

Insights From the Outside

Kevin C. Karnes. *Sounds Beyond. Arvo Pärt and the 1970s Soviet Underground*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021, 193 pp.

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It is, of course, a mere coincidence that I happen to be finishing this review on the day that Mikhail Gorbachev's death is reported in the media, but this news inevitably frames my considerations. Investigating the 1970s Soviet underground, the topic of Kevin C. Karnes's most recent book, means taking a moment of a time into account that is frequently periodized in music historiography as "from Thaw to Perestroika", a wording that equates to "from Khrushchev to Gorbachev". As far as music and the other arts are concerned, however, the term "Thaw" appears something of a euphemism. There was an official musical ideology and a system of censorship that connected the Stalin era more or less seamlessly with that of Gorbachev (with a small window of greater openness during Khrushchev's time) and which forced composers and musicians either to come to terms with the system, or to withdraw from official musical life into inner emigration, or to actual emigration from the Soviet Union, whether voluntarily or under compulsion.

Since the official ideology favoured a traditional musical style and approached modernist, let alone avant-garde tendencies sceptically, the period from Thaw to Perestroika is often regarded as a period of artistic stagnation, at least in non-Russian music historiography. Digging into the recesses of the archives, however, one can discover that there was an underground movement of composers, musicians and other protagonists who existed more or less in their own information space alongside the official one. It is this Soviet underground of the 1970s on which Kevin Karnes focuses and, in view of his main interest, which he investigates as the creative soil of Arvo Pärt's first *tintinnabuli* compositions.

Karnes, Professor of Music History at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, is well known for his research into Baltic and Russian musical culture. Even though the period in question dates back

nearly half a century, some of the protagonists of the Soviet underground are still in a position to be interviewed as contemporary witnesses. And in fact, it is this that sets apart Karnes's study as an eloquently written melange of oral history, ethnography and archival studies by someone who is looking at his subject from the outside, in a way comparable to cultural musicologists who investigate other cultures by immersing themselves into the culture in question. Karnes does so by "reiterative acts of listening, writing, asking questions, recounting stories, and trying to make sense of it all" (p. 7). In this list the author omits to mention reading, for a major part of what can be imputed to oral history in Karnes's book is in fact taken from published interviews, autobiographical texts and similar sources.

The book consists of six chapters, the first of which is an introduction that maps the part of the Soviet underground that influenced Pärt and which in turn also was influenced by him. Karnes sketches the role of both visual artists and musicians as protagonists of a scene that sought for alternatives to the officially promoted artistic paths. Spirituality, understood in its broadest sense, gained more and more importance here, as it served as a means to open up another world. In the field of music, early music aroused interest, represented by Andrey Volkonsky and his ensemble Madrigal in Moscow as well as by Andres Mustonen and his ensemble Hortus Musicus in Tallinn.

Chapters two to five may to some extent be read independently, even if they share the same topic, namely the first performances of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* compositions and how they were embedded in and perceived by the underground. Chapter two considers the Student Club of the Riga Polytechnic Institute – the Riga Polytechnic Disco (1974–76) – where Pärt's *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old* received its first public performance

in April 1976. During these years, the Riga Polytechnic Disco was shaped by the activities of Hardijs Lediņš, a student of architecture who made his debut as a DJ (disk jockey) there in the winter of 1975. Soviet disco culture did not focus on dancing solely, as was the case in contemporary Western disco culture, but entailed listening to live or recorded music as well as to lectures about the respective music. In the Riga Polytechnic Disco, this culminated in the initiative of educational discotheque presentations, in which Lediņš functioned as the first DJ. Karnes introduces some of Lediņš's impressive programmes, which he found in the archive of the Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art.

In chapter three Karnes elaborates on "Tintinnabuli and the Sacred"; his study comprises a limited but carefully focused overview of the *tintinnabuli* technique and its first manifestation in the funeral music from the 1974 film *Colourful Dreams* (the original Estonian title is *Värvilised unenäod*), which Pärt reworked into *Modus* in 1976. Karnes subsequently introduces the first distinct *tintinnabuli* compositions that Pärt arranged as a suite and the instructive programme notes that Nora Pärt wrote to accompany this suite. One of the crucial compositions here is *Summa*, based on the Latin text of the Nicene Creed, to be followed by others based on texts taken from the Latin Bible or the Catholic liturgy. A main feature of these works is the syllabic style that Pärt developed by setting the Latin texts and which would become important for the *tintinnabuli* style in general, thus fundamentally grounding and connecting the style to the sacred.

Chapter four deals with the Riga Polytechnic Institute (RPI) Festivals of 1976–77 and has a history of its own. The earliest version of this chapter appeared in the 2019 issue of *Res Musica*, and a second version forms part of the edited volume *Arvo Pärt. Sounding the Sacred* (New York 2021).¹ Essentially, Karnes tells the story of the two festivals held in Riga in April 1976 and October 1977, both of which were put together largely by Lediņš, and of their respective resonances in both the audiences and among other musicians. Since, as Karnes mentions (p. 80), documentation of

both events is sparse, his detailed reconstructions are immensely valuable. Karnes draws attention to the festivals' musical repertoire which, among many others, featured Western avant-garde composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen and Terry Riley in 1976 and contemporary Soviet composers like Vladimir Martynov and Valentyn Sylvestrov in 1977. While, as already mentioned, Pärt's *Sarah* received its first performance at the 1976 festival, in 1977 there was a concert exclusively devoted to a Riga version of the *Tintinnabuli* suite incorporating the *Missa syllabica*.

The fifth chapter then addresses the famous Festival of Early and Contemporary Music held in Tallinn in November 1978, which, incorporating the essential ideas of the Riga festival of October 1977, gained international attraction. The festival also marked Pärt's first major international triumph and, consequently, in Karnes's view, brought pressure on the composer from Soviet political government that would soon lead to his and his family's emigration.

Pärt's subsequent international success as composer needs no mention, unlike the later careers of Lediņš, who – probably inspired by Pärt – embarked on composition, and of Martynov, who, according to Karnes, is "an unmissable presence in [Russia] today" (p. 97) but not a figure widely known outside Russia. Though I would not venture an opinion on this, one of the merits of Karnes's book is that in the sixth and last chapter he sheds light on Lediņš's and Martynov's artistic development after 1978. Karnes's considerations emphasize the "restless searching for an 'elsewhere' [that] ultimately took [Pärt, Lediņš, and Martynov] into deeply personal spaces" (p. 121).

Karnes's *Sounds Beyond* is without any doubt an essential and unprecedented publication concerning Pärt's creative shift from exploring dodecaphony, collage techniques and aleatoric music, culminating in his 1968 *Credo*, to his *tintinnabuli* style. Karnes presents valuable material from different archives, and even if I do not feel able to judge how many of the historical details of the various events of 1976 to 1978 need be told to readers in the Baltic states, they definitely depict a nuanced picture

¹ Arvo Pärt, Hardijs Lediņš and the Ritual Moment in Riga, October 1977. – *Res Musica* 11, pp. 115–127, 2019; Arvo Pärt's *Tintinnabuli* and the 1970s Soviet Underground. – *Arvo Pärt. Sounding the Sacred*. Eds. Peter C. Bouteneff, Jeffers Engelhardt, Robert Saler, New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 68–85, 2021.

of the concurrent underground culture with its implications and inconsistencies. I am unsure how representative the underground portrayed in Karnes's book is of the Soviet underground in its entirety – in any case, the chosen narrative is teleological in that the international success of the Tallinn festival of 1978 was tantamount to the

breakup of the underground which until then had been the creative soil of Pärt's first *tintinnabuli* compositions. Unfortunately, the chosen format, by presenting the material in more or less independent chapters, leads to a certain amount of repetition, which can at times get in the way of the essential thread of the narrative.