

# *Tintinnabuli* and the Sacred: A View from the Archives, 1976–77

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## Abstract

Drawing on Arvo Pärt's musical diaries and other archival materials, this article examines three key discoveries that were crucial to the coalescence of the composer's *tintinnabuli* style in 1976–77: (1) the two-voice contrapuntal structure of melodic and triadic lines, (2) algorithmic methods for generating musical structure, and (3) the so-called syllabic method of transforming poetic texts into melodic lines. The third of these discoveries, which occurred on the single day of 12 February 1977, culminated Pärt's yearslong search for a musical language capable of accommodating his vision of the divine. The syllabic method, the article suggests, was uniquely capable of accommodating Pärt's Orthodox Christian practice, by offering a way of setting sacred texts that required him to cede any urge to interpret, reflect, or express his own ideas about their meanings. Charting parallels between Pärt's syllabic method and the working methods of the Orthodox Russian painter Eduard Steinberg (1937–2012), the article closes by suggesting that in both cases, the radical abstraction of the works they created opens spaces for the Orthodox notion of apophatic knowledge to take hold, through which a listener or an observer might feel themselves just a bit closer to the divine.

## Discoveries

Arvo Pärt's vision for one of the first works he would identify with the word "*tintinnabuli*" came to him suddenly, as if out of the blue. The event, documented by the musicologist Saale Kareda and recalled by Arvo and Nora Pärt in Dorian Supin's documentary film *24 Preludes for a Fugue*, was the production of a nearly complete sketch for *Für Alina* on 7 February 1976 (Kareda 2000: 59n3; Supin 2002, at 0:55:30). It came just three days after Pärt began experimenting with contrapuntal settings of melodic and triadic voices in his composing notebooks, his "musical diaries" (*muusikapäevikud*). On the diary page, *Alina* is expansively laid out, even visually beautiful in its multicolor inscription (Figure 1). In red pen, the composer recorded his initial imagining of the work as performed on the organ.<sup>1</sup> Its first performance, however, was on the piano, just six weeks after Pärt made this sketch. On 23 March, the pianist Rein Rannap played *Alina* as an encore following his recital in Tallinn's Estonia Concert Hall. As an encore, *Alina* did not appear on the printed program of the recital, and (as was customary for encores) it was not recorded for archiving with the Estonian SSR Philharmonic. The only trace we have of the performance was a

single review in the paper *Sirp ja vasar*, where the critic mentions Pärt's premiere only in her final sentence.<sup>2</sup>

The completion of *Für Alina* marked Pärt's discovery of a key structural component of what would soon become known as his *tintinnabuli* style of composing: the strict interplay of melodic and triadic voices, which the critic Merike Vaitmaa perceptively and immediately recognized as revealing a deep yet surprising kinship between early and modernist music. It "reminds us," she wrote in December 1976 after hearing a suite of Pärt's early *tintinnabuli*-style works, "partly of the strict counterpoint of early music, partly of the strict serial techniques of the twentieth century" (Vaitmaa 1976: 10). With her words about serialism, Vaitmaa was likely thinking about works like the second piece Pärt would associate with the word "*tintinnabuli*": *Saara*, sometimes called *Modus*, which was eventually published under the title *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old*. The musical diaries reveal Pärt working intensively on *Sarah* just three weeks after he composed *Alina*.

A diary sketch from 28 February 1976 (Figure 2), reveals something of this process: on the bottom of the page, in blue ink, Pärt mapped out pitches – a series of pitches he discovered while

<sup>1</sup> Arvo Pärt Centre (Arvo Pärdi Keskus), APK 2-1.7.

<sup>2</sup> Mets 1976: 10; Mihkelson, interview 2019.

Figure 1. First realization of *Für Alina* in the musical diaries, 7 February 1976 (APK 2-1.7).



working on the film *Värvilised unenäod* (*Colourful Dreams*, 1974) – and also meditated on the *shape* of those pitches, on their visual form on the page.<sup>3</sup> Unlike *Alina*, the score of *Sarah* does not feature melodic and triadic voices. Also unlike *Alina*, *Sarah* came together gradually, over the course of several months, as Pärt methodically designed and then recursively ran a combinatorial algorithm that enabled him to generate most of the work from a single, eight-note series of

pitches. In another sketch for the *Sarah* (Figure 3), we see him experimenting with various ways of permuting reiteratively an abstract series of notes. One possibility he hit upon is what he ultimately used to complete the piece.<sup>4</sup> We can see it in the sixth and seventh lines of note-heads on the left-hand side of the sketch. There, a green arrow indicates that the final pitch of line six would return as the first pitch of line seven. In his autograph manuscript of the completed

<sup>3</sup> APK 2-1.7; Karnes 2021: 52–53.

<sup>4</sup> Estonian Theatre and Music Museum (Eesti Teatri- ja Muusikamuseum), ETMM, M238:2/61.

**Figure 2.** Early sketches for *Sarah Was Ninety Years Old* in the musical diaries, 28 February 1976 (APK 2-1.7).

composition (Figure 4), we see all of this brought together: the pitch material and its striking visual presentation taken from the diaries, with the permutation of the eight-note row that Pärt first flagged with his green pen.<sup>5</sup> Like *Alina*, *Sarah* was premiered soon after it was completed, likewise in an inconspicuous place: at a festival of new music organized by the Latvian DJ Hardijs Lediņš, the Russian pianist Alexey Lyubimov, and a group of students from the Riga Polytechnic Institute. The

performers' names have been forgotten (Karnes 2021: 83–88).

The archival documents described above provide glimpses of two of the three signal discoveries of 1976–77 that made Pärt's early *tintinnabuli* music sound the way it does, discoveries that enabled his *tintinnabuli* project, which was always much more than just musical notes, take manifest form in sound. The first of those three discoveries, marked by the

<sup>5</sup> ETMM, M238:2/13.

Figure 3. Sketch for *Sarah/Modus* (ETMM, M238:2/61).

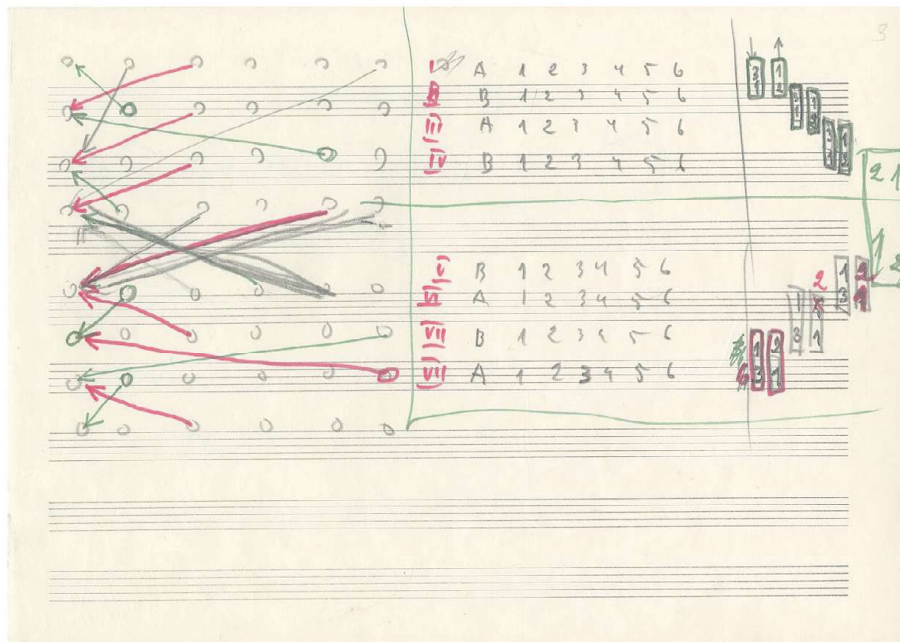
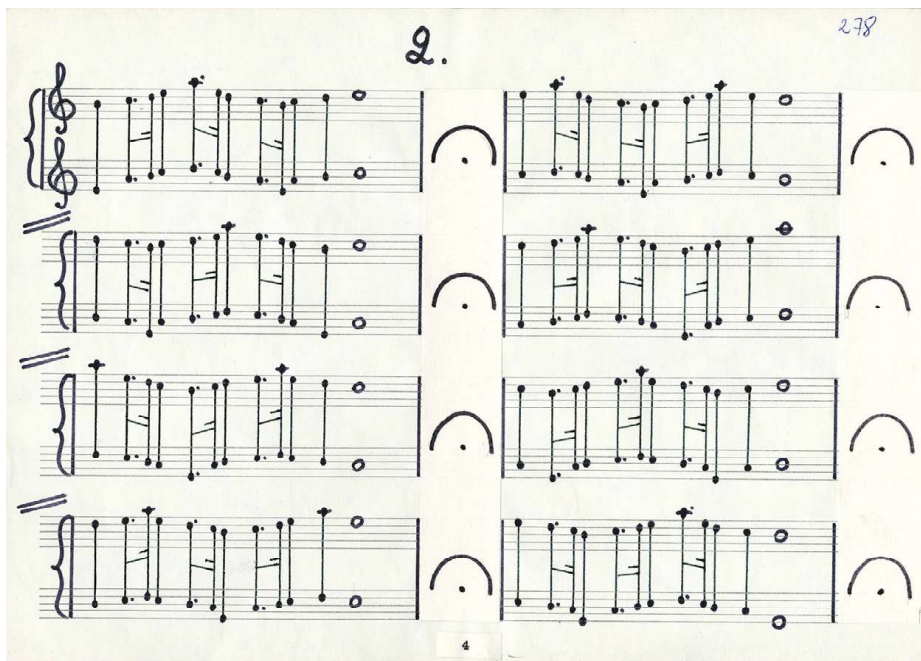


Figure 4. Page from the manuscript fair copy of *Sarah/Modus* (ETMM, M238:2/13).



composition of *Alina* in February 1976, was the two-voice contrapuntal structure comprising melodic and triadic voices. The second key discovery came during the composition of *Sarah*, between February and April of that year: a quasi-mathematical approach to generating musical structures autonomously, by reiteratively running pitch material through carefully

designed algorithmic processes. The third principal discovery, as I will detail below, occurred on a single day, 12 February 1977, when Pärt discovered the logogenic compositional method that has since become known as his “syllabic” technique. But as we will see, even though this third discovery arrived suddenly, it was prepared by months of concerted searching for a musical

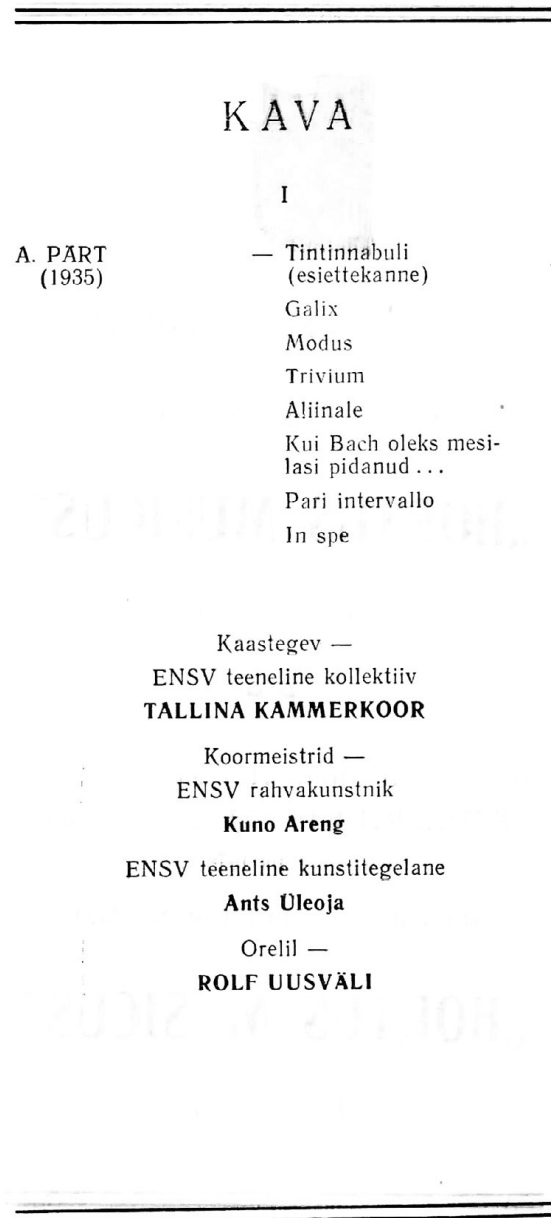
language capable of accommodating his vision of the divine. Indeed, the musical diaries reveal that nearly the whole of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* project, from its very earliest jottings, was a sacred project at its core, its devotional nature concealed in philharmonic concerts while openly celebrated in underground creative circles (Karnes 2021, Karnes 2019). It was, in fact, Pärt's spiritual searching, perhaps more than any musical discoveries, that defined his *tintinnabuli* project in these years. What ultimately led him to the sound of his *tintinnabuli* style was, simply put, an act of devotion.

In the pages that follow, I will unfold this argument in three parts. First, I will retrace Pärt's discovery of the syllabic method on the pages of his musical diaries, which reveal his *tintinnabuli* project of 1976–77 to have consisted largely in his search for means of sounding musically his Christian faith. Then, I will turn to further archival sources to examine his syllabic method of composition as an act of specifically Orthodox devotion. Finally, I will explore some parallels between Pärt's work and that of a contemporary painter, the Russian Eduard Steinberg (1937–2012). In doing so, I will suggest that the radical abstraction of Pärt's syllabic compositions, like Steinberg's strikingly abstract canvases, opens pathways for grasping something of the apophatic tradition in Orthodox theology, to which both artists were so powerfully drawn.

### Searching for a Language

As Immo Mikhelson vividly recounts, the Tallinn premiere of Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-style music on 27 October 1976, performed in an Estonian SSR Philharmonic concert in the Estonia Concert Hall, featured seven works arranged in what the composer was calling his *Tintinnabuli* suite (*oopus*, in Estonian) (Mikhelson 2016). Four of those works were instrumental, with the other three scored for wordless singing. All featured Latin or Estonian titles that either were referentially ambiguous (*Aliinale*, "for Alina"; *In spe*, "in hope") or alluded to their musical structure (*Pari intervallo*: at the same distance). *Saara*, whose title referred to the

**Figure 5.** Program for the Tallinn premiere of the *Tintinnabuli* suite, 27 October 1976 (ETMM, M238:1/4; digital copy APK 5-1.289).



book of Genesis, appeared on the program as *Modus*, Latin for *method*, a word without religious connotations (Figure 5).<sup>6</sup> A sketch of *Calix* ("Chalice") shows that it once had set the Latin Dies Irae sequence.<sup>7</sup> But on the Tallinn concert it was performed with solfège syllables instead of the Latin text.<sup>8</sup> In short, no hints of devotional

<sup>6</sup> ETMM, M238:1/4.

<sup>7</sup> Vaitmaa 1991: 22; ETMM, M238:2/13.

<sup>8</sup> Estonian Public Broadcasting (Eesti Rahvusringhääling), ERR, ÜPST-2734/KCDR-1020.

Figure 6. Vocabulary list in the musical diaries, 3 September 1976 (APK 2-1.18).

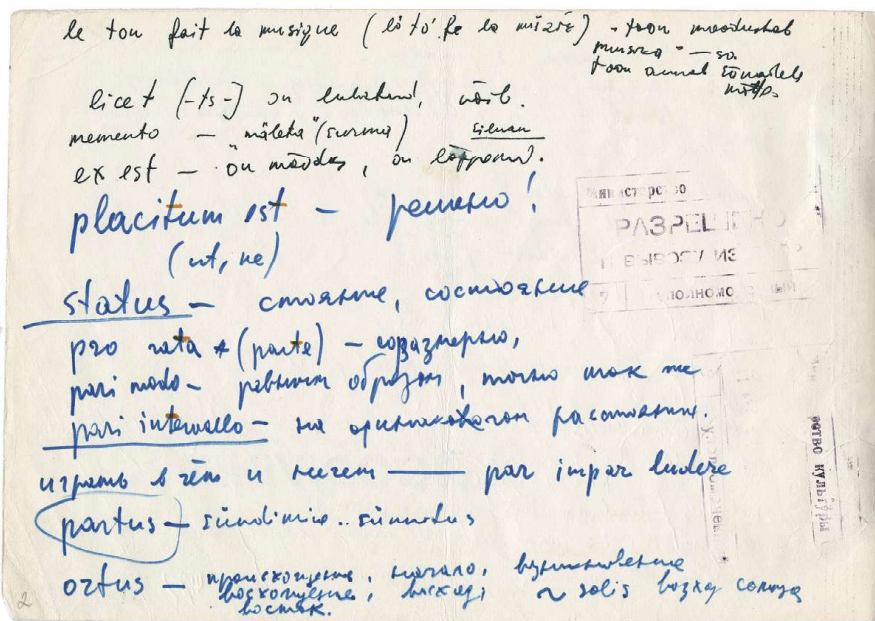
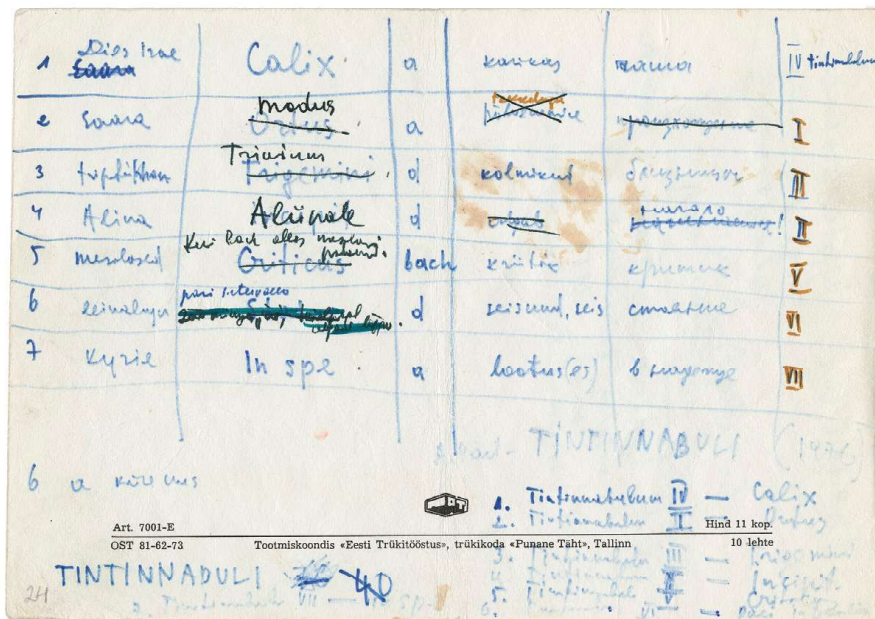


Figure 7. Experimenting with the order and titles of movements in the *Tintinnabuli* suite in the musical diaries, mid-September 1976 (APK 2-1.18).



underpinnings greeted the audience for the philharmonic concert that night.

Pärt's musical diaries tell a different story. Two months before the Tallinn premiere, Pärt had finished composing all but one of the works in the *Tintinnabuli* suite. Only *Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte ...* (If Bach Had Been a Beekeeper ...) remained, and he spent the first

two weeks of September working to complete it. At the same time, he was searching for titles of the suite's movements, compiling lists of Latin words and their Estonian or Russian translations that would figure in the official unveiling of his new style. The words "pari intervallo" appeared on his sketchbook lists on 3 September 1976 (Figure 6). The words "modus" and "tintinnabulum"

appeared ten days later.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, the diaries also reveal that Pärt was thinking of the entire suite as a sacred work leading up to the premiere, albeit one whose outlines were still flexible and to some extent unclear. In mid-September, he was working out both the titles and the order of its movements (Figure 7). He was still identifying *Calix* as a *Dies Irae*, and he toyed with calling *Saara* “*Ortus*,” Latin for *birth* or *origin* – likely a more oblique reference to Genesis 21, where Sarah gives birth to Isaac in her ninetieth year. Ultimately, he settled on the even more neutral *Modus*. The final piece in the suite, *In Spe*, he identified as a *Kyrie*. Finally, in mid-October 1976, his work on the *Tintinnabuli* suite completed, he took a break from daily composing until after the Tallinn premiere. On 1 November, five days after the historic concert, he returned to his musical diaries, and to a project with which he had already filled hundreds of notebook pages: composing free, monodic melodies in the manner of Gregorian chant, sometimes setting Latin psalms or Russian devotional texts. For the next ten days, he produced nothing but page after page of chant-like melodies, dozens of exemplars daily.<sup>10</sup> A more immediate statement of Christian devotion, musically expressed, is hard to imagine.

What brought Pärt back to the *tintinnabuli* project was the Nicene Creed, the Credo of the Latin mass: “I believe in one God.” On 11 or 12 November 1976, he began searching for a melodic line to set that text, and it was through this round of work that his experiments with algorithmic processes acquired a different cast.<sup>11</sup> From that point forward, all the way until the end of 1977, Pärt’s principal, abiding concern became the adapting of various *tintinnabuli* principles to the setting of undisguised sacred texts. He took occasional breaks from this project to produce instrumental pieces he had promised to others. But those he either dispatched quickly, returning as soon as possible to his more explicitly devotional work (as in the case of *Fratres*), or else he executed them in bits and pieces, around the edges of his text-setting project (as with *Tabula*

*rasa*). It is important at this point to recall that in the Soviet 1970s, Pärt’s laser-like focus on setting sacred texts was wildly impractical, even “unnatural,” to borrow from the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak (2006: 102–122). There was literally no place in the Soviet Union where a new setting of a Credo, a Passion, or a mass could be openly performed. But practicality is not what drove him. Pärt’s project was as idiosyncratic as it was deeply felt and obsessively pursued.

Between 11 and 13 November 1976, Pärt experimented with several possibilities for setting the Credo, soon arriving at the freely composed melody that would eventually serve as the opening of *Summa*. At the same time, he worked out the reiterative algorithmic process that would enable him to elaborate that melody into a structure capable of accommodating the entire lengthy text.<sup>12</sup> Then, temporarily putting his work on the Credo to the side, he turned on 14 November to work on another text from the Latin mass, the Gloria. Six days after that, he explored yet another approach to setting the Nicene Creed.<sup>13</sup> On 13 December, he turned to another mass text, the Benedictus. At the start of January 1977, he came back to his initial setting of the Credo, and he stayed with that for the next two weeks. By 22 or 23 January, he had written out the complete score of what he titled “Credo XI 76–177,” which he would eventually christen *Summa*.<sup>14</sup>

After finishing *Summa*, Pärt spent days composing chant-like melodies. He ceased that work on 12 February, when he had a breakthrough. He began that day as he sometimes did, inscribing the Orthodox “Jesus Prayer” in the form of a Russian acronym at the top of the page: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”<sup>15</sup> Then he wrote out, as if spontaneously, a melodic setting of a prayer attributed to the fourth-century Orthodox saint Macarius the Great, by means of what would later become known as his “syllabic” method of composing: a way of deriving a melodic line directly from the linguistic text itself (Figure 8) (Brauneiss 2012:

<sup>9</sup> APK 2-1.18.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> APK 2-1.19.

<sup>15</sup> APK 2-1.21.

**Figure 8.** Syllabic setting of the Third Prayer of Macarius the Great in the musical diaries, 12 February 1977 (APK 2-1.21).



**Figure 9.** Syllabic setting of the Gloria from the Latin Mass in the musical diaries, 12–14 February 1977 (APK 2-1.21).



122–125; Hillier 1997: 106–114). Immediately after setting the saint's prayer to music in this way, still on 12 February, he returned to the Latin *Gloria* and applied the same syllabic technique to it, generating from its text a melodic line for tenor (Figure 9). Five days later, he paired that tenor

with a countermelody for alto, composed using the same syllabic method. A transcription enables us to assess more readily what he accomplished on that day (Figure 10).<sup>16</sup>

In the tenor line, notated in the bass clef, every word of the Gloria text begins on the same

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 10.** Opening measures of the Gloria from the *Missa syllabica*, transcribed by the author from the musical diaries, 17 February 1977 (APK 2-1.21).

pitch, D. From that D, the melodic line descends one diatonic step with the articulation of each successive syllable of a word. Since the first word of the text, “gloria,” has three syllables, its melodic line descends from D through C to B-flat. The second word, “in,” has only one syllable, so the melody it inscribes consists of just a single D. After that comes “excelsis,” whose three syllables determine a melodic line identical with that of the word “gloria.” Then, a two-syllable word, “Deo,” whose line descends from D to C. The melody of the alto voice is formed in the same way as the melody of the tenor, only in its case the *final* syllable of each word is always sung on the pitch A, and the melodic motion is always ascending from below, rather than descending from above. The three-syllable word “gloria” is therefore sung F-G-A; the word “Deo” inscribes the two-note ascent G-A; and so forth.

After sketching the melodic lines for the Gloria using the syllabic method, Pärt’s work through the mass proceeded quickly. He composed the Kyrie, then the Agnus Dei, then the Sanctus, then the Credo. He typically inscribed the principal melodic voice first, then a contrapuntal melodic voice, and finally the triadic voices. On 17–18 February, less than a week after he had discovered the syllabic method, he wrote out the full score of what he would eventually call the *Missa syllabica*. After that, he did not stop. On the single day of 21 February, he composed a complete early version of *De Profundis* using the same syllabic principle.<sup>17</sup> The following day, he composed a syllabic setting of the Latin Miserere text – a setting he discarded, which bears no resemblance to his work of that

name from 1989. On 24 February, he began applying the syllabic method to the text of the St John Passion, a project that would occupy him throughout the remainder of his time in the Soviet Union and into his first years in the West.<sup>18</sup>

### Words and Meanings

To my knowledge, Pärt never wrote or spoke about his syllabic method of composing prior to his emigration – understandably, given that the discovery of the method arose from his search for ways to set in music the words of the scriptures, the liturgy, and the saints. But in program notes that he and his wife distributed at early performances of his *tintinnabuli*-style work, they left some clues about why the syllabic method seemed precisely the solution to the problem of setting sacred texts with which he had wrestled since the historic concert of October 1976.

To help the audience at the historic concert understand what they were about to hear, Nora Pärt described the quasi-mathematical, algorithmic methods Pärt had used to compose *Modus*, *Calix*, and other works on the program. “The constructive simplicity and strictness” of this music “are easily ‘read’ by the mind,” she wrote.

The logic of the process is fully exposed. [...] Never before had number and mathematical calculation appeared in the work of a composer in such a naked way [...] Number [*arv*] has informed the melodic line, form, polyphonic structure, and rhythm, and it has excluded the possibility of anything happening by chance.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> APK 2-1.20, 2-1.21.

<sup>19</sup> ETMM, M238:1/4.

Two years later, for performances of Pärt's music at Tallinn's Festival of Early and Contemporary Music in November 1978, Nora Pärt revised these earlier program notes. She recapitulated their earlier points about mathematical structure, and then she added this:

In *tintinnabuli*, Pärt discovered a new principle by which music relates to a text. The word [*sõna*] is articulated in a manner determined by a unique and dynamic feature of the system, and numerical parameters of construction contribute to the creation of form. In this way, the semantic aspect of the word is partly infused into the musical fabric.<sup>20</sup>

To my mind, reading in succession these two statements – one penned shortly before and the other just after his discovery of the syllabic method – seems to reveal something important about just why Pärt's discovery of that method seemed exactly the solution he was seeking during his months of experimenting with setting sacred texts. In her notes of October 1976, Nora Pärt noted Pärt's attraction to "number" and algorithmic designs for their capacity to generate musical structures in a way that *excludes the possibility of anything happening by chance* in the compositional process. Given this, it seems only natural that Pärt would later latch onto an algorithmic method for autonomously generating sequences of pitches directly from the structures of the texts he now wished to set. If his first round of experimentation, as in *Saara*, consisted in ceding aspects of his compositional decision-making to mathematically determined algorithmic processes, he now simply shifted, in this latest round of work, to a new form of input into the algorithm. Numbers were replaced by words.

With respect to this issue, Toomas Siitan points to something crucial and still deeper. For Siitan, the syllabic method itself constitutes an expression of Pärt's Orthodox faith. "In his relation with the Word," Siitan writes, "Arvo Pärt is close to the original Christian way of thinking, which has been preserved more purely in the Orthodox Church." He continues:

He is not a "construer" of the texts in his works; he does not highlight a personal aspect in them, but rather presumes that the text comprises the entire message perfectly. The texts likewise possess their own music, which must merely be brought forth. As such, the composer does not have all that much to add to the texts on his own part – the music only serves and carries out the text, giving it a sound-based existence. (Siitan 2014: 11)

In this passage, Siitan refers to a way of thinking musically about – and also within – ritual practice in the Orthodox Church. There, as Jeffers Engelhardt documents, the singer, in her act of devotion, does not seek to give voice to sacred texts in an individuating, personally expressive way. Rather, the singer submits to various melodic "prototypes" of the Orthodox modal system. It is through such singing – through such "disciplining, emptying, and effacing a desirous, individuated self," so that the spirit itself can be heard – that the Orthodox singer strives to know or become closer to God (Engelhardt 2015: 44, 36). With respect to Pärt, Engelhardt suggests that the syllabic "formula derived from a sacred text" is akin to "the prototype that Pärt renders in sound, attenuating or effacing his own subjectivity to make manifest the beauty and truth of the prototype, similar to the prayerful ascetic discipline of creating an icon according to a sacred prototype" (Engelhardt 2012: 42).

For Pärt, the word of the scriptures, the liturgy, and the saints is where all meaning resides, and the word is therefore what must sound – clearly, directly, and without personalizing inflection. In the syllabic method and its algorithmic designs, he believed he had found a way of reducing his creative intervention in the setting of texts to the point where he merely attended to their words, setting them free, as it were, to determine their own melodic course. In this respect, the Russian composer Vladimir Martynov was right when he described Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-style music as a powerful testament to the "collapse of the idea of the ego" in experimental art of the 1970s (Martynov 2011: 118). For Pärt, devotion to the word was everything. The sound of his own music

<sup>20</sup> Latvian Centre for Contemporary Art (Latvijas Laikmetīgas mākslas centrs), LLMC, Lediņš Collection, Rokraksti.

was secondary. It was nothing more – and nothing less – than a vehicle for sounding his devotion to sacred texts.

### Apophatic Spaces

Siitan's remarks on the syllabic method point to an aspect of Orthodox Christian practice, *hesychasm*, that has been widely associated with Pärt and his music in Western commentary since the 1990s, when Paul Hillier first began writing on his work (Hillier 1997: 6–10). Typically linked to the trope of silence that frequently attends conversations about Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-style music (the term derives from the Greek word *hesychia*, for *silence* or *stillness*), the Orthodox notion of *hesychasm* might more accurately be described as "the practice of prayer in inner silence, in the renunciation of thoughts, passions, and images," as Peter C. Bouteneff writes (2015: 121n101). The silence inherent to Orthodox *hesychasm* is neither exclusively nor even specifically aural. Rather, it is also metaphorical, signaling one's abandoning the will to interpret or engage as interlocutor with sacred words received. It constitutes an effacing of the self and the creative, interpreting, expressive ego. "Stone-silence is precisely the appropriate posture before the divine," Bouteneff observes. "Intelligent, word-bearing creatures must therefore mimic the dumb stones. [...] Renunciation and silence [are] understood as indispensable to the discipline of apprehension of truth, of self, of the divine" (Bouteneff 2015: 111, 120).

For Engelhardt, this notion of prayerful silence is inseparably tied to the Orthodox principle of *apophatic* (or "negative") knowledge of God. Since "God's nature [is] beyond the capacities of human knowledge to express," he writes, only "negative statements about divinity" – about what God seems *not* to be, about when and where His presence does *not* seem to be felt – can constitute "true reflections of individual experiences" of the divine. By silencing the subject within, "prayer and participation in the life of God (*theosis*) become possible through lived faith and the grace and mystery of God rather

than through the accomplishments of human reason" (Engelhardt 2015: 106, 43–44). With the syllabic method, as Siitan understands it, Pärt accomplished something akin to this. Pärt's input into the algorithmic system was the word of God, the prophets, or the church fathers. Inscribing in his notebooks the autonomously generated musical output of that system, he ceded his urge to interpret, reflect, or express his own ideas about the meaning of their words, about what God might be said positively to *be*. "The music only serves and carries out the text," Siitan writes, "giving it a sound-based existence" (2014: 11).

Similar statements are widely made about the art of a nearly exact contemporary of Pärt, the painter Eduard Steinberg. Born in 1937, Steinberg spent his formative years in internal exile from Moscow with his father Arkady, also a painter. During that time, living in the village of Tarusa over 100 kilometers south of the capital, Eduard acquired through his father an enduring fascination for the art and literature of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s (Manewitsch 1992; Riese 1998: 10–36). Rehabilitated and returned to Moscow in 1961, the junior Steinberg found work as a graphic artist, while on the side he emerged as an important if eccentric member of the group of 1960s modernists against whom the even-younger Moscow Conceptualists would soon position their own creative endeavors. But sometime in the late 1960s, in unknowing parallel with Pärt, Steinberg's thinking began to shift. He found himself drawn ever more deeply into Orthodox theology, and eventually into practice. Converting from Judaism to Orthodox Christianity around 1970, his paintings, always sparse, became increasingly abstract, with birds and seashells evolving into triangles and spirals against a sky-blue horizon.<sup>21</sup> Soon, he eschewed figural representation altogether and entered an abstract creative realm that he called "meta-geometry." His *Composition November–December* (*Kompozitsiya noyabr'–dekabr'*, 1979) is typical of his work from this period (Figure 11): a meeting of two planes, triangles, circles, and lines. And, as we often see in Steinberg's paintings of the decade, two of those lines intersect at right angles close

<sup>21</sup> An example of this transitional period in Steinberg's work is his *Composition* (*Kompozitsiya*, 1969), reproduced in Brossard 1992: 49; Riese 1998: 23; and Thiemann 2007: 410 (plate 560).

**Figure 11.** Eduard Steinberg, *Composition November–December* (1979). Ludwig Museum – MoCA, Budapest (long-term loan from Ludwig Stiftung, Aachen).



to the center of the canvas, inscribing the unmistakable shape of a Christian cross.

In an open letter of 1981, Steinberg connected his leap into geometrical abstraction directly to his practice of his Orthodox faith. Addressing his missive to the long-dead Russian avant-gardist Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), he asked what had become of the life of the spirit over the course of Russia’s twentieth century. Thanking a theologian friend for awakening him to the importance of a neo-Platonic “language of geometry” in early Christian thought, he went on to describe contemporary Russia as “a nation that has become cut off from beauty, which has gradually become mute, where the connection with the eternal word has frayed” (Brossard 1992: 67; Riese 1998: 41). Addressing Malevich, whose own starkly geometrical paintings of the 1910s had inspired some of his own, Steinberg continued:

It is clear you were born to remind the world of the language of geometry [...] the language of Pythagoras, of Plato, of Plotinus, of the ancient Christian catacombs. For me that language is not universal, but within it one finds a longing for truth and transcendence, and a certain affinity to apophatic theology. Just as you set the observer free, so does the language of geometry compel the artist to renounce the ego. (Brossard 1992: 67–68; Riese 1998: 41)

Steinberg’s contemporary Ilya Kabakov, the celebrated Russian artist whose work inspired the younger Moscow Conceptualists, did not share his colleague’s Orthodox faith. Kabakov looked upon his friend’s stance in relation to his painterly project somewhat pityingly, and he even produced a “gentle parody” of Steinberg’s canvases in his so-called white board paintings of 1969–70 (Jackson 2010: 102). “The artist in this

case feels subjectively that he is a conduit rather than someone actively creating," Kabakov wrote of Steinberg. "In essence, he is nobody. Humble and subdued, he is thankful that he had a part to play [his work], that his work passed 'through him'" (Kabakov 1999: 56). Despite Kabakov's assessment, Steinberg stood by his vision. "Is the artist free?" he asked rhetorically in 1983. "Yes, but his freedom is a gift. For this reason, the sincerest gesture the artist can make is to say that 'I' do not exist" (Brossard 1992: 76).

For the art historian Ekaterina Degot', such statements by Steinberg suggest a link between aspects of Orthodox theology and the imagery of the artist's work itself, with the open spaces of Steinberg's paintings inviting or enabling the observer to connect with something of the apophatic tradition (Degot' 2000: 185). I would extend and complicate her view by shifting our attention away from the blank spaces of Steinberg's canvases and toward his words about geometry, expression, and the creative self, in ways that might help us understand something further about Pärt's project in turn. For the painter, restricting one's visual resources to flat, featureless geometrical shapes was a means of silencing the expressive and interpreting subject within oneself, of disciplining and effacing the creative ego. Importantly, I think, it is in the abstraction of those shapes, rather than in the blank spaces between them, that apophatic knowledge takes hold. The line, the square, and the triangle are emphatically *not* representations of God. And precisely for that reason, their beholding discloses for the viewer a kind of silent, *hesychastic* space, a space in which the believer might feel themselves coming closer to His unknowable mystery. With Pärt's syllabic method, I think, the situation is much the same. The apophatic spaces disclosed by his music do not derive from the transparency of its textures or the ostensible purity of its harmonies. Rather, in a kind of sounding analogy to a meta-geometrical painting by Steinberg, those spaces are disclosed by the radical, even stunning abstraction of Pärt's musical structures.

If we think back for a moment to Pärt's earliest, non-syllabic *tintinnabuli*-style works, we can see that a great deal of that music unfolds according to an audible logic. For example, *Für Alina* inscribes a freely composed melody that, by its midpoint, has risen two octaves from its

opening pitch. Then, by the time its final measure arrives, it has descended all the way back to the register of its first note, audibly ending at a point close to where its journey began. Or take the ending of *Tabula rasa*, which attains its famously powerful effect precisely because the melodic process unfolding at its close leads the listener to expect the work to end on the pitch D – when, in fact, it fades off into silence just before that longed-for note arrives, leaving us hanging in suspense. In contrast to these examples, Pärt's syllabic compositions offer nothing to the listener in the way of a musical syntax that might help us make sense of the pitch structures we hear as they unfold in real time, nothing that enables us to follow as listeners the progress of a work in terms of musical logic, or even to hear a clearly audible beginning, middle, and end. True, works like the Gloria from the *Missa syllabica* (Figure 10) might hover around a focal pitch, which functions like the unmoving horizontal line in many of Steinberg's paintings. But around that pitch, every individual word inscribes a musical gesture unto itself. The words of the text connect to each other through the logic of Latin grammar and the semantic content of the liturgy. That is, they cohere as *verbal* statements. But the melodic gestures generated by those words do not move from one to another according to any kind of *musical* logic whatsoever. Mapped through Pärt's syllabic algorithm onto the pitch-space of his notebook pages, the words give rise to a music that is utterly abstract – to compositions that are completely incomprehensible, *as musical constructions*, without the words they set.

Listening through a broad swath of unofficial Soviet music from the 1950s through the 1970s, Peter Schmelz posits a general move from what he calls "abstraction to mimesis" in the work of many, from an emphasis on arranging notes on pages to such exploring such "representational" approaches to composition as polystylism and aleatoric writing. Schmelz notes that this "aesthetic shift" is "no more than a general observation," but the idea captures something important about Pärt's journey as a composer – up to a point (Schmelz 2009: 12). Pärt first made his name as an artist with such "abstract," serial works as *Nekrolog* (1960) and *Perpetuum mobile* (1963). Soon, however, his interest in serialism dovetailed with his first experiments in

polystylism, notably *Collage über B-A-C-H* (1964) and *Credo* (1968), which eventually gave rise to the mimetic sounds of the Third Symphony of 1971, with its echoes of Gregorian chant and medieval polyphony. For many early listeners, that symphony was, in fact, stylistically of a piece with what they heard in Pärt's *Tintinnabuli* suite when they first encountered it in 1976 (e.g., Vaitmaa 1976: 10; Soomere 1977: 212).

But as we have seen, shortly after the premiere of the *Tintinnabuli* suite, Pärt discovered his syllabic method. And with that discovery, he veered sharply back toward abstraction. Indeed, for the musicologist Svetlana Savenko, the rationalistic basis of Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-style music represented nothing less than his "transferring the idea of serialism onto modal material, [with] the totally diatonic style of *tintinnabuli* turn[ing] out to be the flip side of the total chromaticism of serialism" (Savenko 1991: 19). Not since his serial experiments of the 1960s had Pärt produced music as abstract as his syllabic compositions. And, as with the parallel journey undertaken by Steinberg in those same years, so too was Pärt's dive into abstraction attendant upon his spiritual search, upon his longing for a way to bring his faith to artistic (here sounding) realization. For the painter as for the composer, in abstraction lay a path toward quieting the mind, to overcoming the ego. In attending to abstraction, so they believed, one might position oneself in an apophatic space, a space in which a person might feel just a little bit closer to the divine.

When Pärt stepped before the Tallinn public with his *tintinnabuli*-style music on 27 October 1976, the works he presented had arisen from months and even years of experimentation: experiments with new contrapuntal relations and algorithmic methods of generating musical structure. Some of the works performed that

evening arose from his experiments setting sacred texts (*Calix*) or his meditations on biblical or liturgical subjects (*Saara*, *In spe*). But all the works on that philharmonic concert were performed with their religious origins obscured: *Saara* was rechristened *Modus*, and the Dies Irae hymn of *Calix* was replaced by solfege syllables (*do, re, mi ...*). And, as the musical diaries and other archive materials make clear, the historic concert of 27 October memorialized only two of the three key discoveries that would define the sound of Pärt's early *tintinnabuli* style. Less than four months later, he made his third discovery, the syllabic method of composition. With that, he finally found a way of composing that he deemed sufficient to give sounding expression to his Christian devotion.

The first works Pärt composed according to that method, the *Missa syllabica* and *Cantate domino*, are so abstract as to verge on incomprehensibility when regarded as purely musical constructions. Grasping their structure, their artistic coherence, depends on hearing their sacred texts sung clearly and openly by the choir. Such singing was wholly unacceptable in mainstream Soviet society. But Pärt's vision was clear, and his focus on this music compelled him to recenter his attention, largely trading high-profile philharmonic concerts for such partly underground venues as the student club of the Riga Polytechnic (Karnes 2021). With that move, he found a new audience of mostly younger artists (Lediņš, Martynov, Lyubimov), whose own work would be profoundly shaped by their experience of Pärt's sacred *tintinnabuli* music. Yet that same move also set Pärt on what would turn out to be an irreversible path: emigrating spiritually, and later physically, from the Soviet Union itself, committing to forging a new life as a composer in the West.

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## Tintinnabuli ja pühalikkus: vaade arhiivist, 1976–1977

Kevin C. Karnes

1976. aasta veebruaris kirjutas Arvo Pärt „Für Alina” otsekui ühe hingetõmbega, spontaanselt, nagu nähtub tema muusikapäevikutest. Sellega fikseeris ta oma avastuse – kahehääle kontrapunktilise struktuuri, meloodia- ja kolmkõlahääle ühenduse. Õigupoolest oli see üks kolmest võtmetähtsusega avastusest, mis koos määratlesid *tintinnabuli*-muusika kõla kogu kümnendi jooksul. Sama aasta märtsis, kirjutades teost „Modus” (hilisem versioon pealkirjaga „Saara oli 90-aastane”), avastas Pärt algoritmilise meetodi meloodiliste struktuuride loomiseks – kvaasi-matemaatilise viisi, kuidas kasvatada ühestainsast meloodilisest ideest autonoomselt pea kogu muusikateose materjal. Kolmas suur avastus leidis aset 12. veebruaril 1977 ning seisnes muusika nn. süllaabilises komponeerimisviisis, mille algoritmiline süsteem ei põhine enam mitte meloodilisel ideel, vaid tekstil.<sup>1</sup> See avastus võimaldas Pärtil leida muusikalised vahendid andmaks kõla oma nägemusele jumalikust.

Artikkel tugineb ulatuslikule tööle muusikapäevikute ja teiste arhiividokumentidega ning vaatleb mitmesuguseid katsetusi, mis juhatasid helilooja süllaabilise meetodi avastamiseni. Pärast „Tintinnabuli” nime kandnud tsükli esiettekannet 27. oktoobril 1976 Tallinnas jätkas Pärt sihikindlalt oma otsinguid, kohaldades vast avastatud algoritmilist meetodit ja hääle kontrapunktilist ühendust vaimulike tekstide, iseäranis Nikaia usutunnistuse ja hiljem missa ordinaariumi osade muusikasse seadmisele. Nende otsingute viljaks olid „Summa”, kirjutatud ajavahemikul novembrist 1976 kuni jaanuarini 1977, ning „Missa syllabica”, mis valmis veebruaris 1977; samuti „Johannese passioon”, mida Pärt alustas sama aasta märtsis.<sup>2</sup>

Süllaabiline meetod kujutab endast suurel määral „Moduse” komponeerimisel kasutatud algoritmiliste mudelite loomulikku laiendust; põhimõtteline erinevus seisneb aga selles, et algoritmi aluseks ei ole mitte arvud, vaid sõnad. See oluline muutus on tihedalt seotud Pärdi ortodoksi-usuga, eriti õigeusu traditsioonis tuntud „vaikse seesmise palve praktikaga” ehk hesühasmiga (Bouteneff 2015). Süllaabilisel meetodil komponeerimine võimaldas Pärtil luua muusikalisi struktuure, lähtudes otse pühadest tekstidest endast. See omakorda eeldas heliloojalt oma inimlike impulsside pärssimist, et hoiduda nende tekstide tõlgendamisest või tähenduse kommenteerimisest ja oma isikliku arvamuse väljendamisest muusikas. Sel moel oli Pärdi vast leitud komponeerimisviis väga lähedane vene õigeuskliku maalikunstniku Eduard Steinbergi (1937–2012) loomemeetodile. Sarnaselt Pärdiga otsis ka Steinberg kunsti loomiseks vahendeid, mis jumalikku teenides vaigistaksid kunstniku enda ego.

Steinbergi 1970. aastatel valminud maalid on värskendavalt abstraktsed: jooned, tasandid, lihtsad geomeetrilised kujundid. Oma abstraktsuses on neis nähtud otseteed ortodoksi traditsioonis tuntud apofaatilise teadmise juurde, mille kohaselt võib inimene tunda tugevat tõmmet jumaliku poole, mediteerides kõige selle üle, mis Jumal kindlasti *ei* ole (vt. nt. Degot’ 2000: 185). Nii nagu Steinbergi maalid, on ka Pärdi süllaabilised teosed kui muusikalised konstruktsioonid täielikult abstraktsed. Nende helikõrguslik struktuur, mis lähtub otseselt ladinakeelsest tekstist, eirab täielikult tavapärast, s.t. ajas arenevat muusikalist loogikat – vahel puudub teosel koguni selgesti kuuldav algus, keskpaik või lõpp. Iga üksik sõna peidab endas oma muusikalist žesti. Leian, et nii Pärdi kui Steinbergi jaoks pakub abstraktsioon ühe võimalikku tee meelte vaigistamise ja ego ületamise poole ning seeläbi apofaatilise teadmise poole, viies neid lähemale oma usu allikatele.

Tõlkinud Kristina Körver

<sup>1</sup> APK 2-1.7, ETMM, M238:2/13, APK 2-1.21.

<sup>2</sup> APK 2-1.18 kuni APK 2-1.21.