

# Sounding Silence

## The Presence of the Inaudible in Arvo Pärt's "Silentium"

—  
Andreas Waczkat

### Abstract

"Silentium", the second movement of *Tabula rasa*, is one of the compositions from the intensive creative period which marked the end of Arvo Pärt's long, self-imposed silence. The apparent paradox of silence being broken with silence is inherent in the concept, since in the strict sense there is no silence at all but only sound below the audibility threshold. In this sense, in "Silentium" Pärt makes audible what is typically inaudible. In the philosophical concept of *Tabula rasa*, which can be traced back to Aristotle, the human soul resembles a blank slate. Perceptions lead to impressions on the slate. "Silentium" thus reflects the experience of silence.

If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me.  
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day:  
the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.  
(Psalm 139:11–12)

Literally speaking, silence is sounding in Arvo Pärt's "Silentium", the second movement of *Tabula rasa*, which premiered in September 1977. Sounding silence, however, appears as a paradox, at least understood technically and from a human perspective. In Psalm 139, the person of prayer leaves no doubt that such paradoxes are of no importance to the worshipped Yahveh, to whom darkness and light are both alike.

According to the story of the prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:9–13), this also applies to silence and sound. Here, Yahveh advises Elijah to stand upon the mountain before Him, but astonishingly He does not reveal himself to Elijah in overwhelming events like strong wind, earthquake or fire, but entirely differently, in a hardly perceptible, still, small voice. The Hebrew text here is even more drastic. The passage literally translates as "a silent voice", thus mirroring the paradox of sounding silence and the presence of the inaudible. Neither the Greek nor the Latin translation of the Hebrew Bible, let alone modern translations, mirror the "silent voice" in the Hebrew text entirely. Literally translated, both the Greek and Latin texts read "sound of a whispering breeze". This is suggestive since "breeze" or "aura" in the Greek and Latin texts refer to the Hebrew term *ruach*, which translates to both "breeze" and "God's spirit". The Hebrew text, however, reads *qol dmāmāh*; *qol* means "voice", and *dmāmāh* can

be traced back to the radix *dāmām*, which means "to keep silence", "to listen to something without objection" and "to entirely abandon auturgy". Interestingly, keeping silence and listening without objection are synonymic to each other in Hebrew, so the silent voice is a passively listening voice, too.

The semantic field of silence and darkness can primarily be regarded as a word field of absence. Silence is the absence of sound – or noise, if you will –, darkness is the absence of light. However, strictly speaking, neither of these actually exists at all – and not only for Yahveh (or, indeed, for other divine beings). There is electromagnetic radiation below the threshold of visibility or beyond the visible spectrum and there are also acoustic waves below the threshold of audibility or beyond the audible frequency range (Basu 2001: 29, 42). Therefore, silence and darkness are relative terms affected by the question of their perceptibility; they relate to highly individual levels, which depend equally on environmental, cultural and personal factors, where cultural and personal are potentially reshaped by spiritual.

The apparent paradox of a sounding silence designates and, in a way, also affects Pärt's "Silentium", since, as the second movement of *Tabula rasa*, it is part of one of the compositions with which Pärt broke his long, self-imposed silence. It is a work that in the words of Peter

Bouteneff came out of silence. It was and – despite clear evidence to the contrary (cf. May 2021: 36) – still is widely accepted even now to use the term silence to describe Pärt's behaviour during these years of multiple changes. In 1997, Paul Hillier stated: "It has become almost a convention to describe the period of Pärt's career between *Credo* [1968] and the appearance of the first *tintinnabuli* works in 1976 as one of silence punctuated by only two works" (Hillier 1997: 65); and more recently Bouteneff re-emphasized that "the years between 1968 and 1976 are typically known as Arvo Pärt's 'silent period,' or his 'eight-year silence.'" (Bouteneff 2015: 86) However, this conventional view ignores the fact that one of the two works in question is no less than Pärt's Third Symphony, not to mention the fact that during these same years Pärt composed twenty film scores that remained unknown to Hillier and other earlier scholars and which were also withheld from his authorized list of works until 2019 (May 2021: 36). If the notion of a silent period is so persistently maintained, the fact that *Credo*, after its brilliant premiere in November 1968, was suppressed – or silenced – by the Soviet authorities (Kautny 2002: 90–91) potentially turns out to be decisive.

Nevertheless, it does not seem inappropriate at all to speak of a period of silence in Pärt's creative work to emphasize his fundamental artistic realignment and the significant changes in his private life during these years (Kautny 2005: 146). However, silence must not be taken literally but rather metaphorically to explain the period of silence as a period of search for a new orientation or, in the sense of the Hebrew *dmāmāh*, as a period of passive listening and abandoning auturgy. Silence, then, is a habitus that is related to the philosophical and religious concept of *vita contemplativa* as a counterpart to *vita activa*, the active life, a contrastive pair that was developed in ancient Greek philosophy especially by Aristotle in Book 10 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Pärt's fundamental artistic realignment is programmatically present in the very title of the work *Tabula rasa*. With its Latin name, *Tabula rasa* in a way refers to his compositions of the 1960s, when Pärt began using Latin titles as

a means of expressing nonconformity (Braun 2008: 236). Nonetheless the name *Tabula rasa* denotes that something entirely new occurs in this composition. A *tabula rasa* is a wax slate that has been wiped entirely smooth and can now be written on anew. The title *Tabula rasa* thus makes clear that Pärt's first *tintinnabuli* works do not mark a breakthrough or turning point in his compositional style, as Oliver Kautny and several other scholars explain (Kautny 2002: 20), but rather a total restart leading to quite a number of compositions from 1976 on. *Tabula rasa*, scored for two violins, string orchestra and prepared piano, is the most extensive of the early *tintinnabuli* works, consisting of two movements, "Ludus" and "Silentium", where "Ludus" comprises 230 bars and "Silentium" 168 bars. The movements' Latin titles do not appear in the premiere's concert programme (Karnes 2017: 93). They are added to the manuscript score along with an Estonian translation using a lead pencil, whereas the score is written with ink and felt pens.<sup>1</sup> They can therefore be identified as later additions to the score. Considering the tempo indications given in the printed score (Pärt 1977), "Ludus" takes nearly ten minutes to perform, whereas "Silentium" lasts for about 17 minutes and is thus the more significant and longer movement of the two. "Ludus" has a form that is quite easily comprehensible. It is vaguely reminiscent of a baroque concerto grosso with alternating tutti and solo passages. Between each section there is a general rest that is constantly reduced in length, lasting eight half notes in the first instance and subsequently shortened to seven then to six half notes and so on, until finally the last rest consists of only one half note. Conversely, the tutti and solo passages in between expand from eight to 35 bars (cf. Mattner 1985: 91). The rather simple procedure of adding and subtracting discrete values (of tones, rests, intervals, quantities and so on), which will be continued in "Silentium", is quite common in many of Pärt's compositions, even in works composed in the 1960s such as, for example, *Perpetuum mobile* (Karnes 2017: 23) or *Credo* (Waczkat 2016: 164–165). The first general rest is preceded by a single bar with a doubled *a* in quadruple octaves in both violins,

<sup>1</sup> The first page is reprinted in b/w in Karnes 2017: 67. A full-colour scan of this first page is available at <https://www.resvopart.ee/arvo-part/teos/537/> (31 January 2022).

the final general rest is followed by a longer final passage that also incorporates a cadenza for the solo instruments. As Kautny points out, silence is giving way to music in this movement (Kautny 2002: 121), so "Ludus" can be regarded as a piece of music that comes out of silence. Andrew Shenton has suggested distinguishing different categories of silence in Pärt's compositions. According to him, the general rests belong to the category "structural silence", silence that "is used to articulate the structure of works, regardless of their length or complexity" (Shenton 2021: 112). The beginning of "Ludus" ranks among the category "surrounding silence", which is more complex. It encompasses the time before and after the music and features techniques like emerging from silence and receding into silence (Shenton 2021: 113–114). The beginning of "Ludus" clearly emerges from silence and, to anticipate what follows below, the end of "Silentium" recedes into silence.

"Silentium" correlates to "Ludus" reciprocally. While "Ludus" solely features A minor – except for the cadenza, which introduces E major leading back to A minor via a complex sound comprising both a diminished seventh chord and the final A minor – "Silentium" is based in D minor and consists both of sections of the natural D minor scale (the M-voice) and variably figured D minor chords (the T-voice). The indication in the score reads *senza moto* and specifies the movement as predominantly static, while "Ludus" bears the indication *con moto*, which signifies a lively character. The scale sections in "Silentium" oscillate as a mensuration canon in three different tempi around the central tone *D*: in half and quarter notes in the cello part, whole and half notes in the first violin part, double whole and whole notes in the first solo violin part, later taken over by the second violin part (Karnes 2017: 78). The oscillation's pitch range is ever-increasing: first a second above *D*, followed by a second below, then a third above, a third below and so on, where all intervals are filled with the diatonic steps of the natural D minor scale (Karnes 2017: 72–73). Due to the different tempi, the scale is expanded up to a twelfth in the solo violin part and a threefold octave plus a third in the cello part. With its different tempi,

the iridescent harmonic surface seems to stand outside time. It is structured, though, by repeated anacrusic, arpeggiated D minor chords in the piano part that sound once the solo violin part has reached the central tone *D*. Lothar Mattner suggests thinking of sinusoidal waves that cross the x-axis with every chord (Mattner 1985: 93). This appears as quite an impressive illustration of "Silentium's" compositional principle. The length of the rests between the chords increases regularly after every other chord, corresponding to the increasing pitch range: one bar<sup>2</sup> after the first and second chord, three bars after the third and fourth, five bars after the fifth and sixth and so on (Karnes 2017: 76). Towards the end of the movement, the upper parts successively fade out and end on their respective lowest chord tone, except for the solo double bass, which finally plays an *E1* as the movement's last audible tone, marked *ppp* and followed by four bars of general rests. The tone is the lowest possible pitch on the 4-string double bass, a circumstance that can lead to the assumption that leaving out the final *D* is inspired by this technical reason (Kautny 2002: 122; Karnes 2017: 92). However, a 5-string instrument is requested to play the *D1* that grounds each of the piano's D minor chords. Pärt's intention therefore is to keep the final tone just below the threshold of audibility. Just as "Ludus" comes out of silence, "Silentium" vanishes into silence. The final *D* is present but physically inaudible.

Without intending to overemphasize the concept of contrastive pairs, the two movements of *Tabula rasa* correlate to each other like *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*. In Aristotelean ethics, *vita activa* or *bíos praktikós* means active life, understood as acting in society as well as shaping it, while *vita contemplativa* or *bíos theōretikós* means a contemplative life, understood as striving for knowledge (Trottmann 2001: 1071). Contemplation encompasses both sensory and pure intuition and thus can be regarded as passive, in contrast to active participation. Though the Greek verb *theoreîn* and its Latin translation *contemplari* are etymologically primarily linked to visual sensation, the meaning of perception, of sensory intuition in general is inherent (Liddell, Scott 1940: 796–797), so listening belongs to the *vita contemplativa*, too. And if listening and

<sup>2</sup> The anacrusis is assigned to the chord that follows it.

keeping silence are synonyms, *vita contemplativa* also means a life in silence. This connection is clear in the early Christian monastic world, where keeping silence was essential for contemplation and the knowledge of God. The importance of silence had already been stressed by the early so-called Desert Fathers, among them Saint Anthony of Egypt ("the Great"), who withdrew into the desert to live a life in absolute solitude – which, unfortunately, made him famous and his cave a popular pilgrimage destination. Monastic practices of keeping silence were developed afterwards both in Orthodox and Roman Christianity, practices that would sooner or later also spread to many non-monastic contexts.

But while these practices aim at silence in the sense of refraining from speaking, other kinds of silence have to be considered to get closer to "Silentium", which obviously does not aim at silence in the sense of refraining from performing the piece. According to an interview in 2014, quoted by Shenton, Pärt distinguishes "two different wings" of silence: the "silence [...] outside of us" and the "silence [...] inside a person", which Pärt implicitly identifies as "the silence of our soul" (Shenton 2021: 108–109). The first kind of silence can, but does not need, to be understood literally, while the second kind is to be understood metaphorically as spiritual calmness. Both kinds relate to "Silentium". The previously described compositional techniques to let the music emerge out of silence in "Ludus" and to let it vanish into silence in "Silentium" are based on the understanding of silence as absence of sound. But if "Silentium" at the same time appears as a static sounding continuum in a timeless and placeless Here and Now, it represents a state of mind that is the same as total inner peace, or, in Pärt's

words, the silence of one's soul. The notion of an individual being in the Here and Now as equivalent to the highest inner calmness is important not only to many religions and spiritual movements but also beyond institutional religions. It is a notion that is closely related to mystical ideas of experiencing transcendence in its broadest sense, of perceiving in contemplation or meditation what is unperceivable by other means, be it the presence or the knowledge of God in Christianity, or enlightenment or the state of Nirvana as a state of perfect quietude in Buddhism (Conze 1956: 11), to name but two examples.

In *De anima* ("On the Soul"), Aristotle elaborates on the human ability to recall perceptions in the absence of perception. It is an ability that he calls *phantasia* (fantasy). To recall perceptions, however, they need first to be stored. And this storage now is to be imagined as if the soul is a writing tablet (*grammateion*) on which nothing actually stands written, a blank slate. Early modern Latin authors translated this phrase in short as *tabula rasa*. A *tabula rasa* is therefore the idea of a place where perceptions leave marks in the wax. In this sense, the second movement, "Silentium", of Pärt's *Tabula rasa* is not about silence itself, but about the experience of silence. By bringing this experience to sound, the unheardable silence becomes present. As Maria Cizmic writes, *Tabula rasa* "performs a narrative of transcendence" (Cizmic 2008: 48); thus listening to the music is a way to experience transcendence, to perceive that which has gone beyond physical sound. If there is no silence in a material sense, silence is a mere idea and thus excluded from sensation. Silence is inaudible but present in the sounding music of Pärt's "Silentium".

---

## Source

**Pärt**, Arvo 1977. *Tabula rasa: Doppelkonzert für zwei Violinen, Streichorchester und präpariertes Klavier*. Partitur, Wien: Universal Edition.

---

## References

**Basu**, Dipak (ed.) 2001. *Dictionary of Pure and Applied Physics: A Volume in the Comprehensive Dictionary of Physics*. Boca Raton: CRC Press.

**Bouteneff**, Peter C. 2015. *Arvo Pärt: Out of Silence*. Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press.

**Braun**, Joachim 2008. Reconsidering Musicology in the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia: 1990–2007. – *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39/3, pp. 231–238.

**Cizmic**, Maria 2008. Transcending the Icon: Spirituality and Postmodernism in Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* and *Spiegel im Spiegel*. – *twentieth-century music* 5/1, pp. 45–78.

**Conze**, Edward 1956. *Buddhist Meditation*. London: George Allen and Unwin.

**Hillier**, Paul 1997. *Arvo Pärt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Karnes**, Kevin C. 2017. *Arvo Pärt's Tabula Rasa*. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Kautny**, Oliver 2002. *Arvo Pärt zwischen Ost und West: Rezeptionsgeschichte*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.

**Kautny**, Oliver 2005. Pärt, Arvo. – *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart: Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik*. 2. Ausg., Hrsg. Ludwig Finscher, Kassel: Bärenreiter, Personenteil Bd. 13, Sp. 146–151.

**Liddell**, Henry George, Robert Scott (comp.) 1940. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th ed., rev. by Henry Stuart Jones, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

**Mattner**, Lothar 1985. Arvo Pärt: *Tabula rasa*. – *Melos* 47/2, pp. 82–99.

**May**, Christopher J. 2021. Colorful Dreams: Exploring Pärt's Soviet Film Music. – *Arvo Pärt: Sounding the Sacred*. Eds. Peter C. Bouteneff, Jeffers Engelhardt, Robert Saler, New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 36–67.

**Shenton**, Andrew 2021. The Rest is Silence. – *Arvo Pärt: Sounding the Sacred*. Eds. Peter C. Bouteneff, Jeffers Engelhardt, Robert Saler, New York: Fordham University Press, pp. 107–126.

**Trottmann**, Christian 2001. Vita activa/vita contemplativa. – *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Hrsg. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer, Gottfried Gabriel, Basel: Schwabe, Bd. 11, Sp. 1071–1075.

**Waczkat**, Andreas 2016. Konstruierte Gegensätze: Collage- und Décollage-Techniken in Arvo Pärts *Credo* (1968). – *Kirchenmusikalisches Jahrbuch* 100, S. 163–171.

## Häälekas vaikus: mittekuuldava kohalolu Arvo Pärdi „Silentiumis”

—  
Andreas Waczkat

„Tabula rasa” teine osa „Silentium” on üks kompositsioonidest, millega Arvo Pärt lõpetas „Credole” (1968) järgnenud näilise muusikalise vaikimise. Hääleka vaikimise paradoks sisaldub selles lähenemises kahekordselt: heliseva vaikusena „Silentiumis” ning vaikusele järgneva helina „Tabula rasas”.

Õeldut ei saa mõista sõna-sõnalt, sest tehnilises mõttes vaikust ei eksisteeri, nii nagu ei eksisteeri ka pimedust. On helilained allpool kuulmisläve ning elektromagnetkiirgus väljaspool tajutava valguse ala. Lõpuks pole küsimus mitte valguse või heli tajus, mis sõltub nii keskkonna mõjudest kui ka kultuurilisest ja isiklikest faktoreist, kusjuures kultuurilist ja isiklikku võib ka vaimne faktor potentsiaalselt teisendada. Piibliloos prohvet Eelijast Hoorebi mäel (1Kn 19: 9–13) ilmub Iisraeli Jumal Jahve Eelijale heebrea keelest sõnasõnaliselt tõlgituna „vaikiva häälena”. Heebrea sõna „vaikimise” kohta on tõlgitav ka kui „täielik loobumine isesusest” või „kindla eesmärgita kuulamine”. Vaikimine on seega tõlgendatav ka olemisviisina, mis otseselt seostub filosoofilise ja religioosse mõistega *vita contemplativa* (mõtluselu), millele vastandub *vita activa* (teoelu).

Omal moel sisaldub see vastandipaar ka „Tabula rasa” kahes osas. Esimene, „Ludus” meenutab vahelduvate soolo- ja tutti-lõikudega barokilikku *concerto grosso*’t. Lõike eraldavad aina lühenevad generaalpauhid. Vaikus tõmbub siin ikka enam tagasi, andmaks ruumi muusikale. Teine osa, „Silentium” on kujundatud vastupidiselt. Sellele viitavad ka ettekandepühised: *con moto* „Luduses” ja *senza moto* „Silentiumis”. Viimases seostuvad d-moll helirida M-häälena ning varieeruvalt figureeritud d-moll kolmkõla T-häälena. Sealjuures liigub M-hääel kolmehääelse proportsioonikaanonina erinevais tempodes: pool- ja veerandnootides tšellodel, täis- ja poolnootides 1. viiulil ning kahekordseis täisvältustes ja täisnootides 1. sooloviili hääles, mille hiljem võtab üle 2. sooloviil. M-hääel võngub aina suurema ja diatooniliselt täidetud intervallisammuga keskheli *d* ümber: esmalt sekundi võrra üles ja alla ning siis samamoodi tertsi võrra jne. Alati, kui sooloviil jõuab keskhelini, kõlab klaverilt murtud d-moll akord. Erinevate tempode tõttu jõutakse sooloviili hääles sel viisil lõpuks duodeetsimini, tšellohääles aga tertsi üle kolme oktavi. Osa lõpus lõpetavad hääled kõrgemaist kuni madalamateni igaüks oma d-moll kolmkõla madalaimal helil, kuni lõpuks jäävad vaid kontrabassid. Jätkuvas *decrescendo*’s laskudes jõuavad nad aga vaid  $E_1$ -ni. Lõpetav  $D_1$ , diatoonilise helirea loogiline jätk, jääb kuuldamatuks, kuigi on mõtteliselt olemas.

Proportsioonikaanoni tehnika tühistab näiliselt aja. Staatiline kontiinum, mis hääbub lõpuks vaikusse, on seega justkui kohatu ja ajatu „siin ja praegu” ning tähistab meele täielikku rahuseisundit, kõige laiemas mõttes isiklikku transtsendentsuse kogemust, millegi tajumist, mis ulatub kaugemale füüsilisest helist. Kui vaikust aga materiaalses mõttes ei eksisteeri, siis pole ta ka meeleliselt tajutav. Pärdi „Silentiumis” on vaikus kuuldamatu ja ometi kõikjalviibiv.

Tõlkinud Toomas Siitan