

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

Kevin C. Karnes

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.¹ 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.²

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

¹ Arvo Pärt Centre (Arvo Pärdi Keskus), APK 2-1.7.

² Mets 1976: 10; Mihkelson, interview 2019.