscape where the relations between space and characters are centrally present. I would not call Maimets-Volt's notions coded speculation: they are more like phenomenological remarks between music, image, and the unfolding drama to reveal the essence of the language of cinema.

All the same, Maimets-Volt's chapters exhibit a solid familiarity with the extensive literature and hardly disappoint in providing fresh insights. Again in the chapter on film music's theoretical implications, in considering the relations between film music and cinematic narrative, Maimets-Volt makes many important observations about "new critical tools", aesthetic and methodological approaches that have been applied in this field during recent decades. Film music is usually engaged with the surrounding cinematic narrative, although, in some cases, the connotations that go along with the music can easily overcome definitive barriers.

Elsewhere, in the discussion of Pärt's ontological and existential themes, which pits musicological concepts of Pärt's works against bigger ideals, the issue of aesthetic relativity is greatly modified by being viewed from the perspective of interactive relations. The meditative aspect is there. To be sure, the philosophical and ontological aspects that necessarily arise when one moves into this broader context could have been treated at greater length and with more attention to the intellectual and aesthetic issues of Pärt's music. Consequently, corresponding themes in Pärt's musical works, and in the cinematic equivalents are partly ignored.

Nonetheless, the stringent focus that Maimets-Volt applies to her interesting, straightforward study should in the end be applauded insofar as it leaves the reader with a good sense of a central aspect of Pärt's music and its applications in the field of cinema, namely his minimal and deeply fascinating *tinnabuli* sound. The readings of individual passages are lucid throughout and altogether compelling. In this regard, at the very least, Kaire Maimets-Volt's *Mediating the 'idea of One': Arvo Pärt's pre-existing music in film* makes a decisive and highly welcome contribution to the field.