

Arvo Pärt, Hardijs Lediņš and the Ritual Moment in Riga, October 1977

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Abstract

Drawing on archival research and oral history, this article reconstructs events surrounding the premieres of Arvo Pärt's first openly sacred *tintinnabuli*-style compositions, including his *Missa syllabica*, at the Festival of Contemporary Music held in Riga in October 1977. It highlights the work of the Latvian artist and architecture student Hardijs Lediņš (1955–2004), whose discotheque at the Riga Polytechnic Institute hosted the event. Tracing the reception of the festival and Pärt's music by participants, notably the pianist Alexei Lubimov, the composer Vladimir Martynov, and the violinist Boriss Avramecs, the article suggests that an informal network of students and alternative artists played a crucial role in nurturing and supporting this most ideologically problematic corner of Pärt's compositional activity of the period. For a little over a year, Lediņš's disco provided an underground space for the presentation of experimental art and the experience of creative freedom. That experience, however, was short-lived, as festival organizers were charged with distributing religious propaganda shortly afterwards, and they were barred from engaging in future organizational work of the sort.

The Tallinn premiere of Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music on 27 October 1976 was an auspicious event in the life of the city. Staged in the Estonia Concert Hall, the capital's most prestigious venue, and featuring the Tallinn Chamber Choir, it was performed by Hortus Musicus, Andres Mustonen's celebrated early-music ensemble, which had enjoyed the sponsorship of the Estonian Philharmonic since its founding in 1972 (ETMM, MO20; ETMM, M238:1/4). To borrow from the musicologist Peter J. Schmelz, the premiere, sanctioned and supported by the Ministry of Culture, was as "official" an event in the Estonian SSR as any concert could be (Schmelz 2009). In many respects, the official status of the Tallinn premiere was unsurprising. After all, Pärt was an award-winning composer whose work had been alternately celebrated and censored by Soviet authorities for over a decade (Karnes 2017; May 2016). Still, despite the fact that Pärt had not had a concert premiere in over three years, some had doubts about Pärt's latest stylistic turn. "The concert on 27th October did not cause a sensation," Immo Mihkelson remembers (Mihkelson 2016). As Mustonen later recalled of the event, "[i]t was not yet clear if anything would come of this" (Kautny 2002: 118).

As Mihkelson notes, the Tallinn premiere was previewed two days earlier, when Hortus Musicus presented a shorter suite of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* works at Tartu University. The largely academic

audience at the university anticipated the distinctive character of the audience in Tallinn, which Mihkelson recalls as "noticeably younger than the typical concert-goer" (Mihkelson 2016; ETMM, MO20). The musicologist Toomas Siitan likewise describes a distinctive cast to the crowd attending many of Pärt's early *tintinnabuli* performances. It consisted largely of individuals more likely to be seen at concerts of progressive rock than at the philharmonic's classical programs, "young people com[ing] from throughout Estonia" to hear "something real," he remembers, "something fresh" (Siitan, interview 2017). Even the Tartu University concert was not the first public performance of Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-style music, however. As the composer recorded in his musical diaries, *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old* – called *Modus* on the programs in Tartu and Tallinn – had its premiere, *unofficially*, on 27 April 1976, at a festival of new music held at the Anglican Church in Riga's Old Town (APK, 2-1.10). At that time, the Anglican Church was not functioning as a church at all, but as home to the Student Club of the Riga Polytechnic Institute. There, an architecture student named Hardijs Lediņš had been holding a wildly popular series of discotheques since the 1974–75 academic year. In October 1977, the Student Club would host a second discotheque new-music festival, which would feature a slate of *tintinnabuli* premieres: *Arbos*, *Cantate Domino canticum novum*, *Fratres*, and *Summa* were first