

“As purely, cleanly and simply as possible”

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David James and the Hilliard Ensemble have given the first performances of many major choral works by Arvo Pärt. The singer describes their interpretative approach in an interview, raising many interesting pointers for performers of Pärt’s music.

The Hilliard Ensemble perform a lot of early music. Do you use a different vocal technique for Arvo Pärt’s music?

James: As far as performing Arvo’s music and the required vocal techniques go, I can only speak from our experience. After all, we started as an early music group and we applied the principles that guide good ‘early music’ singing – at least the ones we adhere to – to Arvo’s music. Fundamentally, we in the Hilliard have always tried to sing as purely, cleanly and simply as possible. Therefore, all the vowels must be as purely coloured as possible. And this helps good intonation, singing in tune – which is likewise critical in Arvo’s music, because there’s no hiding: in his music, you can’t cover up singing that’s out of tune. And this comes from early music. And you find, if

all the elements of a chord are absolutely in tune, then the harmony is what we call 'locked in', or 'in tune'. And suddenly, in what seems to be a very small, simple chord – the overtones start, it blossoms, it becomes a much larger sound, you get these ringing tones, the harmonies start to resonate. Arvo never writes a note or changes it unless it means something, and that's why I admire him so greatly. Why use ten notes when you can use one to say what you want to say? And that is, at least to my mind, what really sums him up for me, because one note can do it all, if you write it in the right way.

Does Pärt's Passio play a central role for you and the Hilliard Ensemble?

Passio

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James: Yes, Passio has a very important place in our musical heritage as the Hilliard Ensemble. It was really the defining moment that introduced us fully to Arvo Pärt's music. And it was performing Passio, coming to know and understand Passio, that sort of sealed our relationship – the realisation that this is really something unique. If you look at the score of Passio and analyse it, it is very, very spartan, very sparse in the sense that there are actually only three keys used. And then at the very end, just for the very end, at the critical moment when Christ is on the cross and is about to die, suddenly, the four Evangelists come together on one unison A-note. And then there's this silence, this death – he gave up the ghost, we'd say, his spirit isn't in him, he gave up his spirit. And then there's this extraordinary moment when the choir and everybody comes in, in D-major. So this chord comes in and it just goes right through your body! It's an amazing moment – every time, it sends shivers down my spine. It's like the richest Brahms you've ever heard, and you realise that there is life afterwards. This is the most important moment, the death, but it's actually looking forward, it's for a reason, it's a positive thing, and I think that this last page is the most stunning page of music you could ever wish to hear.

“Why use ten notes when you can use one to say what you want to say?”

David James

How do you deal with the fact that in Pärt's scores there aren't many notes, and how do you make sure that it doesn't fall apart?

James: Well, as you say, on first encounter it is not easy to work out how you are going to perform Arvo's music – or how you're going to maintain the intensity from beginning to end. And it is very, very important – and I say this to choirs – to realise that Arvo's music always exhibits a structure, one massive arch. No matter where in the piece you start, there is some connection to the end, because the beginning has a connection to the end. And you must have that in mind; it's utterly critical. Keep that in mind – it's an overriding sort of feeling, from beginning to end. If you lose that, if you make too much of a stop between the sections, it could very easily fall apart. It's all about intensity and keeping that focus from beginning to end. And I should point out here that this applies very much to silence, as well. In Arvo's music, there are a lot of bars of rests, of complete silence, and I know that a lot of choirs look at this and are scared. So many singers and choirs, particularly, are scared of silence, and so are so many conductors: when they have a bar's rest, they'll cut it short because they're nervous; that insecurity then relays itself to the audience, so they will then start to move around. If you're insecure yourself, then the people listening will become insecure.

Of course, the acoustics of the building help tremendously: if you're in a wonderful cathedral, where the sound resonates, then it's easier, because those wonderful chords can hang on and then you go to the next.

How would you explain Arvo Pärt's music to singers and musicians who aren't as experienced with his music?

James: If you try to describe Arvo's music to choirs or conductors, it is very difficult to put into words. But there is this feeling of floating in the air. And that is very much his music; it's not 'grounded', and you never feel that you're being pulled in a direction or forced. It is always hovering, hanging, and sort of 'above' something. It has this ethereal quality, this sort of really almost unworldly feel to it. And a related but slightly different point is this: where Arvo's music doesn't work is in those many cases when people – conductors, choirs – try to put in too much emotion, try to 'perform' the music too much, as if they were doing Romantic music. A lot of Romantic music from the 19th century requires one to actually emote – change speeds, do rubato, add this or that effect. That is exactly the opposite of what you need to do in Arvo's music, because it's all there: if you try to perform or over-perform it, it won't work. Everything is written into the music, and you mustn't try to put your own personality into it, because the music will just die. I believe that it requires a lot of courage to do this, because you really are exposed: I've

described it as being naked, performing naked. You've got nowhere to hide.

So when people are going to perform a piece, I make sure to say: "Look, please, can you make sure that the choir is really well prepared?" And by 'well prepared', I don't mean just knowing the notes. It is better, with Arvo's music, to sing maybe just 15 minutes each week, in a rehearsal – and that's all, to sing it once through – rather than spend one rehearsal doing it for two hours. That won't have an effect. This music is something that has to become part of you, almost in your body, in your being, and you have to live with and grow into this music. And suddenly it starts to make sense. When you rehearse it gradually, spread over a month or two, it goes into you, and you begin to really appreciate what's there.

Could you say what this music has done for you?

James: Well, meeting Arvo and encountering his music was without a doubt the defining moment of my music appreciation career. When I first saw Arvo's music, I was like many of these conductors and many of these choirs: I looked at the paper and was so dismissive! I'm so ashamed of myself now.

And it changed my whole approach to music: I realised that what you see is not necessarily what you get. As soon as you start performing it, it has a life of its own; it takes on a completely different character. It transports you somewhere that a lot of other music does not. You're lifted into this sort of atmosphere, into the air, floating ☐ and it grips you, it won't let you go.

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