

ARVO PÄRT'S MUSIC: FACETS OF THE TINTINNABULI TECHNIQUE

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SUMMARY. This article comprises an analysis of two of the religious works signed by the Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt, both written in the tintinnabuli technique, 9 years apart - *De profundis* and *Miserere*. After an overview of the tintinnabuli concept and after indicating their technical features, I have observed how the minimalist compositional method, specific to Pärt, has acquired elasticity, as years went by. Nonetheless, the hermeneutical principles which the composer intended to soundly integrate in his composition style are preserved, regardless of how the tintinnabuli technique arises (strict or elastic). In both musical works analyzed, the tintinnabuli technique (technique used in composition since 1976) does not refer to serialization of sound parameters, but addresses the algorithmizing process of the musical material, which originates from formal and philosophical thinking.

Keywords: tintinnabuli, minimalism, holy minimalism, Arvo Pärt.

Introduction

By analyzing Arvo Pärt's music (1935-, Estonian composer, special creative personality, author of numerous film music opuses, works for the organ, piano, orchestra, choral pages with accompanying instruments, but also a cappella), we are faced with a surprising discovery: in the tintinnabuli compositional technique, the composer created mechanisms for processing the diatonic (or polymodal) material, which apparently works like the serial-dodecaphonic technique. However, the tintinnabuli technique (technique used in works since 1976) does not refer to serialization of sound parameters, but addresses the algorithmizing process of the musical material, which

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derives from formal and philosophical thinking. So, the main difference between the serial technique and the tintinnabuli technique is qualitative in nature. (Tokun, online).

Firstly, in general, tintinnabuli represents the philosophy of Pärt's works, which is linked to the theological tradition of the Orthodox religion. The spiritual foundations of the composer's repertoire set all the rules of his tintinnabuli system, which the composer considers to be '*flight into voluntary poverty*' (Brauneiss, 2005, 200). The economy of compositional means, proposed by the composer, is based in all instances on a stylistic paradigm that springs from spiritual self-restraint and sonic asceticism, from deep objectivity of the spirit and music matter, taking auditory form, based on certain strict algorithms. More broadly, tintinnabuli is a unique system of composition, which aims at the total reduction and the strictest organization of musical means, resulting in a deep hermeneutical meaning. Simple and transparent in the auditory sensation, the musical language does not define a style, but a way of being (Egger, 2012, p. 57).

In a more restrictive and practical sense, tintinnabuli is a technique which uses two types of voices, linked by way of a set of strict rules regarding counterpoint. The main components of the texture are the melodic voice, with predominantly scalar pattern, and the tintinnabuli voice, carved on a central triad. The composer uses the names of these two voices in their short form, namely the M voice and the T voice. Lastly, tintinnabuli refers to the voice built on the three sounds of a central triad. The two melodic lines – M and T – evolve simultaneously, based on a philosophical and theological principle: *T* comprises the divine will and law, while *M* comprises the human will, where the sounds different from the main triad are the embodiment of human search and inability. The juxtaposition of the two melodic lines is based on the principle of parallelism, and never the other way around.

Although the tintinnabuli technique was influenced by music from medieval times, the texture and function cannot be described easily in terms of any single musical technique of the past. When people experience Pärt's works, they usually refer to the word silence, which refers to an abstract concept. Pärt thinks that it is important that music starts from silence, and he explains it this way (Kongwattananon, 2013, p. 7): "*The more important things happen between two people—for example, two people who are very close to each other—are not stated, are not even that possible to express. One doesn't need to say anything and shouldn't say anything. Yet these things are very important. There is a sort of barrier, and when someone feels this barrier and the strength of such things, I believe they must pause often. These persons mean a great deal. They follow on from what has been said before or are preparation for what is to come*" (McCarthy, 1989, p. 132).

Discussion:**1. The technical features of the tintinnabuli technique**

Paul Hillier, conductor, and author, who dedicated himself to the study of Arvo Pärt's work, built an analytical language specific to tintinnabuli-style works. The architecture of minimalist compositions specific to Arvo Pärt's masterpieces begins with contouring the melodic M lines. The T contour (or tintinnabuli line) was generated later, based on a set of rules focused on its position. Thus, if the T line is in the immediate vicinity of the M profile, we are talking about position 1, and if a chord element can be integrated between the two melodic approaches, we are referring to position 2. In addition to these details, it should be noted that the T line may be higher and lower than the M line, or in an alternating circumstance (Hillier, 2002, p. 93).

E. g. 1

The image displays six musical staves, each illustrating a different position of the T line relative to the M line. The staves are labeled as follows:

- Superior position 1
- Inferior position 1
- Alternating position 1
- Superior position 2
- Inferior position 2
- Alternating position 2

In each staff, the M line is represented by whole notes, and the T line is represented by a triad of notes. The positions show the T line either above or below the M line, or alternating between the two.

Ratio between the M and T lines. The M line is signaled with whole notes, the T line contains the sounds of a minor triad.

With respect to the M line, the sound pattern is based on four modes, converging towards a specific center. The center of a scale, or its nucleus, is always found between one of the sounds of the T-line triad, mostly with the chord's tonic. In a condensed form, these are the rules of musical expression regarding the tintinnabuli technique, which, obviously,

bear different approaches from one composition to another. The four underlying modes of the architecture of the M melody start from the nucleus, ascending or descending, or have as goal the nucleus (by an ascending or descending approach) (Hillier, 2002, p. 95).

E. g. 2



The modes in the construction of the M line

With respect to the modes used in tintinnabuli, please note the gravitational nature of melody contours, indicating an expressive meaning in interpretation.

2. Facets of the tintinnabuli technique in Arvo Pärt's music

In the case of the first works where the author approached the tintinnabuli technique, we notice a strict and symmetrical use of its principles (*Für Alina*, *Spiegel im Spiegel*, *De profundis* etc.), with the passing of the years, we notice an extension and flexibility of the rules, without the disappearance of the basic philosophy. We will be discussing about these facets of the tintinnabuli technique in the following lines.

In the *De profundis* (1980) score, a work for men's choir (four voices), accompanied by an organ and percussion instruments, we find a strict use of the technique we are talking about. I have prepared a graphic interpretation of the compositional approach in this paper, to better understand the symmetry it illustrates:

Legends :

- ↗ - M's 1st mode
- ↘ - M's 2nd mode
- ↙ - M's 3rd mode
- ↖ - M's 4th mode
- ⊥ - tintinnabuli line

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Vers:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
Tenor I		↗				↗		↗		↗	↗	↘	T	↗	T
Tenor II				↗		T	T		↗	T	T		T	↗	T
Bas I			↗		T			T	T	↗		T	↗	T	↗
Bas II	↗				↗		↗		↗		↗	↘	↗	T	↗

We observe the placement of juxtaposed voices, supported by the dynamic plane, which develops from nuances of *p* - in the first bars - and reaches *f* towards the end of the score. Moreover, it can be concluded from the above drawing, that each mode used in the M melody finds its answer in consistent occurrence (1st mode has an answer in the 3rd mode, and 2nd mode in the 4th one).

The choral discourse is continually syllabic and parallel, which helps preserve the tintinnabuli technique - in strict display.

E. g. 3

48 *mf*

I spe - ra - vit a - ni - ma me - a in

T spe - ra - vit a - ni - ma me - a in

II spe - ra - vit a - ni - ma me - a in

B I spe - ra - vit a - ni - ma me - a in

T.T. *mp*

G.C. *mp*

49

3 voice exposure mode, with M in the first tenor and baritone, T to second tenor (bars 48 – 52)

Miserere, a composition published in 1989, proves an extension of the *tintinnabuli* concept. For the representation of Psalm 50, Arvo Pärt has decided to write a score for four lead singers (S, A, T, B), choir, organ and 10 instruments - oboe, clarinet, bass clarinet, bassoon, trumpet, trombone, 3 percussion instruments, electric guitar, bass guitar.

The elasticity of the tintinnabuli concept is reflected on several levels, in **Miserere**:

- First, the work falling under the scope of this analysis is strongly dramatic, although their sections that are less dense, but intentionally positioned as to develop tension and expectation. Unlike the composition analyzed above, this work has a more explicit sense of dramatic development, which does not consist only of progressive voice juxtaposition and dynamic planes in the scale but uses other types of mechanisms as well. It can be stated that a single phrase from **De profundis** centralizes the whole spiritual-musical intention. However, in **Miserere**, there is an evolutionary tendency towards dramatic tension, which creates a new dimension to the minimalist composition technique, consistent with stage music (as opposed to the introverted tendency of the previous composition).

- Secondly, the freedom in treating the M and T lines is reflected in their alternative occurrences, not always overlapping, with frequent role changes, which are sometimes not symmetrical (E. g. 3 and 5). The construction process of the M line comprises differences, such as: melodic approach as recto-tono recitative, gradual syllabic movement, with prolongations and change of melodic sense (E. g. 4), which emphasizes the stressed syllables.

E. g. 4

34

S
A
B

Red - de mi - hi la - e - ti - ti - am sa - lu - ta - ris

Red - de mi - hi la - e - ti - ti - am sa - lu - ta - ris

Red - de mi - hi la - e - ti - ti - am sa - lu - ta - ris

M melodic contour, shifting from one voice to another

E. g. 5

7 3 2 5 4 3

i - u - sti - fi - ce ris in ser - mo ni - bus tu - is,

Construction of the M line with prolongation on stressed syllables and change in the melody sense

E. g. 6

The beginning of the section *Dies irae* – descending scale in the M line, broken into tetrachord structures, in pairs of voices (feminine, masculine)

- Finally, the elasticity of the tintinnabuli technique can be found in the changes of gravitational centers, specific to each section. Both the T triad, and M lines have a mobile nucleus, depending on what atmosphere the composer intends to outline. Moreover, it must be stated that, for the M lines, the modes nucleus is not limited to the three sounds of the T chord, but it may be any of the diatonic scale built on the base sound of the T triad (Hillier, 2002, p.158):

E. g. 7

Miserere nuclei scheme

In addition to these elements that define the elasticity of the tintinnabuli method, there are new approaches employed to overlap the music with the text:

- When several voices sing in isorhythmia, one of the voices extends the last syllable more than the others.

E. g. 8

25 versus IX
(♩ ≈ 76)

solì

T₂

B

A - sper - ges

A - sper - ges

Example of extending the last syllable in a voice

- In certain places of the score, we notice that a voice can only musically process certain syllables in the verse and not all the words, the said interventions having an expressive role (Penton, 1998, p. 116).

E. g. 9

27 versus X
(♩ ≈ 72)

solì

S

A

B

di

A - u - di - tu - i

A - u - di - tu - i

Example of a one-syllable intervention

Conclusions

In a 1997 interview given for the BBC Documentary Modern Minimalists series, Arvo Pärt summarizes his entire repertoire in two realities: personal sins and divine forgiveness (Abdullah, online). This duality is symbolized by the two melodic lines on which the tintinnabuli technique is based, the M and T. Even if we noticed that Pärt's minimalist manner of composition supports changes and elastic hypostases, the hermeneutic principles themselves do not change.

Written 9 years apart, the *De profundis* and *Miserere* works are an example of strict and elastic handling of the compositional means specific to the tintinnabuli technique. *De profundis*, as compared to the second one, depicts a fascinating symmetry, which I conveyed in an original chart. The greater compositional freedom, in the case of the *Miserere*, has attained an additional level of tension within the musical discourse.

Regardless of the tintinnabuli technique's facets that were used, the spiritual pillars of the composer's works establish all the rules of his system, which the composer considers to be '*flight into voluntary poverty*' (Brauneiss, 2005, 200). The economy of compositional means is based, in all cases, on a stylistic paradigm that springs from sonic asceticism, from the deep objectivity of the spirit and the music matter, taking an auditory form that is based on strict or elastic algorithms.

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