

Sounding Silence

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

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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