

# “A process of discovery”

Tõnu Kaljuste on Arvo Pärt

---



*When was your first encounter with the music of Arvo Pärt?*

**Kaljuste:** I was about 14 and singing in a children’s choir when we studied his cantata *Our Garden*. We went on to perform it at the Youth Song Festival.

*When did your cooperation start?*

---

Te deum

 [UE34183](#)

**Kaljuste:** Our cooperation started in 1988 when I recorded *Te Deum* for the Estonian Radio. Pärt was living in Berlin at this time and requested that the recording be sent to him. I guess he liked it and proposed that we record the work for CD. We quickly established a very good connection.

*Pärt is reference and inspiration for many musicians and composers, though he has never been a composition teacher? Where does this power come from?*

**Kaljuste:** I can’t speak for others, but what is important for me is that Pärt is

honest, observant and free of prejudice. He treats all people, orchestras and choirs equally. He and his music reflect goodness.

*“Lean yourself on silence”, he loves to say.*

*You have conducted many world premières, but also recorded many CDs. Is there a difference in the work with Pärt between world première and CD recording?*

**Kaljuste:** Pärt often alters his works after their premières by adding amendments. Making a disc is a sign that a work is ready. He won't let the piece be recorded until he's happy with the composition itself.

*Does sound quality play a role?*

**Kaljuste:** Of course – the search for beauty is never-ending.

*You work together with many composers. What's special with Pärt?*

**Kaljuste:** Some composers release their works after completion and give the interpreters a free hand. Pärt likes to participate in the preparation of performances. He is very sensitive and demanding when it comes to detail and his comments to musicians are often through images rather than technical means. Exceptional sensitivity is expected from the musicians – “lean yourself on silence”, he loves to say.

*Pärt's music is often a prayer. If you reach your internal balance then you can trust your freedom.*

*Do you remember some special episodes?*

**Kaljuste:** There was a somewhat comical episode once during a performance of *Lamentate*. I turned to conduct one section of the orchestra only to hear a different section begin to play that particular line. Afterwards Arvo explained his latest idea to me. Unfortunately it hadn't made it into the score in time.

*Is there advice that you would give a conductor who approaches Pärt for the first time?*

**Kaljuste:** There shouldn't be any difference in a conductor's preparation between Pärt's works and any other composer's. Learn the piece, listen to the textural flow, find a meaning for every line that would liberate the performer from playing the notes mechanically. It makes the music special and meaningful. If that happens, you might find how wonderful it is to be so close to silence.

*What kind of freedom does a score by Pärt give you?*

**Kaljuste:** Pärt's music is often a prayer. If you reach your internal balance then you can trust your freedom.

*How do you introduce your audiences to the music of Pärt?*

**Kaljuste:** With a thought-through performance. Nobody wants to listen to formal notes. I don't like to talk about music before a performance. Words create a certain fixed mindset in the listener. I like it when the audience comes with a clean sheet (tabula rasa).

*The EPCC, which you have founded and directed over many years, has made the choir works by Arvo Pärt internationally well known. What's so specific about Pärt's way to deal with voices?*

**Kaljuste:** I really couldn't begin to pinpoint one specific aspect as such. Every work is a world on its own that opens to us through the text.

*Every work of his is a flight into a new world, a process of discovery.*

*Where does his popularity with choirs come from?*

---

Magnificat

 [UE19350](#)

**Kaljuste:** I first heard Pärt's *Magnificat* sung by a school choir. I think that popularity in music often starts in youth.

*You are very demanded as choir conductor internationally, especially for the Pärt repertoire. How would you introduce a choir who has never sung any music by Pärt, to the world of Pärt?*

---

Solfeggio

 [UE30455](#)

**Kaljuste:** I think *Magnificat* or *Solfeggio* would be a good beginning.

---

Kanon Pokajanen

 [UE31114](#)

*Kanon Pokajanen is Pärt's largest a cappella piece. You have conducted it more often than any other conductor, I guess. What kind of experience is this?*

**Kaljuste:** In this work I like to be part of the choir. The performance is neither a concert nor a liturgy. We sit in a circle and we repent our sins.

*Are there works that have had a sustainable influence on you?*

**Kaljuste:** It's difficult for me to distinguish whether it's Pärt as a person who has influenced me the most or whether it's his music or settings of text – it's impossible to separate. The one work that I've contemplated the most is *Te Deum*.

*Are there works that you had troubles with to get into them?*

**Kaljuste:** Pärt's works will sound unique if you have time to devote to them. Something that is simple on the surface might not succeed unless one searches and experiments. Every work of his is a flight into a new world, a process of discovery.

*Many of his works are based on texts, these texts not being set to music though. Are these texts relevant to you?*

**Kaljuste:** Yes, to delve deeply into the texts during rehearsals and concerts is an experience by itself. The depths and heights they take you to are extraordinary.

—