

Characteristics of the Compositional Process in Arvo Pärt's *Tintinnabuli* Technique

Leopold Brauneiss

Abstract

Many of Pärt's compositions in *tintinnabuli* technique are based on structural ideas which manifest themselves in a characteristic specification of common rules, very often in connection with a given text. As these rules remain valid for the whole or part of a composition, it follows that no details arising from them can be altered. Thus, the first step of the compositional process is to find a proper set of rules, very often in accordance with the formal structure of a given text, that guarantees satisfactory results at every moment. As the sketches for the *Te Deum* exemplarily reveal, this means that Pärt tries out different sets of rules and abandons them immediately if they are not suitable. Another peculiarity is that the compositional process does not end with the first performance but is a work in progress leading to many revisions in order to find the perfectly sounding formulation of the basic structural ideas.

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Among compositions that adhere to the traditional concept of the musical "work", we can distinguish between those that make use of minimal advanced planning, entrusting themselves to the flow of spontaneous ideas, and those in which musical details result from a network of interrelated ideas stemming from an overall plan drawn up in advance. Generally speaking, in atonal compositions of the 20th century – typically in Anton Webern's late works – such individually shaped plans replace tonality and traditional form models as a "skeleton" of the musical details. Behind such compositions lies the general ideal that every note is the result of the application of a system of rules. No note is random or superfluous, each is of equal value, and, in Pärt's words, has been equally loved.¹ In Pärt's compositions in which the *tintinnabuli* technique is applied in its most characteristic form – and these comments must restrict themselves to such works – Pärt is indeed an extreme representative of the systematic approach. However, he no longer uses it as a substitution for the "structural functions of harmony" – to quote a book title by Arnold Schoenberg (1948; see Schoenberg 1989) – as Pärt himself did in his earlier serial compositions, but instead applies the technique to the "neutral" basic tonal elements of scale and triad. In his *tintinnabuli* compositions based

on a text, irrespective of whether the text is actually sung or merely used to determine the progression of instrumental lines, this systematic compositional method is enriched by its correlation of musical and textual structure. Pärt's strict musical structures have been analysed in various publications. Thomas Robinson offers a systematic analysis of such structures in his contribution to the Cambridge Companion (Robinson 2012). Christopher May discusses selected compositions in regard to new and old categories of music (May 2016). Andrew Shenton concentrates on Pärt's choral and organ music (Shenton 2018), while Toomas Siitan draws special attention to the manifold significance of texts for Pärt and his music (Siitan 2014). In his latest publication, Kevin C. Karnes is the first to venture a closer look at the musical diaries or sketchbooks of the first *tintinnabuli* years in order to clarify – as a chapter heading states – "when things happened, and what they were" (Karnes 2021: 62–65). What is still lacking in the literature is a more traditional approach to an understanding of Pärt's specific way of "thinking in music" through an in-depth study of the sketches themselves. This will hopefully not only lead to a better understanding of the act of composing but also to a deeper understanding of the aesthetic significance of the *tintinnabuli* style.

¹ Compare Pärt's frequently related anecdote: when asked how music should be written, a street sweeper replies: "Das ist aber eine Frage. Man muss wahrscheinlich jeden Ton lieben." (Schorlemmer 2002: 246)