

Pärt, Bach and the Bees

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Abstract

Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte ... (If Bach Had Been a Beekeeper ...) (1976) is the most enigmatic composition from the formative year of Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* style and creates an intriguing conflict with the common narrative depicting Pärt's oeuvre. The piece combines Pärt's compositional methods from contrasting stylistic periods and challenges the position of *Credo* (1968) as the watershed between avant-garde and *tintinnabuli*. The polarity of the opposing styles in this piece still resembles the aesthetics of his collages; Pärt's last connection with Bach's original music sheds new light on his earlier compositions as well as on the complexity of composer's creative search of the year 1976. Until now *Wenn Bach ...*, which could be considered a transitional work alongside *Credo* and Symphony No. 3, has not received the reception it merits.

The legendary concert of the ensemble Hortus Musicus in the Estonia Concert Hall on 27 October 1976 is considered the breakthrough performance of Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli*-style music, although it was not quite the first, nor yet a real breakthrough. Among the seven new works by Pärt in the programme of this concert, there was one that was very different from the others, bearing the curious and playful title *Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte ... (If Bach Had Been a Beekeeper ...)*. In the context of the programme, it was as if the piece were a stranger from another world. Much of its score was pre-recorded and played from a tape recorder, its sound is extremely dissonant, and its title raised (and continues to raise) doubts as to whether the work was meant to be taken seriously.

The work has also left most writers on Pärt's music perplexed, and it was virtually absent from the academic debate until Christopher May's dissertation at Oxford in 2016. Paul Hillier considers it a curious exception among the earliest *tintinnabuli* works: "It is a strangely whimsical work; nothing in Pärt's new idiom prepares us for its chromaticisms, which seem to lie at an uncomfortably oblique angle to the *tintinnabuli* scales and triads" (Hillier 1997: 100). The work's 1976 premiere was based on a score that had not yet been orchestrated. The entire structure of the main part was played on the harpsichord, while most of the texture had been prerecorded, and the elucidating final section on early music

instruments failed in that performance owing to extremely uncertain intonation. Therefore, it would not have been surprising if the composer had withdrawn the work, as he has done with several of his scores. Instead, the composer has frequently returned to this unconventional work and, together with the first orchestrated version for piano, wind quintet and string orchestra from 1980/1984, known from Neeme Järvi's superb recording for Chandos in 1992,¹ there are now as many as four new versions: in 2001 a version with added percussion was born, in 2019 Pärt changed some of the formal proportions to slightly abridge the work, and in 2020 added four wind instruments and percussion to the 2001 version. Hence the extent to which Pärt has reworked *Wenn Bach ...* over such a long time is unique in his oeuvre.

Of the early *tintinnabuli* compositions, *Wenn Bach ...* is the only one in which Pärt used borrowed music – Johann Sebastian Bach's Prelude in B minor from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1.² The dissonant soundscape and the dramaturgical function of the Bach quotation are reminiscent of Pärt's collages of the 1960s, as is the turning towards Bach and the motif of his initials. It may seem that this work was born "at the wrong time" or "too late". This is also the apparent reason for the work's poor reception among academics. However, *Wenn Bach ...* eloquently expresses the search of the year that the *tintinnabuli* style was born. The search was hectic and even panic-stricken,

¹ Arvo Pärt. *Collage* 1993. CD. Philharmonic Orchestra, Neeme Järvi, recorded in 1992, Chandos, CHAN 9134.

² Since 1976, the only comparison in Pärt's oeuvre is the *Mozart Adagio*, written in 1992 in memory of Oleg Kagan and based on the second movement of the Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Piano Sonata in F major, K. 280 (189e).