

# The Train to Brest: Mapping the Borders of Pärt Reception<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Arvo Pärt and his family left the Soviet Union in January 1980. A young student, Toomas Siitan, accompanied them as far as the border crossing at Brest station. This shared journey was remarkable in its own right, but has also become tightly bound to understandings of Pärt's music, and of the *tintinnabuli* style in particular. Motivated by the occasion of Siitan's sixtieth birthday, this paper does not present new research, but instead treats Pärt's moment of departure as a springboard for some wider reflections on these patterns of reception. Some major fault lines are briefly reviewed: differences in perception between the so-called East and West, the split identity of *tintinnabuli* itself, the experiential significance of displacement and trauma. Pärt's emigration is then linked to two specific issues in slightly more detail: firstly, the status of his pre-*tintinnabuli* scores, and secondly, the contested perceptions of him as an "Estonian" composer.

In January 1980, Arvo Pärt and his family made a very difficult journey. For someone like me – an Australian, from a much younger generation, with no experience of the institutional pressures that affected many Soviet lives – their departure is quite simply impossible to imagine. The composer had kidney troubles; he and his wife Nora had two small children. And yet their situation in Estonia had become untenable: "I had practically no chance of surviving as a composer," Pärt later reflected, "because the functionaries I depended on for my existence acted towards me with constant animosity" (Restagno 2012: 44). The Pärts emigrated with no money, no set destination, no future certainty, and no real hope of ever again seeing their friends, colleagues or homeland. While their apartment had been crowded enough the previous evening, few dared risk a public farewell at Tallinn's main station when the early morning train carried them away.<sup>2</sup>

The suitcases were heavy, and Toomas Siitan, a young composition student, offered to help the family as far as the border. Pärt's relationship with Siitan was then one of informal mentorship, having begun a few years earlier when Siitan approached Pärt about his high school dissertation on the cello concerto *Pro et contra* (the inaugural work,

perhaps, of the academic career celebrated in this collection). Siitan took no personal risk by assisting the Pärts, but nevertheless describes his presence on the train as a "half-secret." In the aftermath of the journey, he wrote a small organ piece entitled *Capriccio on the departure of a beloved teacher* – a title that took its inspiration, of course, from one of J. S. Bach's earliest works for keyboard.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the period of Pärt's absence from Estonia, the two managed to stay in contact.

Nora's aunt, who had contributed to the costs of the trip, was also on the train. Between Tartu and Vilnius one other traveller joined the family: the filmmaker Grigori Kromanov, a friend and collaborator of Pärt. It was a long journey; there was plenty of conversation. Still, Siitan recalls that the mood of the group was "very hard" in the face of such an unknown future (compare Engelhardt 2012: 37). In 2005, when he discussed these events with the Pärts, he realised that this time in their lives had been so turbulent, so exhausting, that many of the details had slipped from their memories. But at last, after a long day and night in the wagon, the train reached the final threshold: the station terminal at the border city of Brest. Arvo and Nora had already heard rumours of the

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<sup>2</sup> This section draws on an interview with Toomas Siitan conducted on 24 February 2018. See also Restagno 2012: 47.

<sup>3</sup> Bach's BWV 992 is the *Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother*.