

## Music and Faith

# Simplicity and Silence in the Sound of Music

By Natalie Ng

“Be still, and know that I am God” – Psalm 46:10

We live in a world that is constantly filled with sound. From mobile phones to McDonalds, sound permeates our way of life, from the places we go, to the activities we do. Silence is something we are not accustomed to. Likewise, our lives are also becoming increasingly complicated. We constantly multitask (for instance having our lunch while furiously typing away at our laptops), our work requires us to be on standby 24/7 (hence the use of Blackberry), even our leisure activities take on a work-like character (think of how many people come back from holidays feeling even more exhausted!)

As such, the idea of simplicity and silence is something we are not used to. We often think that to be simple is to eschew the material world for a ascetic lifestyle; likewise silence often leads to uneasiness (for instance, the silence in the waiting room just prior to the entrance of a VIP or the silence that is induced when the teacher shouts at the class to keep quiet). According to one local preacher, it is only in moments of tragedy (such as death) where one is forced to confront with the idea of silence, in which life is stripped bare of her complexities, thus allowing us to arrive at a truer appraisal of ourselves. Likewise, Estonian composer Arvo Pärt spent eight years in a self-imposed contemplative silence, emerging from it with a very radical transformation.

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) started his musical education at age seven, attending the music school in Rakvere, Estonia, where his family lived. He showed tremendous musical promise, and was already writing his own compositions in his early teen years. Even though he studied composition at the Tallinn Conservatory from 1957 – 1963, he had little access to what was happening in contemporary Western music because of the regimes of the old Soviet Union. He was at the forefront of his profession, being the first Estonian to experiment with serialism techniques. Reactions to his works were extreme – some were praised, some were criticized, and some were even banned! Pärt then went into the first of a few periods of contemplative silence, choosing to research and study choral part music from the 14 – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. Emerging from the silence with his joyous 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony in 1971, he felt that it was still not “the end of (his) despair and search.” He then entered into the abovementioned eight-year period of contemplative silence, delving into plainchant and medieval music, and finally finding his voice with an utterly new composition technique that he calls tintinnabuli<sup>1</sup>. He has, without any exception, remained loyal to this new technique since 1976, when *Für Alina*, a piece for solo piano, quietly and thoughtfully announced the arrival of his “tintinnabuli style”.

Pärt, along with John Tavener and Henryk Gorecki, are part of a growing number of “holy minimalists”, whose philosophies and music are contrary to western classical music. Their music

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<sup>1</sup>From the Latin root word, meaning “little bells”.

has been described as “music of the angels”, and many, after listening to Pärt’s *Tabula Rasa* or *Spiegel im Spiegel*, claimed to feel that they caught “a glimpse of heaven”. Unlike the usual classical music that normally strives to have direction, build-ups, climaxes and resolutions, Pärt’s music doesn’t go anywhere. It is gently repetitive, meditative, and I daresay, even hypnotic. Its main purpose is contemplation, bringing the listener into an altered state, almost the same feeling one gets when deep in prayer or perhaps meditating upon a certain verse or portion of scripture. The repetitions in the music are placid, and serene, giving the listener a sense of timelessness. “Time and timelessness are connected,” wrote Pärt. “This instant and eternity are struggling within us. And this is the cause of all our contradictions, our obstinacy, our narrow-mindedness, our faith and our grief.”

For Pärt, bell-like clarity is one of the most important qualities in composing music. The score for *Für Alina* is the epitome of minimalism, and also minimalism at its finest. At first glance, the score seems reminiscent of Gregorian chant notation. Barely two pages long, it has neither time signature nor note stems. Notes are black dots (like crotchet/quaver note heads) or semibreves, the former representing short notes and the latter, long. In place of a tempo marking is the direction “*Ruhig, erhaben, in sich hineinhorchend*”, which translates roughly into “peaceful, sublimely, introspectively”. The notes are relatively easy to read and play, but to achieve the pure and ringing sound takes much sensitivity on the pianist’s part. Both left and right hand play notes simultaneously, the right hand voice moving stepwise from and to a central pitch, first up then down, and the left hand sounding the notes of the B minor triad. The two voices are joined in the tintinnabuli principle, leaving ethereal harmonies and overtones ringing.

Pärt himself describes it as; “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, two voices. I build with primitive materials - with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells and that is why I call it tintinnabulation.”

The beauty of Pärt’s music is that one does not have to understand classical music to enjoy it; in fact, if one listens through the filter of Western musical values, they might find his music stark and lacking in expression and However, if doing nothing for a whole day or praying in receptive silence for about an hour sounds like something you would do, then you’ll be probably be one of the many who weep inexplicably to Pärt’s music, whose poignant beauty in simplicity can unearth the reservoir of joy and sorrow in the hardest of hearts.

#### *Additional contribution by Benjamin Ho*

Natalie Ng plays the oboe, violin and piano, but preferably not all three at the same time. She holds a BA(Hons) in music from the University of Wales. She currently serves in the worship team in Grace Methodist Church.