“To orbit the heavens”

<? echo $this->teaser; ?>

Credo

UE33344

By announcing “Credo” – “I believe”, the proclaimer expresses their commitment to something while simultaneously dissociating themselves from something else. It was no different when Arvo Pärt presented his *Credo* for piano, choir and orchestra in 1968, which begins and ends with parts of the famous *Prelude No. 1* from Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Pärt, who was born on 11 September 1935 in Paide, studied with Heino Eller at Tallinn Conservatoire, which is now the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre. His work for Estonian Radio during his studies opened up the world of Western avant-garde music, which was eyed with suspicion in the Soviet Union.

In *Credo*, progressive densification transforms Bach’s prelude into twelve-tone music, drifting slowly but surely towards a chaotic landscape, to a single forcible outcry from choir and orchestra. Pärt was the first Estonian composer to work with the resources offered by twelve-tone music. With works such as his *Credo*, he presented himself as an early representative of a form of post-modernism that blended the musical styles of different times. His setting of the words “Credo in Jesum Christum” can also be reasonably understood as a profession of Christian faith. Pärt clashed with the Soviet cultural bureaucracy

over this, and further performances of the work were initially unwelcome.

If everything had already been said, if a hundred potential styles were competing with each other and increased the confusion, what was left to add?

Credo signified an upheaval in Pärt's oeuvre in a much more radical sense, however. The compositional ideas in this piece, which lasts slightly longer than 10 minutes, took a critical look at the development of European art music in itself. After Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, harmony had become ever more complex, the range of tone colours had expanded drastically, and a wholly new set of rules had arisen in connection with twelve-tone music. Still, the quiet, gentle, even somewhat sugary end with Bach's chords concealed an anxious question: if this music continues to fascinate its listeners when played on CDs and in concerts, how can a contemporary composer really make any additions to what has gone before?

This question has perturbed many composers, but Pärt was plunged into a veritable compositional crisis. "In the state of exceptional unease that I was experiencing at the time, I wanted to prove to myself how wonderfully beautiful Bach's music is, and how hateful mine was in comparison," he remarked later on about his *Credo*. If everything had already been said, if a hundred potential styles were competing with each other and increased the confusion, what was left to add? Something simpler than Bach, perhaps, something that had always been said and therefore could continue to be said. In a record store Pärt happened to hear a short piece of music which had commenced the development of European art music: it was Gregorian chant – unison medieval liturgical singing. Pärt said later that he realised "this is what we need right now, what I need right now".

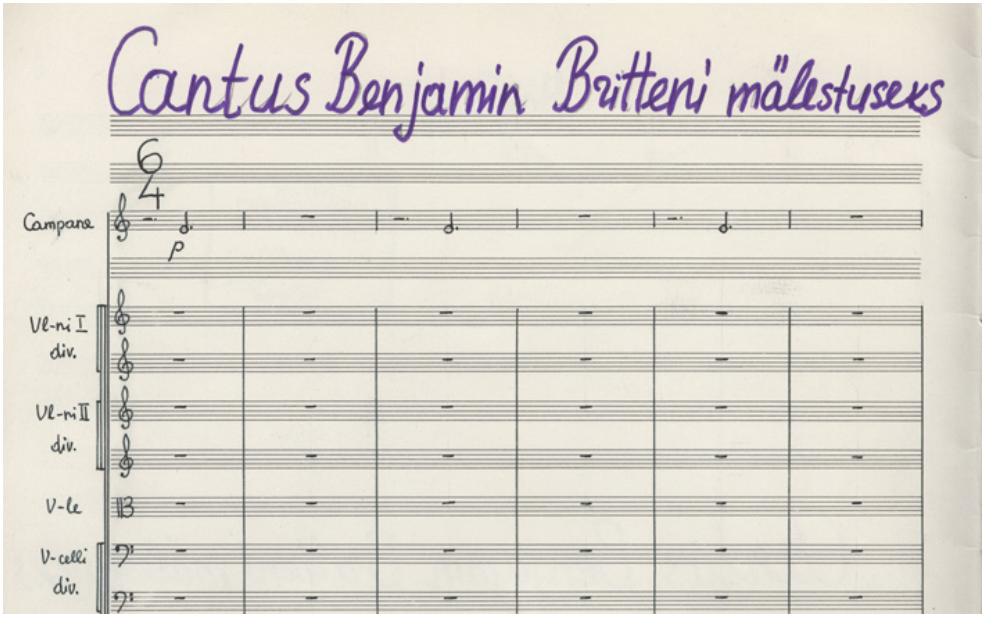
He spent the next eight years searching for a new simplicity. During this time, he kept in close contact with the conductor Andres Mustonen, who rediscovered the pre-Baroque musical styles with his ensemble Hortus

Musicus. At the end of this phase Pärt wrote a short piece for piano: *Für Alina* – not unison, but with only two parts, a melody line with accompaniment. It was the first piece in his style which he gave the name *tintinnabuli* ("little bells") and which in a certain sense went hand in hand with a new credo, a new conviction: "I have discovered that it is enough when a single tone is beautifully played," Pärt said. "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 the triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation." The calling towards musical simplicity also reflects a Christian ideal of humility, deliberately renouncing the exhibition of one's own abilities. Pärt's musical self-examination was also accompanied by religious self-exploration – at the beginning of the 1970s he had converted from Protestantism to Orthodoxy.

Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten

UE35536

A bell also plays a key role in his *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* from 1977, which can also be heard in this concert. In this lament for his English composer-colleague who had died a year earlier, Pärt uses a musical form from the late Middle Ages. In a proportional or mensural canon, the parts enter with increasingly longer notes. The result is a gradually slower tempo which can be interpreted as representing somebody who is dying. The overlapping parts do not bring things to a gradual halt, though, but instead produce a sound that is quickened in itself. Time-dependent motion ends in timeless movement, and the counter-directional parts result in recumbent movement.



Autograph Cantus In Memory Of Benjamin Britten

The *Cantus* was also included on the recording that finally brought Arvo Pärt

recognition among a wider public. In 1984 the Munich record label ECM released “Tabula rasa”, and thirteen more CDs were to follow on the same label. The Western world had already grown aware of Pärt before that, however, which increased the distrust of the Soviet cultural bureaucracy. In 1980 the composer was compelled to emigrate. He moved to Vienna and shortly afterwards moved on to Berlin, where he lived for many years. He only returned to Estonia in 2008.

Pärt has still remained a confusing figure for the Western European music world. Prominent musicians such as the violinist Gidon Kremer and the Hilliard Ensemble embraced his music at an early stage. In recent years Pärt has been the world’s most-performed living classical composer, and even pop celebrities such as the singer Björk or the intellectual band Radiohead have been inspired by his music. Nonetheless, in the established forums for contemporary classical music his compositions have been treated with suspicion, and his music has only started to appear in concert programmes in recent years.

It is not the intention of the music to interpret the words, but rather to reinforce what is uttered and to densify the concentration on its content.

It can be said that Pärt structures his music today no less strictly than his former twelve-tone compositions. His tintinnabuli style has enabled him to find clear working rules which have already been compared with mathematical systems. But at least from a mathematical perspective we are dealing with “natural numbers”, as it were. Pärt develops his system using means found in European music history. He designs whole compositions or large sections on the basis of a single major or minor chord. He limits himself to the pitches specified since the Baroque age, he uses the traditional string instruments and writes one- to four-part scoring for male and female choirs. The texts for his vocal music are also taken from familiar passages from Christian denominations and Pärt sets the words in their original language. As Pärt develops the musical flow as far as possible out of the language, the music

occupies an ancillary role to the text. It is not the intention of the music to interpret the words, but rather to reinforce what is uttered and to densify the concentration on its content.

Salve Regina

UE31988

Pärt is therefore one of the few contemporary composers whose music can be integrated easily into church liturgies. For example, his *Salve Regina*, for which he set to music the old antiphon that addresses the mother of God, was premiered in 2002 during a special service in Essen Cathedral. Pärt also frequently uses liturgical models for concert hall pieces, though.

Te deum

UE34183

For example, in his *Te Deum* – written in 1985 for Cologne Radio – the model of responsorial singing can be heard distinctly in its form that is used even today for special services of all Christian denominations. Every section is first performed in a form that is reminiscent of Gregorian chant, before one of the choirs – the orchestra is also scored as a multi-part choir – repeats and reinforces it. The use of a prepared piano, on the other hand, is almost unusual for Pärt's compositions; screws are inserted between the strings of a piano, and we hear sounds of an Aeolian harp played electronically.

Pärt's treatment of traditional resources is to a certain extent akin to somebody who builds a boat out of the materials he finds on the beach. He uses a fallen branch alongside a discarded petrol can. It is therefore basically immaterial for Pärt's music whether major or minor are present in the overtone row and are therefore a natural occurrence, as had previously been the popular assumption, or whether they developed by chance in the course of European music history. This reflects a religious position where God can be seen in everyday things, in nature just as in civilisation. In any case, in his tintinnabuli style Pärt takes a much different approach to the familiar chords compared to their use in the Classical-Romantic tradition.

And so anybody with knowledge of European art music who wishes to find out more about Pärt will need to readjust. After all, our human mind can hardly conceive what could be so interesting about the angels' eternal hallelujah. It is precisely this altered awareness of time that Pärt's music intends to trace, however, when it works with its many repetitions, lingering for a long time in one key and remaining static for extended periods. Pärt's pieces know no progress; their story persists throughout – the same at the beginning as at the end. Nevertheless, where their effect is felt, the end is filled with greater strength, seemingly transformed to a higher energy level.

Pärt is an Anti-Romanticist, both musically and religiously.

"I wished only to convey a mood, " Pärt writes in a description of his *Te Deum*. "A mood that could be infinite in time, by delicately removing one piece – one particle of time – out of the flow of infinity. I had to draw this music gently out of silence and emptiness. The work *Te Deum* was a quest for something evanescent, something long lost or not yet found, the quest for something believed to be non-existent, but so real that it exists not only within us but beyond our being as well. "

Adam's Lament

UE34740

In *Adam's Lament,* Arvo Pärt illustrates why we have lost this something. The piece was written in 2009 for a joint commission from the European Capitals of Culture Istanbul and Tallinn. Pärt chose a text written by St. Silouan (1866 – 1938), who lived on monastic Mount Athos in Greece. In his native Russian, the monk tells of Adam's sorrow at losing Paradise. "I am Adam and you are Adam," writes Pärt. "And this 'collective Adam' has been suffering and lamenting on this Earth for thousands of years." Silouan and ultimately Pärt tell of the existential solitude, the fear and yearning of the human who has been barred direct access to Paradise. *Adam's Lament* is an unusually dramatic, in parts almost theatrical work by Pärt's standards, because it attempts to find expression for these feelings.

Yet even these feelings confront the listener as an objective situation, and are not intended as a subjective commentary on the part of the composer. Pärt therefore chose to write for a choir rather than vocal soloists – an ensemble is always in a better position to represent a "collective Adam". Just as the texts are not interpreted by Pärt's vocal music in the classical sense, the performers need to draw on far more than just their traditional means of expression. In this music, belief is not a subjective feeling, as is customary in the post-Romantic tradition – it is an objective reality, similar to medieval thinking. Pärt is an Anti-Romanticist, both musically and religiously. In his eyes, feelings do not unlock the heavens. It is possible that they even interfere. His music does not wish to recount yearnings, but to directly orbit the heavens. For this reason, he conceives both his music and the rules of the tintinnabuli style as figures of objectivity that always keep a certain distance from the

listener. The fact that many people still see their emotions reflected in the music seems to indicate that Adam's yearning is stronger than may be assumed in a secular age.