

# Arvo Pärt: Transcendence in the Heart of Secularity

R. Thomas Day, Jr.

In this project, I examine the common phenomenon of experiencing the spiritual within secular music. In particular, I focus upon the mystical minimalist music of contemporary Estonian composer, Arvo Pärt. By exploring why his secular, instrumental *tintinnabuli* works are considered sacred in today's disenchanted world, I shed light upon how to frame questions surrounding the sacred in music which must include both concerns with the external events surrounding his music and the music itself. After tracing Pärt's history, considerations in Western music history, the disenchantment thesis, and the current state of transcendence, I establish a comprehensive picture surrounding the creation and reception of his *tintinnabuli* works. I compile all of this information into a cohesive whole to conclude that Pärt's music provides a sense of timelessness in its relation to Western tonal music that allows its recipients to experience what they call a transcendent, spiritual encounter.

Advisors: Dr. Jeffrey Kosky and Dr. Joel Blecher

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*Introduction: Music's Affective Powers*

Music may be the most ubiquitous form of art in our contemporary world. Thanks in part to technological advances, we are constantly surrounded by it in many different contexts where it serves many different functions. Whether it is helping us pass the time while driving, filling uncomfortable silences in elevators, boosting productivity in the workplace, heightening social encounters in restaurants and clubs, uniting people at a rally, or allowing them to mourn at a funeral, we are constantly bombarded with music throughout our lives. Its sheer omnipresence can often desensitize us from its natural wonder and beauty. Nonetheless, certain music exerts such gut-wrenchingly powerful effects upon its listeners that it causes them to experience chills, overwhelms them with emotions, and even reduces them to tears.<sup>1</sup>

Everything from academic literature in music, religion, and psychology to YouTube comments is rife with vivid descriptions of music's ability to speak to us on a profoundly personal and emotional level. Almost inevitably, these discussions rely upon religious or spiritual terminology when attempting to describe music's beauty and power. Words such as "transcendent," "sublime," "other-worldly," and "eternal" appear frequently when discussing these moments. Some people go so far as to say that "music is the most 'spiritual' of the arts,"<sup>2</sup> while others, like contemporary philosopher of music Jeanette Bicknell, attempt to discuss its affective power through the objective and secular tools of science and philosophy. In her book, *Why Music Moves Us*, Bicknell integrates the fields of philosophy with "modern empirical

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<sup>1</sup> Jeanette Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 34.

research into the phenomenon of strong emotional responses to music”<sup>3</sup> in an attempt to explain why music can cause such physical and emotional affects. Even though she focuses on the secular tools afforded by experimental psychology and neuroscience, she dedicates an entire chapter to first-hand accounts of “strong emotional responses to music” that “range from momentary chills or thrills to enduring, deeply affecting, even ‘out-of-body’ experiences.”<sup>4</sup> Even though music’s ability to overpower people has been widely observed, a proper vocabulary to describe exactly how and why it affects people has remained elusive.

This ineffability has connected music’s power with deep spirituality and reverence throughout history. Sociologist Guy Beck uses twentieth-century German theologian Rudolf Otto’s writings in *The Idea of the Holy* to echo this difficulty of defining music’s power, “Musical feeling is rather (like numinous feeling) something ‘wholly other.’ Consequently, the human response to music is composed of similar feelings and experiences as toward the numinous, such as *mysterium tremendum* (mystery and awe) and *fascinans* (attraction).”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Plato states that “rhythm and harmony sink deep into the recesses of the soul and take the strongest hold there”<sup>6</sup> in his seminal work, *Republic*. More examples of music’s power to take evoke strong emotional responses from people and even explicit connections to religion are abundant across ancient and contemporary literature alike.

One of the most famous examples comes in Homer’s epic poem, *The Odyssey*. The protagonist Odysseus and his crew must sail past the treacherous clutches of the sirens – mystical creatures whose songs would take hold of sailors and lure them to their deaths. Following the

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<sup>3</sup> Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, vii.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Guy L. Beck, *Sacred Sound: Experiencing Music in World Religions*, ed. Guy L. Beck (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1945), 90.

advice of the goddess Circe, Odysseus instructs his men to obstruct their ears with beeswax while he ties himself to the mast so that he could hear the sirens' seductive yet fatal song without being able to act. Despite knowing the danger of their music, Odysseus still loses control of his own will and begs to be released until the ship finally passes out of earshot, thereby surviving the alluring song of the sirens.

This idea that music could command people's emotions and behaviors was commonplace in ancient Greece. Greek music theorists, including the famed Pythagoras, believed that music sat so close to the core of humanity that different modes could evoke different types of behavior so drastically that it could incite or assuage violence. A common story recounts, "a group of drunken youths were aroused by the sound of the tibiae, an ancient wind instrument that is the ancestor of the modern oboe. They were about to break into the house of a virtuous woman when Pythagoras urged the musician to play a melody in a different mode."<sup>7</sup> This new music calmed the youths' "wanton fury" and prevented the violence. There are numerous examples of music controlling people's wills, but stories about its affective powers appear cross-culturally and connect it with social gatherings and religious ceremonies.

In his definitive work *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, twentieth-century French sociologist Emile Durkheim features music prominently while characterizing the birth of religious practice within aboriginal tribes, the most primitive known human society at the time. When these primitive tribes would gather in ritualistic celebrations, they all had an electrifying and heightened sense of "social effervescence that transcended all societal norms and typical means of expression. Lost for words, they turned to the only form of expression capable of conveying these viscerally human emotions – music:

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<sup>7</sup> Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, 2-3.

As passions so strong and uncontrolled are bound to seek outward expression, there are violent gestures, shouts, even howls, deafening noises of all sorts from all sides that intensify even more the state they express. Probably because a collective feeling cannot be expressed collectively unless a certain order is observed that permits the group's harmonious movements, these gestures and cries are inclined to be rhythmic and regulated, and become chants and dances. But in taking on a more regulated form they lose none of their natural violence; the regulated tumult is still a tumult. The human voice is inadequate to the task, and is artificially reinforced: boomerangs are knocked together, bull-roarers are whirled. The original function of these instruments, so widely used in Australian religious ceremonies, was probably to give more satisfying translation to this excitement.<sup>8</sup>

Even though he never explicitly categorizes these outbursts as musical nor discusses their significance, he clearly describes a scenario where, lost for words at the height of feverish excitement, prehistoric aborigines have no other form of expression than music. In these moments, "the human voice is inadequate for the task,"<sup>4</sup> so they use the everyday objects around them – "boomerangs and bullroarers" – to communicate their visceral excitement through music. With this act, they transform every day utilitarian objects into "instruments, so widely used in Australian religious ceremonies."<sup>4</sup> Even though the social effervescence was ephemeral, those objects retained their elevated status as religious artifacts for generations, not because of their initial connection with the moment of excitement, but because their new qualities as musical instruments allowed them to continue communicating that ineffable feeling. Bicknell expands the breadth of this connection by stating, "In all cultures that we know of, music has some connection with ritual, religion and the supernatural."<sup>9</sup>

This world lent itself more naturally to transcendent explanations of music's affective powers. In contrast, our contemporary world values the predictability and reducibility of science and its objective models over the wonder and mystery of the previous worldview. Ever since the

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<sup>8</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 163.

<sup>9</sup> Bicknell, 5.

Enlightenment shifted truth's locale from the transcendent to the immanent<sup>10</sup>, society has foregone "the 'darkness' of religious ignorance" in favor of the "'lights' of reason."<sup>11</sup> In this secular world, the transcendent holds less authority for describing observed phenomena.

With this in mind, it may come as a slight surprise to discover that music is still being discussed with the same reverence and wonder as it was in ancient Greek literature. The prevalence of music at a wide variety of social functions shows that it still communicates on a deeply personal level with people everywhere in today's world. Granted, music affects people in various ways depending on their cultural backgrounds, but it garners strong reactions cross culturally, which is evidenced by its ubiquity at social events and religious ceremonies throughout the world. Despite our drastic advances in scientific knowledge and in the development of a highly technical language, people still cannot describe their extreme responses to music, and researchers still struggle to understand how and why music exerts such strong effects.

Bicknell draws upon the work of contemporary psychologist Alf Gabrielsson and his team's Strong Experiences of Music (SEM) Project at Uppsala University in Sweden to understand what these experiences look like in today's world. They have compiled over a thousand descriptions of "the strongest, most intense experience of music that you have ever had"<sup>12</sup> from nearly 900 people in an attempt to determine how people typically respond to music and why. Some discuss experiences with sacred music, some talk about famous classical examples, while still others draw upon contemporary pop music. Regardless of the source, they all share similar experiences with the effects that music has produced for them. One writer

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Bicknell, *Why Music Moves Us*, 46.

describes his response to hearing Sibelius' *Second Symphony*, a secular work, when he was seventeen:

I remember how the music penetrated my consciousness entirely. How I gradually lost contact with the ground and experienced an *ecstasy of all my senses*. Yes, it wasn't only my hearing that received its share!

When the tremendous intensification of the finale started, I cried. I remember that my face was all wet, and I experienced a happiness that, as I realized later, only could be compared with an intense love of another person.

I was so totally moved and happy that I just had to sit down and write a letter to this fellow-being Jean [*sic*] Sibelius, thanking him for giving me and many others this incredible music, that seemed to purify oneself... both physically and mentally.<sup>13</sup>

The rest of the accounts are replete with similar examples of being overcome by intense emotions, losing control of one's senses, and having extreme physical reactions like crying, chills, "shortness of breath, increase in heart rate, trembling, hair standing on end... pain in the chest or stomach, and (rarely) loss of consciousness."<sup>14</sup> Clearly, the SEM Project has demonstrated that secular music can evoke intense responses that cannot be described in purely objective, immanent terms. People must therefore turn to spiritual descriptions for the music, showing that even secular music can be considered sacred through its effects.

These observations naturally lead to many more queries: *why* does music elicit these profound feelings of sacrality? And *how*? Does the context of the performance matter or does some purely musical element inspire these responses? Are these feelings universal or are they dictated by cultural heritage?

To answer these questions, we will turn to another description of a strong emotional response to music – so strong, in fact, that the lone audience member had to pull his car over because the music coming out of his stereo was too powerful. This story of the first time Manfred Eicher, the German producer and visionary founder of the contemporary record

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.



company ECM (Editions of Contemporary Music), heard Arvo Pärt's music has been recounted so frequently that it has nearly reached the status of a tall tale. Jeffers Engelhardt, an ethnomusicologist at Amherst College, narrates,

Listening to the radio while driving, Eicher had his 'road-to-Damascus' moment during a broadcast of the 1977 Westdeutsche Rundfunk recording of *Tabula Rasa*... Eicher stopped driving, listened to all of *Tabula rasa*, and immediately started working to find out more about Pärt and his music. That recording of *Tabula rasa* was the centerpiece of Pärt's 1984 debut with ECM.<sup>15</sup>

In a 1996 promotional interview with the music magazine *Billboard*, Eicher expands upon the same story, "When I first heard *Tabula Rasa* in 1982, it was like a meteorite falling from the sky. The music was so personal, of such integrity – it moved me deeply. Since then, a new musical landscape has appeared."<sup>16</sup> This musical landscape came in the form of Pärt's compositional technique, *tintinnabuli*, which features ascetically simple melodies, rigidly structured harmonies rooted in a single triad, long notes, and extensive silence. Eicher neither shies away from the spiritual purity found in this music nor from his own role in marketing and selling it to widespread audiences. Since his partnership with ECM, Pärt has skyrocketed to international acclaim from the wild popularity of *tintinnabuli*, which has received extensive acclaim from critics, musicologists, and lay people alike as evidenced by his scores of honorary doctorates, awards, and, most recently, a Grammy for Best Choral Performance in 2013.<sup>17, 18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jeffers Engelhardt, "Perspectives on Pärt after 1980," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 40.

<sup>16</sup> Bradley Bambarger, "Retail eagerly awaits ECM's Arvo Pärt set," *Billboard*, 108/36 (September, 1996), 119.

<sup>17</sup> "Honorary Degrees & Awards," *Arvo Pärt Centre*, last modified January 12, 2014, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part-2/honorary-degrees-awards/>.

<sup>18</sup> "Nominees: Best Choral Performance," *CBS: The 56<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards*, last modified January 26, 2014, accessed November 16, 2014, <http://www.cbs.com/shows/grammys/nominees/best-choral-performance/>.

Arvo Pärt is widely referred to a “mystical minimalist” composer – grouping him with the likes of the late Polish Catholic Henryk Gorecki and British Orthodox Christian Sir John Tavener<sup>19</sup> – because of his music’s sparseness and his carefully crafted public ethos as a pious, ascetic, and monkish “individual spiritual seeker.”<sup>20</sup> Pärt’s most frequently performed music draws its inspiration from the literature of his Russian Orthodox Christian faith, including *Passio* (1989), *Magnificat* (1989), *Miserere* (1991), *Te Deum* (1993), *Kanon Pokajanen* (1997), and *Da Pacem Domine* (2007), but his non-liturgical instrumental *tintinnabuli* music, like *Für Alina* (1976), *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* (1977), *Fratres* (1977), *Tabula rasa* (1977), and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978), also receives significant attention and praise from international audiences.<sup>21</sup>

Additionally, even though these secular instrumental pieces have no relation to liturgical function, explicitly religious inspiration, or context, they are almost universally considered spiritual in nature just like his Christian works. For example, Philip Borg-Wheeler defines Pärt’s music as “imbued with a genuine spiritual tranquility”<sup>22</sup> in the liner notes for EMI’s release of *Fratres* for their Classics series in 1994. The album includes only instrumental music without any explicit indication of religiosity (other than *Summa*, which is a resetting of his earlier *Creed* for four voices now for string orchestra<sup>23</sup>), but Borg-Wheeler clearly and unhesitatingly invokes the spiritual quality found throughout the album. He states, “Though the compositions on this

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Sholl, “Pärt and Spirituality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 148.

<sup>20</sup> Lara Dolp, “Pärt in the marketplace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 178.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Borg-Wheeler, Liner notes for *Arvo Pärt: Fratres featuring Tasmin Little, Martin Roscoe, Richard Studt, Bournemouth Sinfonietta*, EMI Classics 5650312, 1994, compact disc, 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

recording, all purely instrumental, are more obviously secular, devotional or contemplative qualities are evident in nearly all of them.”<sup>24</sup>

What are these devotional or contemplative qualities, though, and why are they accredited to his *tintinnabuli* music? These descriptions of the spirituality found within his supposedly secular, instrumental *tintinnabuli* works (e.g. *Für Alina*, *Fratres*, *Spiegel im Spiegel*, *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, and *Tabula Rasa* among others) appear everywhere people discuss his music. Music critic Alex Ross describes *Tabula Rasa* in *The New Yorker* as “chords [that] silence the noise of the self, binding the mind to an eternal present.” He then relates that these powerful pieces, particularly *Tabula Rasa*, are frequently heard in palliative care and hospice wards, where dying patients have “developed a peculiar, almost desperate attachment to... [what they call] ‘angel music.’”<sup>25</sup> Something within these abstract instrumental compositions provides profound meaning to these patients struggling with their own imminent death. Even stripped of a religious setting and with undefined personal religious beliefs, they still respond to Pärt’s music with a spiritual fervor.

While the descriptions in his liner notes, from musicologists, and even from Alex Ross are revealing, they all come from people very familiar with the history of Western music and Pärt’s biography and religious tendencies. As a result, their reception of his music is heavily influenced by the paratextual indicators – the material that “surrounds and extends it, precisely in order to *present* it.”<sup>26</sup> Even people unaware of Pärt’s religious background who listen to his CDs receive heavy influences from the pristine minimalist packaging and “ECM’s [other] visual cues

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Alex Ross, “Consolations: Arvo Pärt,” *The New Yorker*, December 2, 2002, accessed February 5, 2015, [http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/arvo\\_prt\\_1.html](http://www.therestisnoise.com/2004/04/arvo_prt_1.html).

<sup>26</sup> Gerard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 1.

which have presented the image of a modern monk.”<sup>27</sup> With all of these extrinsic, paratextual factors shaping the listeners’ receptions our goal of understanding how his *music* elicits these responses becomes increasingly more difficult. Therefore, the most revealing descriptions of Pärt’s music come from the comments on his YouTube recordings, which contain minimal paratextual indicators.

The video for *Tabula Rasa* found on YouTube.com offers a unique insight into how people untrained in music history and unaware of Pärt’s Christianity may receive his music. The video, put up by user CagliariPiccinini, includes no description, and it only features a few still-life images of forests and clearings that shift as the original 1977 recording progresses through its two movements. Even stripped of all religious context and knowledge about Pärt’s background, the descriptions of his music’s effects on his listeners appear almost universally positive responses. One user, Jay\_Mechem, comments, “This is where music and soul meet. You really cannot judge an emotion, yet one can understand how music stirs one’s soul – beautiful plane of knowledge.” Another user, david\_j\_Kay, says, “I fell asleep in bed listening to the radio, and half asleep I stirred hearing this, and couldn't believe my ears, it was just overwhelming, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven.” A third, Wim\_Janssen, comments, “without words, silent of admiration.” Even though this video contains minimal indications of Pärt’s religious inspirations, the comments from the primarily untrained ears reveal that something within his *tintinnabuli* music has profoundly spiritual connotations and effects.<sup>28</sup>

This unflinching characterization of Pärt’s otherwise secular music as spiritual returns to the original question and the inspiration for this project: why? What aspects within his “mystical

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<sup>27</sup> Dolp, “Arvo Pärt in the marketplace,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, 184.

<sup>28</sup> “Arvo Part – Tabula Rasa [Complete Score],” YouTube video, 26:31, posted by “CagliariPiccinini,” April 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7sIKVCqN4E>.

minimalist” compositions imbue them with this sacrality that transcends extra-musical settings?

In response, I propose that elements of *tintinnabuli* answer a profound need in today’s hyper-secular Western world by providing a space to experience both the immanent and transcendent sides of human nature through an alternate sense of temporality.

*Arvo Pärt: Early Years*

In order to understand Arvo Pärt, the renowned mystical minimalist composer, we must first get to know Arvo Pärt, the man. I would be remiss not to mention that, even though he is widely categorized as a “mystical minimalist” composer, he and many musicologists disagree with both terms “mystical” and “minimalist” when describing his music – he says, “this subject is really not worth talking about.”<sup>29</sup> Regardless, the moniker is useful because it conveniently allows audiences unfamiliar with his music to grasp the profound spiritual draw of *tintinnabuli*, so I will use it throughout this project.<sup>30</sup>

His ascent to becoming the most prominent contemporary composer in Estonia is intimately connected with his biography: growing up in Soviet-era Estonia, retreating into an eight-year period of compositional silence, converting from Lutheranism to Russian Orthodoxy, reemerging with *tintinnabuli*, (forcibly) emigrating to Germany, and partnering with Manfred Eicher and ECM to record and distribute his music to increasingly diverse audiences.<sup>31, 32</sup> Even though much of his music is ubiquitous today – from appearances in film scores like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004),<sup>33</sup> *There Will be Blood* (Anderson, 2007),<sup>34</sup> and *Foxcatcher* (Miller,

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<sup>29</sup> Enzo Restagno, *et al.*, *Arvo Pärt in Conversation*, trans. Robert Crow (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2010), 57.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Sholl, “Pärt and Spirituality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 148.

<sup>31</sup> Immo Mikhelson, “A Narrow Path to the Truth: Arvo Pärt and the 1960s and 1970s in Soviet Estonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 23.

<sup>32</sup> Engelhardt, “Perspectives on Pärt after 1980,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Shenton, “Introduction: the essential and phenomenal Arvo Pärt,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 1.

2014)<sup>35</sup> to endorsements as wide ranging as Steve Reich, Björk, Keith Jarrett, Radiohead, and Lupe Fiasco<sup>36</sup> – his biography makes his music exponentially more compelling and poignant.

Born in 1935 to a family of musicians in the small town of Paide, Estonia, Pärt began his musical studies at the Rakvere Music School in northern Estonia after his family moved there in 1938. He progressed to the Tallin Music School in the capital of Estonia then to the Tallin State Conservatory, where he studied under the legendary composer, Heino Eller.<sup>37</sup> This early period of his life was marked by an insatiable curiosity and experimental flair in his compositional techniques that led him to an unsteady relationship of extremes with the Composers' Union of the Soviet Union. He vacillated between receiving high praise – he won first prize at an all-Soviet Union composers' competition for his choral piece *Maailma samm (Stride of the World)*<sup>38</sup> – and having his music banned for “formalism” and “prostration in front of the West”<sup>39</sup> – like his dodecaphonic symphony *Nekrolog (1960)* and *Credo (1968)*.

His initial struggles with the Composers' Union stemmed from his experimentation with the new dodecaphonic compositional style even though it was initially banned for being too Western. Unshaken, Pärt pioneered this new musical framework and introduced it to Estonian culture with his first (banned) symphony, *Nekrolog (1960)*. Pärt first heard about dodecaphony from brief mentions “in Estonian-language newspaper articles that criticized Western society.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “Foxcatcher (2014): Soundtracks,” *IMDb*, accessed March 31, 2015, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1100089/soundtrack?ref\\_=tt\\_trv\\_snd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1100089/soundtrack?ref_=tt_trv_snd).

<sup>36</sup> Shenton, “Introduction: the essential and phenomenal Arvo Pärt,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Mihkelson, “A Narrow Path to the Truth: Arvo Pärt and the 1960s and 1970s in Soviet Estonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

Even though he had access to the widest variety of Western music around as a sound engineer for Estonian radio, no audio recordings of twelve-tone music existed in Estonia at the time.<sup>41</sup>

Dodecaphony, also known as twelve-tone, is defined as,

Music based on a serial ordering of all twelve chromatic pitches. The series of twelve pitches (also known as the row), whose form is uniquely determined for each composition, serves as the referential basis for all pitch events in that composition (in distinction to the seven-note diatonic basis used in tonal music).<sup>42</sup>

This musical framework was developed by the German composer Arnold Schoenberg in the 1920s as an alternative to the more traditional functional harmony, in which the tonic (the note that provides the key with a sense of home) and the dominant (prominent note that leads back to the tonic with a strong sense of resolution) play more important roles than the other notes in establishing the key of the piece. This key revolves heavily around the seven pitches of some diatonic scale (picture the white keys of a piano keyboard which make up the C-major scale) while other notes outside that scale are called “accidentals” (imagine the black keys of a keyboard in the context of a C-major scale). This age-old paradigm of tonal music – which still dominates popular music today – values certain pitches, namely the tonic and dominant, above all others when establishing the home key. Schoenberg contested this artificial preference of certain pitches above others, so he established his new twelve-tone system where all twelve chromatic pitches must sound before any one can repeat again, effectively abolishing all sense of a traditional key. Even though this style dominated the European musical landscape of the mid-twentieth century, “nothing was considered more hostile than so-called influences from the West,

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>42</sup> *The Harvard Concise Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Don Michael Randel, s.v. “Twelve-tone music,” (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 693-694.



to which twelve-tone music belonged,”<sup>43</sup> so no recordings or scores existed in Estonia when Pärt was studying with Eller at the Tallinn State Conservatory.

Unperturbed, Pärt taught himself how to write in this new twelve-tone system by studying two contraband textbooks that Heino Eller lent him from a former student who had emigrated to Sweden. His resulting symphony, *Nekrolog (1960)* was one of the most important works in Pärt’s development because it demonstrated his experimental and insatiable quest for musical purity regardless of the potential consequences. He took a great risk because “composing this kind of work was a public defiance of the socialist rules for the creation of art.”<sup>44</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, it pointed to the *raison d’être* of Pärt’s search for divine purity through sound that would continue to define the rest of his life. He states, “The piece was the starting point of my explorations. Searching for truth. Searching for purity. It is searching for God, in fact. What is really going on? What does have a meaning after all? This is like the end and the beginning all in one.”<sup>45</sup>

This quest to discover truth through his music pushed Arvo Pärt to continue exploring with increasingly cutting-edge techniques. In an attempt to merge the old with the new, he began to experiment with the collage technique, in which he placed sections of other composers’ works, like Bach and Tchaikovsky, into his modern twelve-tone framework to create a completely new product that merged both the timeless and the contemporary. He described it as “an attempt to replant a flower in alien surroundings... Here, however, the idea of transplantation was not in the

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<sup>43</sup> Martin Elste, “An Interview with Arvo Pärt,” *Fanfare*, November 4, 1988, 338.

<sup>44</sup> Mihkelson, “A Narrow Path to the Truth: Arvo Pärt and the 1960s and 1970s in Soviet Estonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, 23.

<sup>45</sup> “Heliloojaks saamine: Optimistitlikud kuuekümnendad (Becoming a Composer: Optimistic Sixties),” narrated by Immo Mihkelson, part 4 of 14, *Arvo Pärt 70, Klassikaraadio*, September, 2005. Reprinted in Immo Mihkelson, “A Narrow Path to the Truth: Arvo Pärt and the 1960s and 1970s in Soviet Estonia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 23.

foreground - I wished rather to cultivate a single flower myself."<sup>46</sup> He drew heavily on the legendary Christian composer Johann Sebastian Bach, "the nodal point, the central figure of Western music,"<sup>47</sup> during this time, culminating in his collage masterpiece, *Credo* (1968).

This composition written for solo piano, chorus, and orchestra marked a pivotal moment in Arvo Pärt's career because it simultaneously marked the climax of his struggle with contemporary techniques, led to a widespread censorship of his works, and served as a tipping point into his period of silence. Even though the twelve-tone style was no longer contraband, the title and text were all drawn from the Bible in a defiant shout of his stalwart Christian faith in the midst of the secular State – "Credo in Jesum Christum," and Matthew 5:38-9 "Audivistis dictum: oculum pro oculo, dentem pro dente. Autem ego vobis dico: non esse resistendum injuriae" ("You have heard it said: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say unto you: do not resist evil"). Even though its premiere was a rousing success and was immediately encored (or perhaps because of its reception), this work received a decade-long ban, and Pärt suffered from increasing pressure from Soviet officials.<sup>48</sup>

Pärt places his personal crisis on display in *Credo* in uncharacteristically simplistic terms. His struggle to integrate the traditional tonal music of Bach with his contemporary dodecaphonic style pits Bach's elegant *Prelude in C Major* from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* against a violently discordant dodecaphonic middle section before returning to the pastoral restatement of the diatonic *Prelude in C Major* as the cacophony fades into a triumphant serenity. Pärt explains his musical choices in an interview with *The New York Times* in 2010, "I wanted to put together

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<sup>46</sup> Merike Vaitmaa, liner notes, *Arvo Pärt, Cello Concerto "Pro et Contra"; Perpetuum Mobile; Symphony No. 1, "Polyphonic"; Symphony No. 2; Symphony No. 3, Bamberg Symphony Orchestra, Neeme Järvi*, (BIS CD-434, 1989), compact disc.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

the two worlds of love and hate. I knew what kind of music I would write for hate, and I did it. But for love, I was not able to do it.”<sup>49</sup> The fact that he used the contemporary dodecapronic music as his symbol for hatred rather than in the more positive light of progress shows that he was rapidly losing faith in the ability of musical progress to express the love and sacrality that he wanted to imbue upon his music.

His method of transitioning from what he calls the “love” of Bach’s *Prelude in C Major* to his violent dodecapronic section sheds more light upon his personal convictions in 1964. Rather than naively juxtaposing the peaceful diatonic music with the cacophonous middle elements, Pärt allows the initial theme in C major to slowly merge into the twelve-tone block chords through the very progression that gives the traditional music its stability: the circle of fifths.

The circle of fifths is a cycle of notes related by the interval of a fifth (the tonic-dominant relationship discussed earlier with tonal music) until it reaches the initial pitch-class<sup>50</sup> again several octaves higher. Ever since Pythagoras stumbled into a blacksmith’s workshop<sup>51</sup> and discovered the “inviolable mathematical relationships”<sup>52</sup> – ratios of strings’ lengths (or in this case hammer/anvil sizes) that create harmonious intervals when plucked (or struck) simultaneously – the interval of a fifth has served as the pillar for all tonal tuning systems.

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<sup>49</sup> Arthur Lubow, “The Sound of Spirit,” *The New York Times*, October 15, 2010, accessed January 15, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17part-t.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17part-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0).

<sup>50</sup> A pitch-class is a pitch related between several different octaves. Where an “A” pitch would appear to us as a single note on a keyboard and would always have a specific frequency, the “A” pitch-class can exist as that same note between several different octaves and could contain several different interrelated frequencies. It is helpful to imagine a keyboard where are several different keys that we understand as discrete “A” pitches yet they are all related as the same “A” pitch-class.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1999), 42.

<sup>52</sup> Stuart Isacoff, *Temperament: How Music Became a Battleground for the Great Minds of Western Civilization* (New York: Random House, 2001), 5.

Throughout history, from Pythagoras until today, the relationship between the tonic and the dominant has defined traditional functional harmony.

The eloquence behind Pärt's usage of the circle of fifths lies in his distortion of tonality's backbone into the instrument that progressively, even inevitably, leads to his representation of "evil" cacophony. In this progression, he employs the twelve-tone technique as the cycle passes through all twelve chromatic pitches on its path from peace to violence. Paul Hillier points out that "in this context serialism function not, as might be anticipated, as a willing agent of evil(!), but as an almost unwitting step in the process that leads to chaos."<sup>53</sup> Pärt clearly demonstrates his immense distrust of musical progress to encapsulate the religiosity that he hopes to communicate through his music. Even though he had created a veritable masterpiece by seamlessly blending the purity of Bach's *Prelude* with the vitriolic twelve-tone and aleatoric section, he had reached his peak as a composer in the cerebral and often cacophonous contemporary compositional styles.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 59.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-63.

*Arvo Pärt: Period of Silence*

Following his great success with *Credo*, Pärt lost all faith in the notion of progress within music to capture the sacrality of religion – he reverted to the music of J.S. Bach rather than his own music to express love, after all. Even though he had championed twelve-tone music for years, he realized that “if the human has conflict in his soul and with everything, then this system of twelve-tone music is exactly good for this... But if you have no more conflict with people, with the world, with God, then it is not necessary.”<sup>55</sup> Without any clear path for how to express this peaceful soul, he fell into a despondent and disillusioned silence for eight years during which he completely reinvented his compositional style to capture the numinous and the transcendent. His biographer and musical collaborator Paul Hillier writes,

With *Credo*, Pärt had written himself into a cul-de-sac: he had reached a position of complete despair, in which the composition of music appeared to be the most futile of gestures, and he lacked the musical faith and will-power to write even a single note. It was from this creative death that there gradually arose in him a search for an entirely new way to proceed.<sup>56</sup>

He spent his time focusing, not on the progress that could be made through art, but the sense of timelessness found within exceptional art forms. In an interview on Estonian Radio in 1968 he expressed his new direction, “Art has to deal with eternal questions, not just sorting out the issues of today.”<sup>57</sup> He spent the years between 1968 and 1976 searching for that eternity within a period of relative silence. After producing prolific amounts of music, he only released *Symphony No. 3 “Pro et Contra”* (1971) and film scores to pay the bills during that entire eight-year period. On his search for the sacred within music, he immersed himself in the 14<sup>th</sup>-century French music of the Notre Dame and Netherlands schools, which included composers like

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<sup>55</sup> Lubow, “The Sound of Spirit,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>56</sup> Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 64.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

Machaut, Ockeghem, Obrecht, Josquin, and Palestrina.<sup>58</sup> From these intense studies in the beginning of polyphony, Pärt reemerged in 1976 with his new style, *tintinnabuli*, which draws inspiration heavily from these studies in Gregorian chant and early polyphony.

In the time following the premiere of *Credo*, Pärt had his first experience with Gregorian chant while shopping a bookstore. His eyes opened to a previously undiscovered world of music that saturated his soul with the spirituality he was seeking. He recounts this encounter in a 2010 interview, “In one moment it was clear how much deeper and more pure is this world. Everyone has many antennae, and they catch what we cannot even register in our minds. But the feeling is clear.”<sup>59</sup> Having discovered the transcendent spirituality inherent within the monody (one melody) and simple polyphony (multiple intertwining melodies) of the Medieval and Renaissance composers, Pärt dedicated himself to mastering this new art form.

With his trademark fastidiousness, Pärt filled countless notebooks with attempts to “learn how to walk again as a composer”<sup>60</sup> by composing one-line monodies. He tried to separate his personal creative inclinations from this new searching by viewing inanimate objects, like landscapes or the palm of his hand, or reading a psalm and then quickly writing a melody from that inspiration. Over time, this intense study of monody and polyphony morphed into his new, ascetic compositional style that he dubbed *tintinnabuli*.

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-9.

<sup>59</sup> Lubow, “The Sound of Spirit,” *The New York Times*.

<sup>60</sup> Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 74.

*Tintinnabuli*

*Tintinnabuli* takes its name from the Latin word *tintinnabulum*, which means “little bells,” because its unique, austere sound hearkens to the triadic ringing of a bell.<sup>61</sup> It follows a simple yet rigid system of relating melodies and harmonies within the unchanging tonality of a single triad – a stack of three notes related by a third and a fifth to create what people recognize as a chord in Western music – to create a texture of beautiful, scintillating overtones that fluctuate between complex consonances and dissonances rising from the simple unity of the triad. This technique flawlessly captures the constantly shifting, indefinable qualities of that liminal space between the immanent and the transcendent.<sup>62</sup> According to contemporary musicologist Robert Sholl, “The subtle sense of tension and release imparted by this technique creates the quintessential quality of Pärt’s music.”<sup>63</sup>

The two voices of a *tintinnabuli* line include the M-voice, or melodic voice, which moves in simple chant-like motion along a tonic scale (which is often modal) while the T-voice, or *tintinnabuli* voice, complements it by playing only the three pitch classes contained within a single triad. By subtly shifting the relationships between the M-voice and the T-voice, such as which one plays above or below the other, Pärt creates the illusion of having more notes than are actually present within the unstable sonority.

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<sup>61</sup> Marguerite Bostonia, “Bells as inspiration for tintinnabulation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 128.

<sup>62</sup> Leopold Brauneiss, “Musical archetypes: The basic elements of the tintinnabuli style,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012).

<sup>63</sup> Sholl, 142.

His first piece in the *tintinnabuli* style was the delicate solo piano piece, *Für Alina* (1976)

[Fig. 1]. Its haunting, mystical melody contains only two notes at a time of extremely high and

Für Alina - Arvo Pärt, Piano

Figure 1: Arvo Pärt, *Für Alina*, 1976 from “Für Alina – Arvo Pärt, Piano,” [annemievaniel.be](http://www.annemievaniel.be), accessed on April 2, 2015, <http://www.annemievaniel.be/lijsten/pdf/PartFurAlina.pdf>.

extremely low registers played against each other – the M-voice in the right hand and the T-voice in the left – to provide the perfect example of the *tintinnabuli* style. Pärt reflects, “That was the first piece that was on a new plateau. It was here that I discovered the triad series, which I made my simple, little guiding rule.”<sup>64</sup> It follows the simplest iteration of *tintinnabuli*: the M-voice

plays a simple chant-like melody in the B-minor scale while the T-voice plays whichever note is closest to the M-voice in the B-minor triad while always remaining below it.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Wolfgang Sandner, Liner Notes, *Arvo Pärt: Tabula Rasa*, trans. Anne Cattaneo, ECM New Series 1275, 1984, compact disc, 27.

<sup>65</sup> Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 77.



A time signature, which indicates how many beats appear within each measure, is also conspicuously absent from this sheet music. These collections of beats create passing cycles that we can detect by listening for the downbeat, which is the first and typically strongest beat of each measure in Western music. The number of beats arranged within these cycles influences the way we understand music, while the repeating cycles help us organize the passage of time. For example, one can immediately differentiate between a 3/4 waltz and a 4/4 pop song just from the various stresses. However, similarly to Gregorian chant, *tintinnabuli* does not have a standard time signature to organize its rhythms within time, so it has a constantly shifting and disorienting sense of time. This ineffable passage elicits a feeling of timelessness within the listener because it transcends these rhythmic cycles. Without these metrics, Pärt suspends the listener in an alternate sense of temporality. We will discuss this concept further when considering how *tintinnabuli* can evoke an experience of transcendent, or even spiritual, eternity.

The notes themselves follow a strict methodology that never strays from the fundamental guiding rule of the single triad, like the ringing of a bell. The low B repeated and sustained throughout the piece roots the short work in its B-minor tonality without changing keys. The one aberration from this strict methodology comes in the eleventh measure when the left hand strays



Figure 2: Arvo Pärt, *Für Alina*, 1976, Original score, from Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 88-89.

from the B-minor triad to play a C#; this note is highlighted in his original score with a flower sketched by his wife, Nora [Fig. 2]. In his documentary *24 Preludes for a Fugue*, Pärt says that he now has “a need to concentrate on each sound,

so that every blade of grass would be as important as a flower.”<sup>66</sup> This insightful statement shows the drastic change in his pursuit of music because, rather than trying to challenge the listener, he is trying capture the transcendent beauty within pure sound itself. Fascinatingly, Pärt’s descriptor as a sacred music composer only began after he revealed this new approach to music through *Für Alina* even though it lacks any explicitly religious characteristics.<sup>67</sup>

It follows that something within *tintinnabuli*, itself, must elicit something with listeners to make them classify Pärt’s music spiritual or mystical. We just outlined the basic elements of *tintinnabuli* through analyzing *Für Alina* (1976), and these elements certainly evoke strong responses from listeners. Examining what feelings Pärt is trying to communicate through these compositional techniques will elucidate *how* and *why* the music itself affects so many people.

In the liner notes of his premiere album with ECM, *Tabula Rasa*, Pärt eloquently expresses the transcendent quality and inspiration for *tintinnabuli* in his uniquely perceptive yet unspecific rhetoric:

Tintinnabulation is an area I sometimes wander into when I am searching for answers – in my life, my music, my work. In my dark hours, I have the certain feeling that everything outside this one thing has no meaning. The complex and many-faceted only confuses me, and I must search for unity. What is it, this one thing, and how do I find my way to it? Traces of this perfect thing appear in many guises – and everything that is unimportant falls away. *Tintinnabulation* is like this. Here I am alone with silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played. This one note, or a silent beat, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, with two voices. I build with the most primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I called it *tintinnabulation*.<sup>68</sup>

Even though he does not use explicitly religious terms in this description of his music, Pärt clearly seeks what can only be called a spiritual or transcendent peace. His descriptions of his music revolve around words like “beauty,” “unity,” and “silence” now rather than his

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<sup>66</sup> *Arvo Pärt: 24 Preludes for a Fugue*, directed by Dorian Supin (Alliance, 2005), DVD.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>68</sup> Sandner, Liner Notes, *Arvo Pärt: Tabula Rasa*, 26.

previous drive to experiment, progress, and challenge using increasingly complex art forms in his quest for transcendence.

This new search for transcendent purity within silence and simplicity has been connected to his conversion from Lutheranism to Russian Orthodoxy ever since Wolfgang Sandner likened Pärt's music to "the hesychastic prayers of a musical anchorite: mysterious and simple, illuminating and full of love"<sup>69</sup> in the same *Tabula Rasa* liner notes. Contemporary musicologist Laura Dolp astutely notes the extreme influence that album exerted, not only on Pärt's musical reception, but how it was discussed thereafter:

Sandner's contribution may have been fleeting... but his rhetoric on the issue of spirituality... offered both a working vocabulary and the license to characterize Pärt's music as embodied worship. His direct parallels between the experience of Pärt's music and Orthodox prayer became a thematic mainstay of subsequent commentary."<sup>70</sup>

Similarly, ECM capitalized on this association by presenting him as "a pious, solitary spiritual seeker who lives in the embodied moment"<sup>71</sup> in all of their promotional materials. The paratextual elements surrounding his music included pristine, minimalist album designs, scholarly liner notes (for the first few releases), and monk-like image of the bearded Pärt. These features helped prompt his characterization as a "mystical minimalist" and helped market him as an exotic, spiritual composer to increasingly widespread audiences. Paul Hillier specifically identifies Russian Orthodox faith: iconography and the tradition of the apophatic, or negative theology.

Hillier traces Pärt's incorporation of Gregorian chant into *tintinnabuli* to the sense of timelessness inherent within the Russian Orthodox tradition of iconography:

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>70</sup> Dolp, "Arvo Pärt in the marketplace," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, 183.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

The timelessness of such music overrides the question of contemporaneity. He has not sought to imitate the external appearance of chant or early music, but rather to incorporate its manner of operation (as an approach to sound, and as an expression of all-encompassing purpose), into his own.<sup>72</sup>

Pärt never claims to create icons through his music, preferring to allow his music to speak for itself, but the aesthetic qualities are readily apparent. People describe his music as “timeless” or “eternal” ubiquitously, and Pärt himself seeks an opportunity to combine the two states. He says, “That is my goal. Time and timelessness are connected. This instant and eternity are struggling within us.”<sup>73</sup>

The Russian Orthodox Church is inseparable from the hesychast tradition, which values “stillness, silence, tranquility, and also stability, being seated, fixed in concentration.”<sup>74</sup> These same values are expressed in relation to *tintinnabuli* both from listeners and from the composer himself. Pärt finds the most truthful expression of what he calls “the nucleus” of his compositional process “by way of reduction [rather] than by growing complexity. Reduction certainly doesn’t mean simplification, but it is the way... to the most intense concentration on the essence of things.”<sup>75</sup> This reduction comes in many forms – reduction of structure, of tonality, of rhythm – to more fully express the stillness that is so vital within his music.

Pärt’s love of silence has been linked with the apophatic tradition, or negative theology, that argues “that God can only be known by what He is *not*.”<sup>76</sup> This tradition, which traces its foundation back to the anonymous writer referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius, propounds that a believer can only experience God in his full divinity “by plunging into the darkness of

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<sup>72</sup> Sandner, Liner Notes, *Arvo Pärt: Tabula Rasa*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Geoff Smith, “An Interview with Arvo Pärt: Sources of Invention,” *The Musical Times* 140, no. 1868 (1999): 19.

<sup>76</sup> Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 9.

unknowing, [where one] passes not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence.”<sup>77</sup> Rather than trying to name all the different components of God, this tradition argues that the believer should unname every preconceived idea they ascribe to God in order to experience Him in His pure, mystical divinity. Similarly, Pärt greatly values absolute silence as a sacred space both in his work and in his compositional process:

My music has emerged only after I have been silent for quite some time, literally silent. For me, ‘silent’ means the ‘nothing’ from which God created the world. Ideally, a silent pause is something sacred... If someone approaches the silence with love, then this might give birth to music. A composer must often wait a long time for his music.<sup>78</sup>

Arvo Pärt’s biography is, without a doubt, one of the most unique and formative set of circumstances that crafted the creation of his *tintinnabuli* music that we know today. His initial experimental pursuits that flourished from his innate drive to express the transcendent led to his intimate relationship with the history of Western music, particularly with the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. His subsequent period of silence, conversion, and renaissance then served as the most productive and idiosyncratic hiatus in twentieth century history. Even though these unique circumstances provide lots of useful insights into Pärt as a man and as a composer, his wife Nora warns against relying too heavily upon his story without giving his music its due time. She reminds us, “you can always connect ideas – biographical or not - with Arvo's music. Yet the meaning of the music is purely musical.”<sup>79</sup> This point must remain in the forefront of our minds proceeding forward: Pärt’s biography and religious background are fascinating topics, but it is

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<sup>77</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology*, trans. by Editors of The Shrine of Wisdom (Herts, England: The Garden City Press, 1923), 13.

<sup>78</sup> Leo Normet, “The beginning is silence,” *Teater. Muusika, Kino 7* (1988), 22.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, “An Interview with Arvo Pärt: Sources of Invention,” *The Musical Times*, 21.

his avant-garde *tintinnabuli* music that elevated him from censorship in the Soviet Union to being the “world’s most performed living composer”<sup>80</sup> for three years straight.

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<sup>80</sup> Chris Glew, “Arvo Pärt world’s most performed composer for third year running (video),” *Estonian World*, January 10, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015, <http://estonianworld.com/culture/arvo-part-worlds-performed-composer-third-year-running/>.

*Sacred in Music*

Before analyzing what classifies Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music as sacred specifically, we first need to thoroughly examine what other scholars have written about the sacred within music and what aspects are considered "religious" or "spiritual" in this context. Jonathan Arnold, a professor at Oxford University as well as a singer in several exceptional early church vocal ensembles, lays out a thoughtfully constructed approach to these questions in his most recent book, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*. In it, he uses a series of interviews with prominent Christian composers and performers to "suggest that the intrinsically theological and spiritual nature of sacred music remains an immense attraction particularly in secular society."<sup>81</sup> His thorough research of the sacred in music leads to a definition that covers many different aspects of music, from the composing process to the performance to the audience's reception. We will use these categories as a starting point for our own exploration into how "instrumental music, without any religious text or context, can provide a 'spiritual experience.'"<sup>82</sup>

Arnold divides sacrality within music into three different categories: intention, context, and what he calls the "genius" of the art form. The first category, intention, relates entirely to the creative process of composing music. If a composer writes a piece "that is explicitly intended for the purpose of expressing (and stimulating in the listener) one's devotion to a specifically Christian God in all his ineffability,"<sup>83</sup> then it retains a spiritual nature. Even though Arnold specifies that his definitions relate to a Christian God, they translate seamlessly to our more general examination of spirituality, which does not depend on any specific faith system. In choral

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<sup>81</sup> Jonathan Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, (Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), fourth cover.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

pieces, the textual selections can reveal the composer's intentions because any setting of a sacred text obviously confers the sacred nature of that text to the music. Arnold's examples, which include Brahms' *Requiem* and a U2 pop song influenced by the band members' shared Christian faith, do not necessarily depend solely upon the composers' intentions for the music like he says. Rather, it relies upon the listeners' *understanding* of the composers' intention. This subtle clarification drastically changes this category because it means that a composer's goal does not imbue music with a certain sacrality, rather it means that the listener's preexisting knowledge of the music's inception influences whether he or she considers it sacred. Regardless, the flexibility of this category means that anything from a setting of a Mass to a pop song can be equivalently religious regardless of whether the music is textual or instrumental.

His second category, context, also needs little explanation. Any music performed in a place of worship or with a liturgical function draws its spirituality from the setting or purpose. Contemporary theologian Albert Blackwell echoes this sentiment by defining sacred music according to its mystical and sacramental purposes. He states, "music increases in holiness to the degree that is intimately linked with liturgical action, winningly expresses prayerfulness, promotes solidarity, and enriches sacred rites with heightened solemnity."<sup>84</sup> Blackwell's dual focus on the mystical and on the sacramental mirrors our more general approach to spirituality because he defines a mystical experience as providing a "sense of intimate communion with reality infinitely greater than ourselves."<sup>85</sup> We will return to this point later when considering which definition of religion to employ for this investigation. Regardless of its physical setting, the aforementioned categories classify music as sacred based on its text, the composer's

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<sup>84</sup> Blackwell, *The Sacred in Music*, 15.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.



intention, and its function, but they do not consider highly moving instrumental works that evoke a sense of timelessness and reverence in the listener despite lacking those qualifications.

Arnold's final category considers "the liberation of music from its religious function over the centuries" by examining what he calls its "*genius*." He explains this term further by saying, "[genius music] appeals to those needs, desires, and doubts that are experienced by all thinking and truly human individuals."<sup>86</sup> Through this category, secular music that evokes a transcendent experience in a listener can still be defined as spiritual because of its capacity to fill any deeply human needs in spite of its lack of religious context or function. For example, if somebody hears a secular piece of music like Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* or Ludwig van Beethoven's *Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13*, more commonly known as the *Sonata Pathétique*, while driving or listening in a concert hall, that person can rightfully describe that experience as being spiritual or religious. This response confers sacrality onto the music itself. These experiences are quite common for many concertgoers both from pieces of music that qualify as sacred under Arnold's previous categories and from secular instrumental music performed without any religious setting or function. This category of music's genius accounts for the spiritual nature behind those musical experiences because it references the music itself in relation to the external socio-historical context rather than relying solely upon extra-musical factors to categorize music's spirituality.

Here, Arnold strays from referencing only music's extrinsic qualities to discuss its intrinsic qualities as well. This distinction hearkens to an age-old debate amongst music theorists about how music conveys meaning to its listeners: does it come from outside factors or from the music itself? Jeremy Begbie, a prominent musician and theologian, defines music's *extrinsic*

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<sup>86</sup> Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, 10.

qualities as its “capacity to relate in some manner to some extra-musical/non-musical object or objects or states of affairs (e.g. emotions, ideas, physical objects, events etc.)” while he defines *intrinsic* as “theories which lay the principal stress on the relationships between the constituent elements of music itself.”<sup>87</sup>

He explains that proponents of the intrinsic nature of music tend to align themselves with “essentialism: treating music as if it were an asocial, acultural (and ahistorical) phenomenon, with no intrinsic ties to contingent, shared human interests.”<sup>88</sup> Even though this approach has gained increasing support from proponents of what is called “new musicology,”<sup>24</sup> it naively assumes that music can be considered as existing within a vacuum without relating to the social and cultural realities in which it is embedded. This approach is simply preposterous, though, in light of music’s extensive social functions and because it is always composed, performed, and conceived in different socio-historical environments that affect its expression and interpretation. After all, at its core music is inherently temporal; it can only be experienced within time and through time. Musicologists cannot extract the notes themselves from the historical context that surrounds them. For example, the American national anthem contains identical harmonies and rhythms regardless of whether it is performed before the Super Bowl or at a soldier’s funeral, but it evokes drastically different responses in each scenario because of its function, setting, and other external factors. Begbie quotes contemporary musicologist Nicholas Cook to verify the impossibility of musical autonomy, ““pure music is an aesthete’s (and music theorist’s) fiction.””<sup>89</sup> Clearly, any accurate representation of the meaning behind music must account for its historical, social, and political environments.

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<sup>87</sup> Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time*, 11.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>89</sup> Cook (1998a), 92, in Begbie, *Music, Theology, and Time*, 13.

These factors refer to the extra-musical objects, events, and emotions that Begbie calls the extrinsic qualities of music, and, while they are vital for a full understanding of music's meaning, it is equally dangerous to consider these factors too heavily in lieu of the notes and rhythms themselves. This avenue runs the risk of considering music as an inevitability of external events, which divorces the musical meaning from the notes themselves. Begbie warns against this "social reductionism which would seek to account for music exclusively in terms of socio-cultural determinants;" this approach threatens to "dissolve [aesthetic value] too quickly into matters of social utility or function."<sup>90</sup> Regardless of the environment the music is written, performed, or received in, no meaning can be transmitted without considering the vehicle itself: the music. Even though different contexts may shift the way people understand music, any analysis that does not consider the intrinsic relationships of the notes to each other and to silence is woefully incomplete.

From this consideration of the different benefits of viewing music from its intrinsic and extrinsic values, it becomes obvious that an accurate musical analysis *must* include considerations both of the socio-historical realities of its time of composition, performance, and reception *and* of the relations of the notes, harmonies, and rhythms to themselves and to silence. Music's ability to create and to transmit meaning both through its intrinsic and extrinsic qualities echoes Charles Taylor's assertion that humanity is simultaneously immanent and transcendent<sup>91</sup> – a correlation that I do not believe is accidental. We will return to this comparison later when discussing why music affects people so profoundly

Arnold's categories of sacred music span both the extrinsic and the intrinsic qualities of music. His first category, intention, draws its influence most heavily from the extrinsic qualities

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 14-15.

<sup>91</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

of music because the composer's aim when composing the piece and the listeners' understanding of that intention reside outside the realm of the notes themselves. His second category, context, also refers exclusively to music's extrinsic qualities by drawing upon its location and function. His final category, music's genius, considers both the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects; however, it still relies heavily on the extra-musical environment of its reception because it refers to music that "appeals to those needs, desires, and doubts that are experienced by all thinking and truly human individuals."<sup>92</sup> Even though the music itself somehow answers those needs, the external world still dictates what constitutes them. Additionally, Arnold never considers what compositional techniques actually communicate these feelings of the transcendent to specify what could help some music elicit certain responses from listeners. Many different problems exist within this vague definition of what makes music sacred that should each be redressed to fully understand how it most effectively applies to Pärt's secular *tintinnabuli* music.

Arnold's attempt to provide a broad and all-encompassing qualification for what makes music sacred is commendable but far too flimsy to be used as a metric. He clearly defines sacred music as "music that touches upon themes eternal and essential to human existence as we perceive them from a Western aesthetic." He then expounds upon these themes by reiterating that "truly great music... is 'sacred' to the degree that it... speaks to a humanity united by shared frailty, doubt, and a desire to admire something transcendent."<sup>93</sup> While these points provide an exceptional start to our consideration of identifying the sacrality within secular music, the *how* and *why* of the way that music "speaks to humanity" remains frustratingly vague.

One of the most commendable parts of his discussion about genius music lies in his recognition of his own Western Christian heritage and the resultant limiting of his scope to how

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<sup>92</sup> Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, 10.

<sup>93</sup> Arnold, *Sacred Music in Secular Society*, 11.

we “perceive [music] from a Western aesthetic.” This point is very important because it acknowledges that two different people – for example a Russian Orthodox priest and a tribal aborigine – could respond drastically differently to the same performance of the same piece of music because of their incongruous cultural and musical heritage. Three different moments must be considered to fully understand the message that music communicates while firmly embedding it as a socio-historically time-dependent phenomenon. These moments include music’s inception, creation, and reception.

First: the moment of inception. Regardless of how idiosyncratic or avant-garde a composer attempts to be, he must necessarily respond to the socio-historical stimuli of his surroundings using the conceptual and musical vocabularies that he has inherited. Even when Pärt entered his period of silence and removed himself as much as possible from contemporary music he was still writing within the context of his Lutheran and Russian Orthodox faith systems and in response to the music of the Western canon.

Second: the moment of creation. Performers interpret the music according to their own historical factors, which can be concurrent with or separate from the composer’s. One can listen to many performances of the same piece of music over time to demonstrate just how much performers’ interpretations and technical backgrounds can shape their interpretations of the music.<sup>94</sup>

Third: the moment of reception. Listeners receive and interpret music based upon their own socio-historical backgrounds, personal experiences, and musical heritages. This moment

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<sup>94</sup> Another interesting and productive thesis could trace one piece of music through time to explore its development from its composition to its contemporary iteration. Following a prominent work, like Bach’s *Chaconne* for solo violin, Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique* for solo piano, or Mozart’s *Requiem in D minor* for orchestra and choir, would make some interesting comparisons between different cultures, time periods, religious influences, and biographies.

interests us most because we want to examine why people call Pärt's music spiritual without knowledge about the composer or performers' backgrounds or intentions. Any interpretation of music without that information revolves around the composer's compositional choices than around his intentions themselves. Different compositional techniques must transmit certain feelings to people based upon their cultural and music backgrounds, so that seems like the next logical step to understanding how certain "genius" music transmits these feelings of transcendence to its audiences.

Unfortunately, Jonathan Arnold never takes that step of critically examining the music itself. He simply settles to say that "in Western society today, *all* music that evokes a genuine affective response also appeals to [our sense of transcendence] to a lesser or greater degree." This statement essentially gives him carte blanche, however, because, as we already observed from the Strong Experiences of Music Project, these "genuine affective responses" can come from almost any type of music. Personally, I have a hard time believing that *any* music can be considered sacred based solely upon subjective responses to it. Plus, this much flexibility removes the possibility of creating any useful metric of what makes music sacred because it varies according to each person's individual reactions.

His only weak attempt to clarify these concerns results in saying that this music "affects the composer, performer, or individual to the degree that it points towards something far greater than itself, but that it alone can begin to express," which he later attributes to "the attraction of beautiful and profound harmony... [that appeals] to desires deep in human souls." Again, Arnold substitutes explanations of *how* and *why* music can have these effects with lofty, poetic, and nebulous odes to the power of music. Conversely, I believe that certain qualities inherent within the music itself elicit this divine reverence within the context of the Western Judeo-Christian

tradition and its intimately related secular society, but before identifying genius music, we must qualify what “needs, desires, and doubts”<sup>95</sup> exist in today’s Western society.

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

*Disenchantment and Secularity*

All of the examples we have presented for people who call Arvo Pärt's secular works "spiritual," "transcendent," or "religious" have come from Western society – meaning Western Europe or America. Additionally, these monikers only appeared after Pärt unveiled *tintinnabuli* in 1976, which focuses our investigation into what makes his music sacred. Many of these people encounter his music outside any religious settings and do not know his background, yet they still describe his music in spiritual and religious terms – as demonstrated by countless YouTube comments from people unfamiliar with his biography. These qualifications rule out Arnold's first two categories for identifying sacred music – religious intention and context – leaving his final category – genius – as the only available explanation. Consequently, we must examine what "needs, desires, and doubts" plague these people in contemporary Western society.

The lamentations about the current state of today's disenchanted and secular world appear so often in so many venues that they have become almost hackneyed. Ever since the Enlightenment shifted the locale of truth from the transcendent, all-powerful God to the method-driven logic of immanent reason, our society has become increasingly secular in our understanding of truth. Accordingly, today's culture obsesses over the objectivity and predictability afforded by scientific and mathematical models over the wonder and awe found in mystery. The ineffable has faded before the predictable. Unfortunately, this obsession with objectivity has left little room for what contemporary theologian, Charles Taylor, calls the sense of "fullness"<sup>96</sup> that is vital to humanity's need for both the transcendent and the immanent. A

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<sup>96</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.



thorough examination of the history and process behind the disenchantment thesis and the affect that it has exerted over contemporary society will shed extraordinary light upon the power behind Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music.

The disenchantment thesis has been written about many times according to different frameworks that often repurpose its origins and projected outcomes to match the overall goals of the author. Since the Enlightenment's self-fulfilling prophecy that envisioned "the 'darkness' of religious ignorance" fading before the "'lights' of reason,"<sup>97</sup> this thesis has undergone many different forms. At its most extreme, the theory actually predicted the eventual extinction – or privatization at the least – of all religion under the inexorable pressure – and assumed infallibility – of scientific progress. As Jose Casanova has pointed out, however, that simply has not happened. Religions are still robust, growing, and exerting an influence upon the supposedly public sphere. So what, then, is the disenchantment thesis if this mainstream form has been discredited?

Charles Taylor identifies the crux of the disenchantment thesis that has resulted in our undeniably secular age – meaning that primary cultural values revolve more heavily upon nonreligious justifications than upon religious foundations – as the shift in truth from the realm of the transcendent to the immanent. He provides a succinct summary of truth's previous locale:

The general understanding of the human predicament before modernity placed us in an order where we were not at the top. Higher beings, like Gods or spirits, or a higher kind of being, like the Ideas of the cosmopolis of Gods and humans, demanded and deserved our worship, reverence devotion or love. In some cases, this reverence or devotion was itself seen as integral to human flourishing; it was a proper part of the human good... These beings commanded our awe. There was no question of treating them as we treat the forces of nature we harness for energy.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, 31.

<sup>98</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

In contrast to this widespread devotion, today's secular world is "characterized by rationalization and intellectualization,"<sup>99</sup> which was made possible by a migration of truth from the realm of God to immanent human reason. In his seminal Enlightenment essay, "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber captured the essence of this world as one in which there are "no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play [because]... one can, in principle, master all things by calculation." Perhaps even more importantly, disenchanted man has "the knowledge or belief that, [even if he does not understand something,] if one but wished, one could learn it at any time."<sup>100</sup> Essentially, a disenchanted modern is defined by the belief that Science and Reason can – and eventually will – reduce the universe to reproducible constants and equations. Ironically, this unquestioning faith in the omniscience of reason precisely mirrors the framework of the transcendent worldview they had just condemned despite their so-called progress. In essence, the disenchanted worldview replaced one source of absolute truth, a transcendent God, with another one, immanent Reason.

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<sup>99</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation" in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 156.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.



Figure 3: Frontispiece from Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen auch alen Dingen überhaupt den Liebahren der Wahrheit* (1720), Rare Book Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity – Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy*, by Jeffrey L. Kosky, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2013), xx.

Jeffrey Kosky, a professor at Washington and Lee University, beautifully illustrates this irony in his book, *Arts of Wonder*, using a series of images beginning with the frontispiece from Enlightenment scholar Christian Wolff's work, *Reasonable Thoughts on God, the World and the human Soul, and All things in General. Communicated to the Lovers of Truth by Christian Wolff* [Fig. 3].<sup>101</sup> This image depicts a human town illuminated by the unwavering rays

of a smiling sun that represents and omniscient God who provides truth in the form of the light by which we see the world. This light pierces through the

clouds of ignorance to elucidate the entire world. Regardless of whether the land illuminated from the light is cultivated by human activity or not, it still traces its truth back to the same single vantage point in the sky. In this scene, humans do not control the light; rather, they live in a world illuminated by it. As a result, they do not have to understand the source as long as they worship whatever they recognize as God and accept the absolute certainty provided by His omnipotence.

<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey L. Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity – Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2013), 1.

This omnipotence was shaken as soon as secular methodologies challenged this transcendent worldview's monopoly on truth. Eventually, human reason defeated the transcendent model as the more widely accepted way to view the world. Science and reason provided man with the ability to reduce and to shape the world according to their own purposes without having to rely upon "a God who hides his face and speaks from a cloud."<sup>102</sup> The Enlightenment embarked upon the mission to liberate man from this capricious monopoly on truth and to place it firmly within humanity's control by reducing the world to a world of models



Figure 4: "Apotheosis of Electricity," Title page from *La lumière électrique* (1882), in *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity* – Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy, by Jeffrey L. Kosky, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2013), 11..

where human reason now shines the light of discernment.

This new worldview is represented in Kosky's second image, suggestively entitled "The Apotheosis of Electricity" which comes from "the title page for the 1882 volume of *La lumière électrique*"<sup>103</sup> [Fig. 4]. This image depicts a world where human invention now shines the same light to illuminate the world. Where before a transcendent God elucidated everything, now humans have harnessed the

power of electricity to shine their own light to part the clouds of ignorance and to make the

<sup>102</sup> Kosky, *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity* – Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy, 7.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

murky waters of the world safe. It also warns of the danger of erring from the light of human invention because the one ship that has strayed from its light has crashed on the dark rocks in the foreground. The most striking part about the image, though, is how closely it mirrors the initial image of the transcendent God. Science and invention has been set up as the same source of absolute truth that can and will elucidate all mysteries. Regardless of which occupies the solar position, “God or reason – both make for a world that appears clearly and distinctly.”<sup>104</sup> These Enlightened disenchanted moderns created nothing other than another desperate religious belief that one can create and maintain absolute truth through reason and invention.

In 1927, science’s claim to absolute truth was abruptly ripped away when the quantum physicist Werner Heisenberg introduced his uncertainty principle. This theorem stated, “it is impossible to specify simultaneously, with arbitrary precision, both the momentum and the position of a particle.”<sup>105</sup> Rather, there would always be a slight uncertainty according to the formula:  $\Delta p \Delta q \geq \frac{h}{4\pi}$  where  $\Delta p$  and  $\Delta q$  refer to the uncertainty inherent within the particle’s momentum and location respectively and  $h$  is Planck’s constant.

This seemingly insignificant discovery changed the face and the philosophy of science from that point on. Now, rather than operating entirely with constants, scientific arguments contained statistics, variables, and uncertainty. No measurement could every be true one hundred percent of the time, so data began to increase in scope to account for statistical analyses and the error that was inherent within all measurements. Essentially, science and reason discovered their own impossibility to provide absolute truth.

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>105</sup> Peter Atkins, Julio de Paula, Ronald Friedman, *Physical Chemistry: Quanta, Matter, and Change*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 2014), 60.



*Figure 5: Walter de Maria, The Lightning Field (1977). Permanent earth sculpture: 400 stainless steel poles arranged in a grid array measuring one mile by one kilometer; average pole height 20 feet 7 inches, pole tips form an even plane. Quemado, New Mexico. Photograph by John Cliett. © Dia Art Foundation, New York, in *Arts of Wonder: Enchanting Secularity – Walter De Maria, Diller + Scofidio, James Turrell, Andy Goldsworthy*, by Jeffrey L. Kosky, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2013), 16.*

Now, with the illusion of absolute truth stripped from both a scientific explanation and from a religious explanation, the world is plagued with the reality of an interminable uncertainty.

Charles Taylor acknowledges, “naiveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer or

unbeliever alike.”<sup>106</sup> This new reality of modernity is represented by Kosky’s third image of the series: Walter de Maria’s “The Lightning Field” (1977) [Fig. 5].

This image escapes the previous

framework of a light with a definite source transcending an infallible, transcendent plane to illuminate the temporal one. Rather, it shows a lone lightning bolt piercing through the great cloud of unknowing from an undefined source to light a single point in the dark sky without casting its light anywhere else. It recognizes the failure of reductionism to relegate everything into little boxes because, even with one discovery in the vastly mysterious world, the scientist only reveals one relationship rather than casting an ultimate source of truth upon the entire known and unknown world. Even if that light comes from a religious faith, it now exists as one “option... among many,”<sup>107</sup> so man live their “faith also in a condition of doubt and uncertainty.”<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 21.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

How do people then deal with this constant uncertainty within their lives? Twentieth-century sociologist Peter Berger presents a dire warning in his book, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of Sociological Theory of Religion*, that this uncertainty can strip people of a clear sense of purpose. He claims that the resultant meaningless, or what he calls *anomy*, is “unbearable to the point where the individual may seek death in preference to it.”<sup>109</sup> In order to prevent this state, he argues that people constantly engage in a process of world-building”<sup>110</sup> in which they create a *nomos* around them to understand how to live. This *nomos* protects man as a “shield against [the] terror” of *anomy* by serving as a plausibility structure that orders the human experience. This *nomos* used to be handed down through culture in the form of religion or other inherited knowledge that would provide absolute protection from chaos and uncertainty, but, as we have established, those frameworks have been dismissed both through the immanent and transcendent realms. Therefore, people must constantly engage in this process of world building at all times in an exhausting and never-ending project of fighting off the chaos of the world.

This constant struggle against the agents of chaos creates a highly dissatisfying and incomplete picture of humanity. It defines people only in terms of their struggle against *anomy* rather than for who they are. This image focuses only on the immanent characteristics of humanity rather than on any transcendent nature. In so doing, it sacrifices the fullness of a true dual human nature for a supposedly objective account. Scientists and scholars across many different fields keep attempting to reduce humanity to reproducible constants.

For example, Dr. James Watson, one half of the Watson and Crick team who discovered the helical structure of DNA, once said, “The goal of the human genome project is to understand

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<sup>109</sup> Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1967), 3-5.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-25.

the genetic instructions for the human being.”<sup>111</sup> The Human Genome Project is “the international, collaborative research program whose goal was the complete mapping and understanding of all the genes of human beings.”<sup>112</sup> Even though genes do dictate the formation of all proteins and hence all bodily functions, the belief that they can form some type of “recipe” is just as naïve as it is ill founded. This one attitude is a quintessential example for the reductionism that permeates our contemporary, disenchanted world.

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<sup>111</sup> James Watson, “Winding Your Way through DNA,” interview, University of California San Francisco, 1992, accessed on April 8, 2015, [www.accessexcellence.org/RC/CC/watson.php](http://www.accessexcellence.org/RC/CC/watson.php).

<sup>112</sup> “An Overview of the Human Genome Project: What was the Human Genome Project?,” *National Human Genome Research Institute*, last updated November 8, 2012, accessed on April 9, 2015, <http://www.genome.gov/12011238>.



*Transcendence in Modernity*

Scholars reacted to the oversaturation of the immanent worldview and its failure to provide satisfying descriptions of humanity by turning towards the transcendent presences in the world. Rather than attempting to account for everything in the world according to measurable and objective factors, people have shifted towards a *nomos* that accepts and accounts for the sense of “fullness and seeking to attain it... [within] transcendent reality.”<sup>113</sup> Charles Taylor correctly diagnoses this backswing from the immanent to the transcendent in *A Secular Age* by recognizing the shift in the “equilibrium point”<sup>114</sup> between the two means of understanding the world.

He identifies this transition within contemporary youth “looking for a more direct experience of the sacred, for greater immediacy, spontaneity, and spiritual depth... [which] springs from a profound dissatisfaction with a life encased entirely in the immanent order.” He later elaborates, “they are seeking a kind of unity and wholeness of the world, reclaiming of the place of feeling, against the one-sided pre-eminence of reason.” Crucially, this quest is “informed by an ethic of authenticity. I have to discover my route to wholeness and spiritual depth. The focus is on the individual, and on his/her experience. Spirituality must speak to this experience.”<sup>115</sup> This attitude is indicative of the shift back towards the transcendent rather than the immanent alone when discovering what it means to be fully human in today’s secular world.

This spirituality can come from a transcendence of “secular time” into an alternate sense of temporality that abstracts the subject from the inexorable passage of existence. I use Taylor’s

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<sup>113</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 770.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 506-507.

definition that “secular time is what to us is ordinary time, indeed, to *us* it’s just time, period. One thing happens after another, and when something is past, it’s past.” In contrast, he introduces a “parallel distinction [between] temporal/spiritual. One is concerned with things in ordinary time, the other with the affairs of eternity.” He traces the inherited importance of eternity in the West back to “Plato and Greek philosophy. The really real, full being is outside of time, unchanging. Time is a moving image of eternity. It is imperfect, or tends to imperfection.”<sup>116</sup> Something that points a disenchanted modern towards that “higher time” of eternity allows him or her to experience that taste of the fullness that he or she pines for so desperately.

As a phenomenon inextricably bound to time, music has a special ability to sit at that intersection between the temporal and the eternal, the immanent and the transcendent. Many people write about its ability to speak to the soul on an elevated plane specifically because of its ability to transcend that liminal space in one’s search for a time separate from the world. Ergo, music that directs the listener towards this abstraction from time elicits a spiritual response.

Here, we find fertile ground for understanding why Pärt’s *tintinnabuli* music is considered spiritual almost universally for many people who live in this disenchanted Western world described by Taylor’s *Secular Age*. It directs its audiences into a feeling of augmented and even suspended temporality different from the secular clock-time that dominates their immanent lives. In order to understand how the musical elements within *tintinnabuli* can create this sense of timelessness for its listeners – which is one of the most common descriptions for Pärt’s music – we must first characterize how music orders and measures time.

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

*Time within Music*

At its core, music is a time-bound phenomenon that must be created and experienced within and through time. In its most reduced form, music can be defined as the ordering of aural frequencies through time. Jeremy Begbie uses music to explore the nature of time because it “offers a particular form of participation in the world’s temporality and in doing so, we contend, it has a distinctive capacity to elicit something of the nature of this temporality and our involvement with it.”<sup>117</sup> In it, he provides a clear summary of the different ways that music and time interacts to experience – and to transcend – time’s passage within it.

The two primary ways that time passes within Western tonal music are through the use of rhythm/meter and through the progression of functional harmony. Both of these processes order the pitches into cycles that indicate the flow of time. These cycles create patterns that make music understandable for the listener rather than presenting a cacophonous, disordered wall of sound. We will focus upon the Western tonal system of music that “emerged towards the end of the seventeenth century and has been predominant ever since in European [and other Western] culture.”<sup>118</sup> In many ways, Pärt’s music responds to this Western system of music, and it dominates the sound world of his contemporary listeners. Understanding the relationship between Western tonal music and time will shed immense light upon the way Pärt’s music creates a sense of timelessness for his listeners.

The most obvious way music orders time is through rhythm and its interaction with meter. We discussed meter earlier, which is “a configuration of beats permeating a piece of

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<sup>117</sup> Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time*, 6.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

music,”<sup>119</sup> in its role of providing the listener with an initial “feel” for way time flows through the piece. In essence, it creates a cycle of waves consisting of strong and weak beats that order the piece into a repeating pattern of “equilibrium-tension-resolution in which each beat is dynamically related to the others.”<sup>120</sup> Rhythm orders the pitches within this overall metrical structure to provide this sense of tension and resolution. One way to understand their difference is the idea that we *hear* rhythm while we *feel* meter.

Music is ordered into a hierarchical series of cycles with the smallest one – a measure – growing all the way to movements of a symphony. These waves all follow the same equilibrium, tension, and resolution models on increasingly larger scales within Western tonality. Begbie illustrates this idea clearly in *Theology, Music, and Time*, so we are using the same figure as an example. Notice that the smallest cycles – measures – coalesce into larger cycles – phrases – into

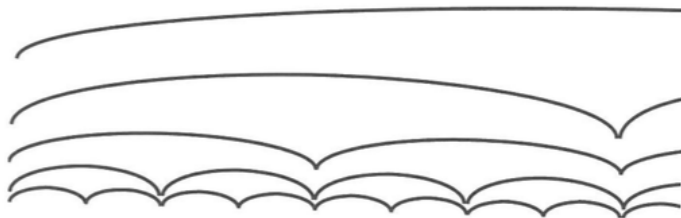


Figure 6: Metrical Matrix in Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 161.

larger ones – periods – and continuously higher levels of organization that order the full piece of music [Fig. 6]. Even though many metrical ambiguities and anomalies will inevitably appear in every piece of music, its overall structure is organized

clearly into a repeating cyclical series. Begbie states, “musical time is thus not essentially about a line split into equal parts but about waves of tension and resolution.”<sup>121</sup>

The second source for measuring time within music comes from classic Western tonal functional harmony. This system creates waves of shifting harmonies that all function around a

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

similar general equilibrium-tension-resolution structure. This structure then revolves around the tonic within a key. The different tones and harmonies can combine dynamically to create different tensions and resolutions that direct the music to and away from its sense of tonic home between the tonic and dominant notes. These cycles create a teleological sense of direction in which the music travels towards its final resting place.

The waves formed by the constant tension and resolution within functional harmony order music into understandable patterns in an identical manner to the series of cycles found through harmony. In terms of the listener's intuitive sense of the musical journey, the dynamic progression of functional harmony may be even more important because it helps people comprehend which notes are more important than others and which ones direct the overall piece of music most critically. The previous image can be repurposed to understand this role of functional harmony by imagining the increasing layers as a single resolution followed by a phrase then a period then a double period until eventually tracing the entire piece of music into an overall framework of dynamic conflict and resolution.

These cycles order Western tonal music for listeners into an understandable narrative within time. In addition, the constant waves of equilibrium-tension-resolution allow them to measure time as it progresses through the course of music. By manipulating audiences' expectations of this pattern – like extending suspensions, changing the pattern unexpectedly, or resolving a tension unusually – composers can provide them with alternate experience of time. While the music cannot literally create separate times, it can influence people's perception of it by subtly shifting the harmonic and metrical waves of tension and resolution.

*Tintinnabuli and Transcendence*

Some of the most common descriptors for Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music revolve around its timeless qualities or its sense of stillness. Often these alternate temporalities prompt comparisons to spirituality or to transcendent qualities within his music. For example, Paul Hillier relates the static sound of his music to Russian Orthodox iconography<sup>122</sup> while Robert Sholl equates it to "a sense of timelessness." When analyzing *Fratres* (1977), he states, "The extreme slowness and the irregular phrase structure, and the absence of an upbeat or a downbeat engenders a sense of timelessness."<sup>123</sup> This sense of timelessness depends more upon the intrinsic musical techniques found within *tintinnabuli* than upon its historical context. Even though the extrinsic factors influence how the music is interpreted, the compositional techniques create those feelings of transcendent eternity.

There are several different key characteristics within *tintinnabuli* that each influences the way it interacts with and through time: the single triadic tonality and the long notes/extensive silences. These interact with the two ways that time is measured within Western music: functional harmony, and rhythm/meter. Time within traditional Western tonality is measured according to the dynamic transitions between tension and resolution, between conflict and peace. However, when *tintinnabuli* breaks free from both of those cycles, it removes its music from the seminal narrative of time's passage and results in a sense of timelessness.

The single triadic tonality is *tintinnabuli*'s most easily recognizable feature and serves as the inspiration for its name – which means "little bells" in Latin. As mentioned previously, the T-voice never leaves the three notes of the founding triad, which roots the music in a seemingly

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<sup>122</sup> Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, 3-5.

<sup>123</sup> Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, 145.

static harmonic progression. Rather than work with traditional Western harmonies, Pärt instead chooses to view music horizontally (focusing on melody) rather than just vertically (focusing on harmony) by juxtaposing the chant-like steps of the M-voice with the carefully regulated and complementary movements of the T-voice. This effect creates a series of highly complex overtones that waver ineffably between consonance and dissonance in a sound reminiscent of the ringing of a bell. Regardless of the movement, the single note from which all music grows – the tonic of the triad – is implied throughout the entire piece rather than shifting according to the push and pull of functional harmony. This grounding in the single tonality transcends the cycles of tension and resolution by which a listener can measure the passage of time in tonal Western music. As a result, the static feeling allows space for a listener to interpret it as spiritual or transcendent.

Similarly, the long drone notes, constantly shifting meter (or lack thereof), and extensive use of silence break from the same cycle of tension and resolution that rhythm uses to mark time within Western tonal music. Normally, the waves of down-beats and up-beats provides a common metric that we can use to measure time, but *tintinnabuli* lacks these cycles for ordering sound. Rather, it features either a constantly shifting meter – like the opening for *Fratres* (1977),

The image shows a musical score for the opening of Arvo Pärt's *Fratres*. It consists of four staves. The top staff is for a vocal line (M-voice) with a tempo marking of  $\text{♩} = c.60$ . The second staff is for a vocal line (T-voice) with a *pp* dynamic. The third staff is for a string section playing *armonici* (harmonics) with a *pp* dynamic. The bottom staff is for a string section playing *pizz.* (pizzicato) with a *pp* dynamic. The score shows a constant shifting of meter: 6/4, 7/4, 9/4, and 11/4. The music is characterized by long, sustained notes and a static harmonic progression.

Figure 7: Arvo Pärt, *Fratres*, opening, in Robert Sholl, “Pärt and Spirituality,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (New York: Cambridge University, 2012), 146.

which switches swiftly between 6/4, 7/4, 9/4, and 11/4 in the opening bars [Fig. 7] – or no meter at all – like *Für Alina* (1976)

[Fig. 1]. As a result, “the sound of this music... is decentered, allusive, on the verge of the audible, and between presence and absence, in a way that implies a notion of spirituality as ineffable, almost intangible, searching.”<sup>124</sup> Transcendent, spiritual time and its ineffability certainly stems from *tintinnabuli*'s relationship with them.

In addition to the decentered meter, the rhythms themselves – or lack thereof – also contribute to the overall sense of the inexpressible within Pärt's music. The long drone notes and extensive silences transcend the same paradigm of tension and resolution because they do not have the same clashes. The long notes and silences disrupt the listener's expectations so frequently that eventually the listener is forced from constraining the music to secular clock-time. Instead, it opens a space free from the constant passage of time to allow the listener to experience the transcendent.

With these characteristics, *tintinnabuli* transcends the ebb and flow of secular time and abstracts the listener into an alternate reality. Note that this *abstraction* varies from *extraction* because music has the power to open a space for an experience of another temporality, but it cannot actually create that other time. Music, as we noted earlier, is inherently bound *within* time and must be experienced *through* time by people who also must necessarily exist *within* time. Even though people can talk about feelings, senses, or experiences of some alternate temporality or “high times” where they were more present or felt more of a sense of fullness, they can never actually depart from their existence within time itself. Therefore, when we talk about music's ability to allow people to experience a separate sense of time, we must be careful to clarify that we are not claiming that music can actually *create* time; rather, it can enhance, influence, and manipulate our understanding of time to provide spaces free for an encounter with the divine.

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.



Regardless, these powers of music to evoke these senses of alternate temporalities stem from the compositional techniques themselves within Pärt's music. The extrinsic properties may (and do) influence the way these moments are interpreted and internalized, but the intrinsic features of the music itself, including the single tonality, long notes, shifting meter, and extensive silences allow people to have those experiences.

*Conclusion: So what makes tintinnabuli sacred?*

After tracing many different threads connected to Arvo Pärt and *tintinnabuli*, we finally have enough background to answer the initial research question: “What makes *tintinnabuli* sacred, after all?” Before answering it outright, we must have a firm grasp upon the many different philosophies and histories from which we are drawing this response. Analyzing Pärt’s music has revealed itself as an exceptionally complex and multidisciplinary undertaking. Without a firm background in his biography, music history, musicology, the disenchantment thesis, and religion, it becomes impossible to assemble a distinct picture of Pärt both as a man and as a composer. Without all of that information, it also becomes far too easy to misinterpret his music, its effects, and its causes. In that light, Nora Pärt’s complaints about a dearth of good scholarship about Arvo make much more sense.<sup>125</sup>

To make the most accurate statements about the sacrality within Pärt’s music, we must focus both on the intrinsic and on the extrinsic values of the music and the context surrounding its inception and reception. As Jeremy Begbie points out, “it is hard to give any satisfactory account of musical meaning which rigorously excludes one or the other.”<sup>126</sup> The extrinsic, or the extra-musical factors that influence interpretation, relate both to Pärt’s background while composing music and to the time and history of the listener receiving his music. The intrinsic, the relationships between the notes within and through time, refers only to the music itself. Focusing only on the extrinsic properties cuts out the vehicle that actually communicates those feelings, which leads to a shallow understanding, while attempting to analyze music in a vacuum separate from its socio-historical context seems naïve and simply incorrect. Applying a full

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<sup>125</sup> Smith, “An Interview with Arvo Pärt: Sources of Invention,” *The Musical Times*, 21.

<sup>126</sup> Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time*, 11.

analysis including both intrinsic and extrinsic qualities to Pärt's music will provide that full and accurate answer we seek.

Pärt's biographical and musical history provided many insights into what *tintinnabuli* meant for him both as a devout Russian Orthodox Christian and as a composer. In his youth, he experimented heavily with many avant-garde compositional styles, including dodecaphony and the collage technique. After pushing to integrate the traditional Western tonal masterpieces with his contemporary compositional frameworks, Pärt eventually lost faith in the possibility of writing truly transcendent music. His final piece of this period, *Credo* (1968) brilliantly fused the timeless with the temporal, but he felt that he could not imbue the highly intellectual music with the simple, pure, mystical approach to God that he now sought.

As a result, Pärt slipped into a despondent compositional silence for eight years on a journey to discover how to infuse sacrality into his music. During this period, he immersed himself in Gregorian chant and studying the early church's first polyphony. He reemerged with a brand-new style called *tintinnabuli*, which features a strict, ascetic mathematical formula, simplicity of notes and rhythms, a single tonality rooted in a single triad, and silence. His first piece in this new style, *Für Alina* (1976), was a drastic change from his previous success with *Credo* because it now featured a very still, transcendent, shimmering sound gained through the ascetic applications of only two voices. This piece revealed his new mission of reducing all of his musical elements until finding truth. He finally identifies this truth within a moment of silence where "time and timelessness are connected."<sup>127</sup> Within this realm of unknowing, Pärt finds clarity and transcendence, which he tries to communicate through his *tintinnabuli* music.

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<sup>127</sup> Sandner, liner notes, *Tabula Rasa*, 29.

Similarly, we must understand the listeners' extrinsic historical settings to fully grasp why they label Pärt's music as spiritual. Today's disenchanted world is defined by an excessive focus only on immanent, secular avenues to truth without much credit given towards a more transcendent pursuit of knowledge. This hyper-secularization resulted from a gradual shift in the locale of truth from the realm of the transcendent church to immanent science and reason that discredited religion's ability to provide absolute certainty in the process. However, the immanent realm established an identical framework of omniscient Reason providing the same absolute assurance until it reached its own limit with the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in 1927. Since that point, neither the immanent nor the transcendent worldviews have been able to provide absolute truth to its believers since everything must now contain certain amounts of uncertainty and mystery.

Charles Taylor points out that this view of the world has become increasingly dissatisfactory especially among youth in this overly secular world. Many of them have begun to turn towards embracing their sense of fullness and experiencing the world through a more transcendent approach. He points out that this longing has pushed them away from the mundane, inexorable secular time into experiencing a higher, spiritual time more concerned with eternity and alternate temporalities. Music is uniquely equipped to serve the new wave of spiritual seekers because it can profoundly influence its listeners' perceptions of time while being strictly rooted within time itself. Many people have called music "the most 'spiritual' of the arts."<sup>128</sup>

Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* answers this longing for timelessness exceptionally well because he uses specific techniques that suspend the listener's sense of secular time and allows space for transcendent experience. Its key characteristics include a tonality that centers upon one

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<sup>128</sup> Begbie, *Theology, Music, and Time*, 34.

unchanging triadic tonality, long notes, shifting meter, and extended silences. These qualities are each tailor made to suspend temporality because of methods people use to measure time's passage in Western tonal music. We understand time within music according to hierarchical cycles of overlapping tensions and resolutions both within functional harmony – or the teleological relations of the notes to themselves within a certain key – and within rhythm and meter – what we understand as a pattern of beats and rhythms that work within that framework. By transcending these cycles, both by remaining in a single tonality rather than moving, and by using silence and long notes so frequently that no waves of downbeats exist as a metric, Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music creates a space for its listeners to experience an alternate reality.

By understanding these various viewpoints in relation to *tintinnabuli* – Pärt's motivations, the listeners' desires, and the musicological backgrounds – we have assembled a full picture of what makes it sacred. Even though it does not have any of Arnold's more standard characterizations for religious music, it answers a deep-seated need for transcendence for its audience members. Pärt recognizes the importance of spirituality within his own faith, so he expresses those values through the techniques of *tintinnabuli*. Once he has written the notes, however, they speak for themselves by providing a space for the listener to encounter a transcendent reality free from the immanent realm of the disenchanted world. The listeners' interpretations of the music as spiritual come in response to its ability to answer their needs intrinsically. Other people from other times and other cultures may not interpret this experience as sacred because they internalize the music differently based upon their individual extrinsic environments, but they will still experience the same abstraction from typical musical time – if they are familiar with Western tonal music, of course.

Essentially, many people in today's disenchanted world find Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* music sacred because he answers a need for transcendence within their lives. His own faith informs his writing process, but he cannot imbue the notes themselves with a sense of the sacred unless they can provide that experience to the audience members. With this in mind, his music's ability to suspend temporality and to create a space for people to encounter what they call divine within a transcendent reality makes it sacred for many of them.

As a final note, I do not purport to give a final answer for what makes Pärt's music sacred. This type of absolute response falls precisely under the frameworks that I highlighted for not working. Rather, this provides one small way to view the question of sacrality within his music. There are many different avenues still to pursue that I would wish with more space. For example, examining silence's irreducible role as the relationship between the notes in his music – it could be considered literally nothing, hence it would be irreducible, or it could be the potential for everything, again, irreducible. Someone could also examine *tintinnabuli*'s relationship with Augustine's description of time and how the continuous implied drone suspends time in Augustine's framework to create another sense of eternity. Finally, somebody could examine the compositional techniques Pärt uses in *Credo (1968)* as a means of demonstrating his own disenchantment with disenchantment – to borrow a phrase from Dr. Kosky. This paper would intersect intensive musicological studies with the disenchantment thesis in an exceptionally enlightening view of Pärt's disillusionment with progress and with the increasingly secular world leading up to his period of silence.

Regardless of the future scholarship, though, please go listen to his music. Nothing can compare to the absolute bliss of absorbing and experiencing his *tintinnabuli* music. It will allow your soul to sing and your heart to be still. But most importantly, you will be.

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