

# “Comrades in Misfortune”: Arvo Pärt and Valentyn Sylvestrov, from Experimentation to Mystery, Periphery to Center<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Like many young Soviet composers during the post-Stalin Thaw, Arvo Pärt and Valentyn Sylvestrov experimented with a range of musical techniques in the 1960s before turning in radically simplified directions during the next decades. Notably, both Pärt and Sylvestrov were among the only composers from their generation featured in the Soviet youth magazine *Krugozor* in the late 1960s, a time when Sylvestrov was more successful than Pärt on the global stage. But the Union of Composers of Ukraine was harsher than its Estonian counterpart, and Sylvestrov suffered severely from its policing in the 1970s.

This paper explores for the first time the stylistic intersections and influences between Pärt and Sylvestrov. Focusing on the 1960s, and the appearance of music by both composers in *Krugozor*, it traces the parallel yet distinct paths of both composers, paying close attention to the compositions featured in the magazine: Sylvestrov’s *Mystery* and Pärt’s *Pro et contra*. The contacts and contrasts between Pärt and Sylvestrov tell a particularly potent story about musical experimentation and discovery from the 1960s through the present.

*I originally wrote and delivered this article in October 2021 as a keynote address at the conference “Arvo Pärt: Texts and Contexts” hosted by the Arvo Pärt Centre in Laulasmaa, Estonia. As I revised it in the first half of 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, unleashing brutal and senseless violence without provocation. Valentyn Sylvestrov fled the country in early March for Berlin, and his music has since gained new attention worldwide. I briefly address these topics at the end of this article but want readers to be aware from the outset that the war, threatened when I first delivered the talk, was very much on my mind as I revised it for publication.*

In a reminiscence titled “Greatly Sensitive,” first published in German in 1999, Arvo Pärt credited a pivotal conversation he had with Alfred Schnittke in 1976 as the moment he was pushed to “go public with my new system of composition, the tintinnabuli style” (Pärt 2012: 198). Pärt said that Schnittke’s “words were like midwifery,” as he urged Pärt to “leave the experimental stage on paper for real sound.” Schnittke’s advice came from lessons hard-earned through his own compositional practice in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when he first formulated and expressed his idea of polystylism (Schmelz 2009, Schmelz 2021). Schnittke proved so influential

for Pärt because both shared similar approaches to musical dramaturgy and both made similar creative journeys as they engaged with and then departed from serialism in the 1960s. Both composers moved through serialism, aleatory techniques, and collage (see Table 1). The early 12-tone compositions of both composers were often strict and yet suggested or were based on a narrative. For example, Pärt’s 1963 *Perpetuum mobile* and Schnittke’s 1968 *Pianissimo* both set up steady, layered serial processes that trace a dramatic course of buildup and dissipation that audiences found quite appealing. (Pärt’s composition lacks an explicit narrative; Schnittke’s

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