

Tacit Texts: Considerations on Pärt's Settings of the Word

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Abstract

As Arvo Pärt scholarship continues to deepen, considerable attention has been paid to the role of the text in Pärt's compositions. Most of his *tintinnabuli* works are textual settings, and there are enough quotations from the composer to indicate that the texts are extremely important to him and his work. This essay investigates the compositions in which the text shapes the music but is not sung, and poses questions about why the composer chooses to leave certain texts unheard, how this music is received, and whether or not the text can be said to play a role in that reception.

The Father spoke one Word, which was His Son.
And this Word He always speaks in eternal silence,
and in silence must It be heard by the soul.
(St. John of the Cross, *Maxims on Love*, 21)

The study of Arvo Pärt's music – both of its genesis and its impact – has increasingly been touched by questions of theology and religious experience. Many aspects of Pärt's work have no need of analysis at the theological or spiritual levels. Yet there are areas of Pärt's output where the avoidance of such topics would either be disingenuous or be missing something fundamental. Once one does embark on it, the attempt to bring theology and musicology into conversation is liable to face some methodological problems that go beyond the challenges common to multidisciplinary study. The main issue that must be laid bare before an academic readership is that the points of connection or dissonance between music and theology – and perhaps even more so between music and spirituality/experience – generally do not lend themselves to incontrovertible proof or substantiation. An author exploring such connections must of course work on the basis of fixed data in musicology and history, as well as in demonstrated theological concepts and spiritual practice. But I am convinced that some of the more useful and resonant statements and conclusions must be made at a more intuitive and therefore less demonstrable level. These can only be propositional in their character, and their

reception will inevitably be mixed.¹ This has been the approach in all my writing on Arvo Pärt, as I have sometimes made explicit (e.g., Bouteneff 2015: 16–20). And it is the case with the present essay.

Much has been written about the role of text: the logogenic nature of many if not most of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* compositions, the way in which the syllables shape the melodies, etc. Yet there comes a point where it becomes inevitable to comment on the fact that not only does the overwhelming majority of Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* oeuvre consist in text settings, but all but a handful of the set texts are explicitly sacred in their character. They are devoted to the praise of God, the calling on God, Jesus, Mary, the angels, et al. in prayer, often as passages from the scriptures or liturgical hymnography. The statistics are clear and rather overwhelming: the vast majority of Pärt's post-1976 compositions are settings of sacred texts.

Here too there is still much to say without venturing into theology or spirituality. But the composer's dependence upon text to give his music its shape, character, and sound is such that he has said that the *words* actually *write* his music, that his music is "a mere translation of the words". They do so through more than just the syllabic

¹ For example, my assertion (repeated at the close of this essay) that Arvo Pärt's compositions are acts of prayer would be impossible to substantiate. It is founded on a combination of evidence and intuition. Its use or its meaninglessness is for the reader to discern.