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The Challenges of Transition: Arvo Pärt's 'Transitional' Symphony No. 3 between Polystylism and Tintinnabuli¹

As part of my doctoral research on Alfred Schnittke's symphonies² I analysed countless symphonies written not only by Schnittke ([Al'fred Šnitke] 1934–1998) himself, but also by a host of his Soviet contemporaries including Galina Ustvolskaya ([Galina Ustvol'skaâ] 1919–2006), Boris Chaikovsky ([Boris Čajkovskij] 1925–1996), Nikolai Karetnikov ([Nikolaj Karetnikov] 1930–1994), Sofia Gubaidulina ([Sofiâ Gubajdulina] born 1931), Valentin Silvestrov ([Valentin Silvestrov] born 1937), Boris Tishchenko ([Boris Tišenko] 1939–2010) and many others. Among them, the symphonies by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (born 1935) really stood out, because each one of them is unique and quite different from the Shostakovichian symphonic model that was prevalent among this generation. In particular, Pärt's Symphony No. 3 is an unusual and striking work, unlike anything else written in the USSR at that time.

By the time he graduated from the Tallinn Conservatory in 1963, Arvo Pärt could already be considered a professional composer, because he had been working as a recording engineer with the Estonian Radio and writing music for the stage and film, not to mention that in 1959 he won the first prize at the *All-Union Young Composers' Competition*. Although Soviet composers had little information on what was happening in Western avant-garde music at the time, the early 1960s saw many new methods of composition being 'smuggled' into Soviet music by the composers who refused to conform to the official socialist realist standards.³ In spite of living in the 'provincial' Baltic republic of Estonia, Pärt was at the forefront of this belated Soviet avant-garde, and his 1960 *Nekrolog* op. 5 was one of

¹The writing of this article was supported by the project Serbian Musical Identities within Local and Global Frameworks: Traditions, Changes, Challenges (No. 177004 /2011–2014/) funded by the Ministry of Education and Science of Serbia.

²Ivana Medić, *Alfred Schnittke's Symphonies 1–3 in the Context of Late Soviet Music*, PhD dissertation, University of Manchester, 2010.

³For a comprehensive analysis of 'unofficial', non-conformist music in the Soviet Union after World War II see Peter J. Schmelz, *Such Freedom, if only Musical. Unofficial Soviet Music During the Thaw*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

the first compositions in the USSR to employ serial technique; moreover, his music was well known in the Soviet capital Moscow, at least among his fellow non-conformist composers. Pärt continued to use serialism until the mid-1960s, albeit combined with other compositional methods. His 1964 *Collage über BACH* was one of the first examples of what was to become known as Soviet polystylism.⁴

Written in 1971, Pärt's Symphony No. 3 is often dismissed as a product of his creative crisis. It is the only work completed during the otherwise unproductive eight-year period between *Credo* (1968), Pärt's final polystylistic piece,⁵ and a rush of works from 1976–1977 which introduced his new *tintinnabuli* style. In the early 1970s, Pärt wrote a few 'transitional' compositions in the spirit of early European polyphony, but the Symphony No. 3 is the only finished work that he did not subsequently withdraw. He also continued to write applied, incidental music to make a living, however he excluded these works from his catalogue.

According to his biographer Paul Hillier, in the mid- to late-1960s Pärt developed a keen interest in Orthodox Christianity; he found a role model in Heimar Ilves, one of the most outspoken (and overtly religious) professors at the Tallinn Conservatory, who was dismissive of contemporary music.⁶ His view of atonal music as music without the presence of Divine Spirit "powerfully fuelled Pärt's own growing disenchantment with the avant-garde".⁷ Pärt's *Credo* caused a furore after its premiere, not because of the employment of avant-garde techniques (which by 1968 had

⁴On the role and significance of polystylism in Pärt's and Schnittke's oeuvres see: Ivana Medić, "I believe... in what?" Alfred Schnittke's and Arvo Pärt's Polystylistic *Credos*", in: *Slavonica* 16/2 (2010), p. 96–111.

⁵*Credo* is one of Pärt's numerous 'Bach' works: it is based on the C major Prelude from the first volume of J. S. Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Pärt's other 'Bach' works include the already mentioned *Collage über B-A-C-H* for oboe and strings, as well as *Wenn Bach Bienen gezüchtet hätte* for piano, wind quintet, string orchestra and percussion (1976) and *Concerto piccolo über B-A-C-H* for trumpet, string orchestra, harpsichord and piano (1994).

⁶On Ilves's influence on Pärt see: Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 67–68.

⁷*Ibid.* In contrast to Pärt, some of his non-conformist contemporaries, such as Nikolai Karetnikov, were happy to continue writing serial music despite undergoing religious conversion and becoming practising believers.

already become old hat), but because of its obvious religious connotations.⁸ In spite of the abundance of avant-garde techniques, paired with an overall constructivist procedure, *Credo* revealed Pärt's 'loss of faith' in serialism and other avant-garde techniques (which are here used to depict 'the evil') and anticipated his evolution from serial constructivism to the minimalist constructivism of his *tintinnabuli* works. As I have observed in my analysis of *Credo*, the explicit and implicit dualisms confronted in this work – tonality versus atonality, order versus chaos, construction versus destruction, peace versus war, forgiveness versus vindictiveness, Christianity versus atheism, affected the composer very intensely; hence, Symphony No. 3 was based neither on traditional tonality, nor on serialism, nor on aleatorics – it seemed that Pärt had exhausted these techniques in *Credo* and had no intention of ever using them again, and thus he began looking for other alternatives to the socialist realist canon.⁹

In order to develop his abstractly-tonal (but, actually, not functionally tonal) *tintinnabuli* style and to dissociate it completely from socialist realism, Pärt had to go back to the origins of tonality. Thus, after completing *Credo*, he immersed himself into a study of pre-tonal music including Gregorian chant and French and Franco-Flemish choral music from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries: Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300–1377), Johannes Ockeghem (c. 1410–1497), Jacob Obrecht (c. 1457–1505), Josquin des Prez (c. 1450–1521) et al. This music was literally unknown in the USSR at that time, and was only in the early stages of its revival by the newly-founded ensembles, such as *Madrigal*.¹⁰ Hence in Pärt's Symphony No. 3 serialism, aleatorics and tonality are bypassed in favour of old church modes and various pre-classical polyphonic techniques. However, this transitory phase did not entirely satisfy the composer and he entered into another five-year period of creative silence, while he resumed his study of early music. Finally in 1976 Pärt re-emerged with a new compositional technique that he invented and to which he has remained devoted to this day. He called it *tintinnabuli* (in Latin, 'little bells'). He said: "I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent

⁸On the circumstances surrounding the premiere and reception of this work see Hillier (see note 6), p. 58; Nick Kimberley, "Starting from Scratch", in: *Gramophone*, Vol. 74, No. 880 (1996), p. 14.

⁹Medić, "I Believe... In What?" (see note 4).

¹⁰The ensemble *Madrigal* was founded in 1965 by Andrei Volkonsky ([Andrej Volkonskij] 1933–2008), one of the leaders of Soviet post-WW2 musical avant-garde.

beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, two voices. I build with primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells and that is why I call it tintinnabulation.”¹¹ Having found his new voice, there was a rush of new works: *Für Alina*, *Fratres*, *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten*, *Tabula rasa* etc. As Pärt's music began to be performed in the West, whilst his frustration with Soviet officialdom grew, in 1980 he and his family emigrated, first to Vienna and then to Berlin, where he still lives.

Symphony No. 3 is cast in three movements, played without a break. David Fanning has described it as a study in rhythmic layering which translates the archaic statements into modern terms.¹² As such, this symphony is unique both in the context of Pärt's oeuvre and Soviet symphonism in general, although it does bear certain resemblances to Pärt's previous two symphonies. The movement titles in his Symphony No. 1 (1964) suggest pre-classical polyphonic models ('Canon', 'Prelude and Fugue'). Pärt employs a variety of polyphonic techniques for the purpose of creating neo-stylistic syntheses, and then mixes them with freely employed twelve-note segments and almost minimalistic repetitive passages. In that respect, especially remarkable is the 'Fugue', which does not sound like a fugue at all, and at moments resembles early minimalist works by the likes of Philip Glass (born 1937) or Louis Andriessen (born 1939) – however, Pärt's Symphony No. 1 actually predates them.

The differences between his Symphonies Nos. 2 and 3 are more remarkable. Similar to *Credo*, Symphony No. 2 is characterised by a free employment of twelve-note rows, quotations, sonoristic effects, neo-baroque forms, all of these presented on the background of a quirky interplay of tonality and atonality. Remarkable is a quotation of Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's children's piece *Sweet Daydream* towards the end of this predominantly bleak and tragic piece. As observed by Merike Vaitmaa: "The naïve beauty of the Tchaikovsky quotation (...) sounds fragile and defenceless in the im-

¹¹Cited in: Richard E. Rodda, liner notes for Arvo Pärt *Fratres*, I Fiamminghi, The Orchestra of Flanders, Rudolf Werthen (Telarc CD-80387).

¹²See David Fanning, "The Symphony in the Soviet Union (1917–1991)", in: Robert Layton (ed.), *A Guide to the Symphony*, Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 292–325.

mediate presence of an aggressive nightmare created by modern expressive means.”¹³

On the other hand, in his Symphony No. 3, Pärt does not set the tonal and atonal forces in confrontation. All main motifs are modelled on Gregorian tunes, featuring a narrow intervallic span and gradual movement in seconds; moreover, a majority of them are mutually related and/or derived from one another. However, as mentioned, Pärt does not employ actual quotations. If we add to this equation the odd minimalistic-repetitive moment, and the unusual effect produced by the *Ars nova* cadential turn known as the ‘Landini cadence’,¹⁴ the overall impression is that of mock-archaic early modernism. The most obvious role model is Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971) – from his early neo-classical works including the *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) to the late ‘religious’ works, written just a few years before Pärt’s Symphony, such as *Canticum Sacrum* (1955) and *Requiem Canticles* (1966). One also finds echoes an earlier Northern European symphony, Jean Sibelius’s (1865–1957) Symphony No. 6, completed in 1923 and influenced by Palestrina (c. 1525–1594). Moreover, some of Pärt’s homophonic textures closely resemble Erik Satie’s (1866–1925) ‘religious’ works written during his *Order of the Rose and Cross* phase, while the relentless, repetitive textures anticipate early minimalism.

The symphony’s three movements are joined *attacca*, emphasising seamless flow and organic development. The form of the entire cycle can be argued to be a combination of sonata form and sonata cycle. The form of the first movement falls into following sections: introduction (from rehearsal 1) containing the main theme, exposition (rehearsal 3), and development (rehearsal 9) with a brief coda (rehearsal 14).¹⁵ This formal division is merely provisional, because the exposition is actually developmental, and the entire movement is based on a free interplay of short motifs, all of them closely related to one another. Pärt employs polyphonic and homophonic textures in alternation, in order to produce some contrast; however, the overall thematic and harmonic unity of the movement decisively contributes to a predominantly non-conflicting dramaturgy of the piece.

¹³Merike Vaitmaa, liner notes to CD *Arvo Pärt: Symphonies 1–3 – Cello Concerto – Pro et Contra – Perpetuum Mobile* (BIS CD 434).

¹⁴See David Fallows, “Landini Cadence”, in: *Grove Music Online*, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/15943> (30.10.2015).

¹⁵My analysis differs from Hillier’s in several important respects. Compare to Hillier, *Arvo Pärt* (see note 6), p. 68–73.

The introduction contains two motifs, the first one 'a' based on an embellishment of a single note, performed by oboe and clarinet in unison, with an addition of a trumpet from bar 7 emphasising the intervals of perfect fourths and fifths, while the second motif 'b' is derived from it, but contains a leap upwards and contrasts the 'a' with the brutish sound of low brass. The motif 'a' is actually an old musical trope known as the 'circular figure' (*circulatio*); according to Tim Smith, this figure, characterised by departures and returns to the central note, was first described in 1650 by Atanasius Kircher as the aural equivalent of the circle, representing either God or the sun.¹⁶ Smith argues that Bach was familiar with this extra-musical connotations of this figure at least since 1732, and that he employed it rather consistently in conjunction with the words 'Christus' (Christ) and 'Kreuz' (Cross).¹⁷ And since Bach was, as I have already mentioned, one of Pärt's (as well as Schnittke's) role models and a common point of reference, it is hardly a surprise that they would often draw on Bach's musical symbolism. Gottfried Eberle has discussed the use of the *circulatio* trope in Schnittke's Piano Quintet (1972–1976),¹⁸ and I have recently devoted a chapter to a discussion of Schnittke's depiction of the Cross by various means, including the *circulatio*, in his Symphony No. 2 *St. Florian* (1979–1980).¹⁹ However, as far as I am aware, no author has discussed the employment of the *circulatio* by Arvo Pärt in the Symphony No. 3, which actually predates both Schnittke's aforementioned works by several years. And while it is possible that Pärt's employment of this figure was merely accidental, I would argue that, in the light of the fact that the Symphony No. 3 was preceded by the *Credo*, a work which expressed Pärt's admiration for Christ's teaching, and followed by his spiritually infused *tintinnabuli* works, it is very plausible that the *circulatio* figure is employed in the Symphony No. 3 deliberately and with a full awareness of its connotations, i. e. with the purpose of representing Christ's suffering

¹⁶Tim Smith, "Circulatio as Tonal Morpheme in the Liturgical Music of J. S. Bach", in: *Ars Lyrica: Journal of Lyrica Society for Word Music Relations* 11 (2000), p. 78.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Gottfried Eberle, "Figur und Struktur von Kreuz und Kreis am Beispiel von Alfred Schnittkes Klavierquintett", in: Jürgen Köchel et al. (eds.), *Alfred Schnittke zum 60. Geburtstag*, Hamburg: Hans Sikorski 1994, p. 46–54.

¹⁹Ivana Medić, "Crucifixus etiam pro nobis: Representations of the Cross in Alfred Schnittke's Symphony No. 2 *St. Florian*", in: Gavin Dixon (ed.), *Schnittke Studies* (In memoriam Prof. Alexander Ivashkin), Aldershot, Ashgate, 2015 (forthcoming).



Example 1a: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, I movement, bars 1–2 – motif ‘a’ i. e. the *circulatio*²¹

Example 1b: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, I movement, bars 9–10 – the ‘Landini cadence’

and crucifixion. This, in turn, lends a wholly new extra-musical undercurrent to this work of ‘absolute music’. While it is not my intention to offer a ‘programmatic’ reading of this symphony here, the reader should be well aware of the fact that the dramaturgy of the piece might have been inspired by Christ, and that some of the formal idiosyncrasies could be explained by this hidden programmatic content.²⁰

Both motifs from the introduction, ‘a’ and ‘b’, end with an *Ars nova* cliché, the ‘Landini cadence’. The *circulatio* and the Landini produce a remarkably archaic effect, although it is unclear which exact past they evoke, as these influences are actually separated by several centuries (Examples 1a, 1b, 1c).

The exposition of the first movement begins with the motif ‘c’ (Example 2a) also derived from ‘a’, performed by clarinets in parallel octaves and distinguished by a swift movement in triplets; it takes up the role of the first theme of the sonata. A *fugato* ensues with different instrumental

²⁰On the other hand, I have offered precisely such a ‘close reading’ (a term by Lawrence Kramer) of Pärt’s *Credo* and Schnittke’s *Symphony No. 2* in my other articles; cf. MediĆ, “I Believe... In What?” (see note 4); MediĆ, “Crucifixus etiam pro nobis” (see note 19).

²¹All examples reproduced from the Score No. 5775, Edition Peters, Leipzig. Reproduced with permission. All rights reserved.

Example 1c: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, I movement, bars 14–20 – motif ‘b’ with the ‘Landini cadence’

Example 2a: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, I movement, bars 21–23 – motif ‘c’ i. e. the first theme of the exposition

Example 2b: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, I movement, bars 48–51 – motif ‘d’ i. e. the second theme of the exposition

This musical score excerpt shows the final bars of the second movement. It features a variety of instruments including strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes strings and woodwinds. The second system includes Cfg (Corymba), Cor (Cornet), Tr (Trumpet), Trb (Trumpet), and Tuba. The music is characterized by its minimalist style, with long, sustained notes and a focus on harmonic texture. A handwritten annotation '(Landini cadence)' is present above the Cfg staff in the second system.

Example 3b: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, II movement, bars 73–80 – culmination of the second movement: 'b', 'a1' and the 'Landini cadence'

This musical score excerpt shows the end of the second movement. It features a variety of instruments including woodwinds, brass, and strings. The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes Cl (Clarinet), Cl. b. (Clarinet in B-flat), Fg. (Flute), Cfg. (Corymba), Trb. (Trumpet), Timp. (Timpani), Camp. (Cymbal), and Vl. (Violin). The second system includes Va. (Viola), Vc. (Violoncello), and Cb. (Contrabasso). The music is characterized by its minimalist style, with long, sustained notes and a focus on harmonic texture. A handwritten annotation 'trem.' is present above the Camp. staff in the second system.

Example 3c: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, II movement, bars 138–143 – end of the second movement (Christ's death at the Cross)

are also frequently found in J. S. Bach's works.²² From rehearsal 17 it is added a counterpoint in semibreves, also derived from 'a'. These motifs are then developed in free imitation until the culmination is reached at rehearsal 22 with the return of 'b' from the first movement, followed by 'a1' (Example 3b). The motif 'c' then returns at rehearsal 23 with its distinctive triplets; however, it is transposed to D minor, the 'tonal' centre of the second movement. At rehearsal 24 the 'a' from the first movement returns. After slowing the musical course down to achieve maximum tranquillity (with 'little bells' in celesta at rehearsal 25 followed by a 'lament' in strings), the second movement ends with sudden ominous chords in the full orchestra and a dramatic solo for timpani in F which prepares the third movement (Example 3c). If one should relate it to the biblical narrative, this would be the exact moment of Christ's death at the Cross.

The third movement starts at rehearsal 30 with the motif 'a' in D minor, and its 'antiphone' responses in woodwinds, based on a syncopated motif 'a2' derived from 'a' and 'd'. The first section (until rehearsal 37) is mostly based on 'a' and 'a2', ending with the 'Landini cadence' in D, which then becomes a basis for the next, polyphonic segment. It begins at rehearsal 37 with an augmented 'c' in double-bass solo in D (Phrygian), followed by a free imitation moving swiftly through many tonal centres but without settling for any particular key.

The recapitulation on the level of the entire symphonic cycle begins at rehearsal 46 with a return of the motif 'a' from the introduction in *ff* in F# Phrygian (Example 4a). At rehearsal 48 Pärt repeats the first sonata theme of the first movement i. e. 'c', with counterpoint based on motifs 'a' and 'd' (Example 4b). It is followed by the second theme i. e. 'd' at rehearsal in G, and then by a Coda from rehearsal 51 with the final hint of 'd' in the last two bars. It is very tempting to interpret the recapitulation, with its reappearance of the *circulatio*, as the moment of Christ's resurrection.

Aside from the thematic unity of the entire cycle, the harmonic progressions also support the interpretation of this cycle as a unified whole. The main key is G sharp minor, but the first movement actually ends in F minor. The second one begins in D minor (the key a tritone apart from G sharp, i. e. its polar tonality), but also ends in F. The third movement continues to vacillate between D and F, but midway through returns to G sharp, thus emphasising the recapitulative effect.

²²Cf. Smith (see note 16).

Example 4a: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, III movement, bars 166–168 – recapitulation of 'a'

As we have seen, Pärt's musical rhetoric in this work is seemingly anti-Romantic: this clean-cut symphony demonstrates his penchant for conciseness and reductionism, suggests an affinity with Stravinsky's modernist aesthetics and anticipates early minimalist works. While Pärt aims towards objectification, there are musical 'signs' that suggest an 'extra-musical' meaning, although the musical symbolism is not nearly as obvious as in Pärt's *Credo* or in Schnittke's *Symphony No. 2*, the two works which closely follow the biblical narratives.

Example 4b: Arvo Pärt, *Symphony No. 3*, III movement, bars 183–188 – recapitulation of ‘c’ with hints of ‘d’

Pärt’s *Symphony* can be labelled ‘polystylistic’ only conditionally: although the composer pours the simulations of plainchant into a classical symphonic mould, this results in a restoration of old music in a modern context, rather than a deliberate and incongruous clash of aesthetically and diachronically opposed styles, as was the case with his older polystylistic works. To overview once again the symptoms of Pärt’s ‘transition’ from polystylism to *tintinnabuli*, we could say that Pärt’s Soviet and polystylistic past is revealed in the following features:

- the very genre of symphony – quite typical of Soviet aesthetics, which regarded the symphony as a supreme genre and a ‘substitute for the mass’ in the modern atheist world;²³
- a free interplay of different stylistic traits, without committing to any particular one;
- the employment of musical ‘signs’ although, unlike what he had done in *Credo*, here they do not follow an overt narrative;

²³Cf. Mark Aranovsky, *Simfonicheskie iskania – Problemi zhanra simfonii v sovetской muzyke 1960–1975 godov*, Leningrad: Sovetskiiy kompozitor 1979, p. 35.

- however, in contrast to a majority of Pärt's Soviet contemporaries who relied on Shostakovich's symphonic model, the most obvious influence on his symphony is Stravinsky's late oeuvre.

As to the features that anticipate Pärt's *tintinnabuli* style, one may observe the following:

- the employment of a minimum of thematic material – all main motifs are derived from one another and/or mutually related;
- the entire work unfolds by means of a development of these motifs – there is hardly any thematic contrast between the movements, and the development transgresses the boundaries of individual movements; hence the formal divisions are provisional and the symphony should be heard as a unified whole;
- this principle of diminishing thematic contrast leads to repetitiveness, which would become one of the key features of Pärt's *tintinnabuli* style;
- harmony is vaguely tonal, but there are no customary tonal cadences, and the distribution of keys seems quite arbitrary; this is achieved by means of bypassing the major/minor dichotomy in favour of old church modes and pre-tonal cadential turns;
- finally, by referencing the plainchant and the *Ars nova* polyphony, Pärt confirms his interest in spirituality, which would infuse his *tintinnabuli* works.

If one should summarise the 'meaning' of this symphony, I could be argued that the composer seeks inspiration and solace in the idealised distant past, but also uses it as a means of 'reviving', 'purifying' and reaffirming the symphonic genre. However, Pärt's employment of a covert but nevertheless readable musical symbolism (in particular when seen in the context of his works that predate and follow the Symphony) makes it very tempting to hear this work as a continuation of the topic already dealt with in the *Credo*, i. e. the depiction of the holy figure of Jesus Christ and of his death and resurrection.