

The hidden world of Arvo Pärt

Dorian Supin on Arvo Pärt



“Even if I lose everything” is your third film about Arvo Pärt. What was your motivation for the films?

Supin: In 1990, Estonian television – which was where we worked in those days – collaborated with Finnish television to make a documentary on Pärt; it was called *And Then Came the Evening and the Morning* (Siis sai õhtu ja sai hommik). After the film was released, I continued to shoot new material that focused on the life of Arvo Pärt, purely for archival purposes and without any concrete objective. By 2002, a relatively large quantity of material had been amassed, which subsequently supplied the impetus for the production of a new film. This was how the second film originated: *Arvo Pärt: 24 Preludes for a Fugue* (Arvo Pärt 24 prelüüdi ühele fuugale).

The fact that I was shooting without a specific, overriding idea in mind is clearly reflected in the structure of the film. It is a series of individual episodes that are not interconnected in any way: Arvo Pärt is the only link between

them. And so you could say that the second film is “free” of any dictation by the author.

You could say that this film is an attempt to reveal the hidden world of Arvo Pärt as a person and as a composer.

In a documentary, the role of the document is usually played by some sort of event, a fact, or an incident – in other words an action that can be described by asking the question “What happened?” Of course, it is impossible to make a film that is entirely devoid of a story line. It is just that action itself is not so important to me, nor is an event; I am rather interested in the reaction of the protagonist to the event. This is the reason why on frequent occasions I mention neither the location nor the names of the people, nor the time when the event is taking place. The viewer’s interest should be focused on the reactions of the film’s protagonist. The film does not tell you *what* is happening, but rather *how*, i.e. it tries to trace the inner, hidden logic behind what is happening.

The third film *Arvo Pärt – Even if I lose everything* (Arvo Pärt – isegi kui ma kõik kaotan), which was made in 2015, cannot actually be called a “film” in a specific sense. It cannot be described by taking an ordinary approach; instead, we are dealing essentially with a collection of structured close-ups. The material in the film is structured not so much visually as substantially, and its order follows the logic of Arvo Pärt’s inner world. You could say that this film is an attempt to reveal the hidden world of Arvo Pärt as a person and as a composer.

I must say that I was acutely aware of this while shooting each of these three films, and the most important rule for me was not to allow my presence to disturb anything at all that was already present in some form or other, that existed in some way.

Your films – and their very specific rhythm – are entirely foreign to the conventional TV formats currently used. Isn’t that a major obstacle for when

you offer the film to a TV station?

Supin: I think art should have not only artistic value, but also something greater that is or should be its true destiny. It is possible to like or dislike these works; I believe it is rather subjective. However, I have the feeling that art should contain a further component that is more significant, with universal character. This is a central concept, a subtextual part of the work that is quasi-concealed, and its value is no longer dependent on subjective perception. If this assertion is correct, then the question of authorship is no longer absolutely relevant. And so my authorship becomes less important as well, even though – and I am unable to hide this – I am naturally delighted when somebody likes my work.

When the president of Estonia, Lennart Meri, handed Arvo Pärt his medal and gave the laudation, Pärt said that he only listened with one ear – and it was the ear that cannot hear very well.

Pärt is quite shy and reluctant when it comes to media appearances; he is increasingly withdrawing from public life. Isn't that very difficult for a filmmaker?

Supin: I wouldn't call Arvo Pärt a shy person, but he could be described as an extremely sensitive man. We have been acquainted with each other for quite a long time and Arvo knows me, possibly even better than I know myself. When we are filming, he trusts us. However, I cannot allow myself the luxury of feeling secure. The doubts, the hesitance, being spoiled for choice – all these issues are my constant companions, even when the film has been released.

What was your focus? The man or his music? What aspect of Arvo Pärt interests you?

Supin: In this film my focus of interest could be roughly described as follows: how and why does *this kind* of music develop inside this person's mind, and where does it come from? Although at one point in the film Arvo Pärt himself explains it something like this: it is as if the music is already in the world and I only have to write it down correctly.

However, this is precisely what is most difficult, writing it down correctly. So he sits at his instrument day and night, looking for the solution that is truly correct. There is also the other side, though: what sort of a person, what sort of a composer must you be in order firstly to differentiate between what is "correct" and what is "incorrect", and secondly to set it down on paper

“correctly”. But it goes even further than that! “Writing it down” and “achieving the right sound”, those are two different things. The composer hears the music and attempts to write it down in an adequate way, hoping that it will be reproduced adequately. It is during this reproduction that the problems arise: the musicians only see “cold” notes. The conductor attempts to make these notes “warmer”, but all these endeavours are far removed from the music heard by Arvo Pärt. Sometimes during rehearsals he is forced to restore this heard sound. It is a difficult process. And it generally becomes a long process as well. There are improvements and additions, sometimes over the course of decades. I believe the publishers are familiar with this.

It is unconsciously understandable.

How did you deal with Arvo Pärt’s religiousness? He experiences it quite privately. Have you touched on this in your film?

Supin: It is well known that before Arvo found his singular tintinnabuli style, he encountered a phase of agonised searching that lasted almost ten years. It was the period in which he examined his visions of life profoundly. Everything had to be reinvented – his own place in the world, his search for a dialogue with God, and an intensive search for his “own” language. As his primary, “native” language consisted of music and sounds, the entire complex of problems connected with his world view inevitably centred upon musical issues, as did his search for an authentic musical language during these years.

Fortunately for us, Arvo Pärt’s workbooks with all the evidence from these years of crisis are still in existence. The material from these years, beginning in 1974, constitutes the most intimate and valuable part of his life. It is a strange mixture of ordinary diary entries, in which free quotations from what he has read alternate with his own thoughts and – most importantly – musical experiments, drafts and even almost fully matured scores. It is a veritable laboratory that enables us to trace the entire dynamism and atmosphere of the composer’s search process.

Hundreds of these books are stored in Arvo Pärt’s archives, and these records

are currently being deciphered. The musicologist Immo Michkelson has assumed responsibility for this work and from time to time he requires help and comments from Arvo. Then the idea originated of accompanying their work on camera and making a film about it at the end which basically would be made up of some comments from Arvo about his old notes. These frequently take the form of explanations of individual words, of brief statements, associations, random connections between completely different events, or merely memories, and the most important aspect – a fresh look at the past – enriched with almost forty years of experience.

The totality of a person's inner world is in itself indeed "delicate matter". The purpose of the film was even more fragile – it aimed to explain this "delicacy", illustrating that the fragility of the issue is retained. It is a very personal and discreet procedure. We had to leave out a lot and it was very difficult to choose which material to include. And yet we hope that the content in the film enables viewers to gain an idea of Arvo Pärt's attitude to life and visions of life.

Arvo Pärt's music is regularly used as music for feature films. What is the reason for that, in your opinion?

Supin: The reason why music composed by Arvo Pärt is so popular, I believe, is that his music touches something most profound within a person, the depths where we all still spoke a common language, a primeval language. Even today we understand this language, albeit in our subconsciousness. It is unconsciously understandable. People from different religious denominations, generations, cultural traditions and social classes feel and understand this very "individual" music in the same way. It is individual in its antiquatedness and yet its absolute actuality. How is it possible for such music to be created?

Not every creative endeavour results in a work of art.

Over the years you have gathered a lot of film material on Pärt. Making the right choice is certainly not an easy task. How did you manage?

Supin: The right choice. That is generally the fundamental challenge in life. I can't say that I make the right choice. I believe that there is a highly complicated path along which I am supposed to travel, in the best and truly correct way. Every minute of the day I am faced with a choice – yes or no, right or left. This or that. Speaking or silence. Just like now. And I believe that each of these moments presents me with the possibility of taking a step in the right direction. It is just a matter of feeling it, taking it to heart. Taking it to heart is difficult, however. I think this is an important part of every creative process. Ultimately, the question of choice plays a decisive role in the destiny of a work: not every creative endeavour results in a work of art.

Has your work with and on Arvo Pärt – on the music or on the person – had an influence on you or your work?

Supin: It is very easy to be near Arvo. He radiates a wonderful feeling of calm, bonhomie and love. It is very difficult to be near Arvo. You are constantly faced with the realisation of how incredibly far you yourself are from what you value about him.

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