

Arvo Pärt: Notes from Oregon

by Jeremy Beck

During the summer of 1994, Arvo Pärt was the composer-in-residence at the Oregon Bach Festival. The Festival commissioned a major new work from Pärt which was premiered there by Helmuth Rilling, the Hilliard Ensemble and the Oregon Bach Festival Chorus and Orchestra. Notably, this work, *Litany*, was the first U.S. commission Pärt had ever accepted. In addition to his activities associated with the presentation of this premier, Pärt also met with the composers attending the first annual Composers Symposium at the University of Oregon. This Symposium, under the direction of Robert Kyr, was being held in conjunction with the Oregon Bach Festival. I was in attendance at this Symposium and took down notes during one of the meetings with Pärt; this article is drawn primarily from those notes.

The image often presented of Arvo Pärt is that of an ascetic, a monk from another time outside of our own, composing music which recalls that of some earlier age. Pärt himself is not one to bear with such an image without a sense of humor. At an open meeting with the public before the premier of his *Litany*, in answer to the rather serious question "Does your living in solitude contribute to the spiritual nature of your music?", Pärt replied dryly, to the amusement of all present, "I have a family; four children and a wife - what solitude?"

The participants in the Symposium met with Pärt privately in the School of Music at the University of Oregon on the morning of June 28. We had been cautioned by the directors of the Festival that Pärt was shy with strangers and uncomfortable with so much attention being thrust on him; he felt it was a distraction from his music, we were told. The directors had assured him that we, his younger colleagues, had great respect for his music and his privacy and that this meeting would be one in which questions would be asked, not to disturb that privacy, but rather to learn more about his approach and philosophy, one which yielded music of such depth and beauty. Once so assured, Pärt agreed to meet with us. Our group, for its part in the bargain, did its best to make him feel as comfortable as possible. It should be noted that while Pärt does speak English, it is his fourth language, after Estonian, Russian and German. Therefore, for the purposes of our meeting, an Estonian composer/pianist from Los Angeles (Rein Rannap, who was also attending the Symposium and who had a performing relationship with Pärt) acted as a supporting translator to facilitate the meeting. As well, Pärt's wife (a conductor) often participated in the ensuing discussions, primarily to help clarify certain points her husband was trying to make.

Q: Do you start with large structures and add details or the reverse when you compose?

Pärt: Every time it's different. Everything starts with one simple...gesture or stroke. The path to an idea goes downward to the bottom of ourselves. You don't know anything; all you know is that you know nothing. You never know how it will grow; one is always oscillating between Heaven and Earth or, better, Earth and Hell one's whole life. For example, in *Tabula Rasa* [for Two Violins, String Orchestra and Prepared Piano, c. 1976-77], the structure is a vessel which is used to convey feelings and gestures. I don't trust my music to flow without mathematical structures.

Q: Could you tell us some of your thoughts in general about composition? Do you have any advice to offer younger, less-experienced composers?

P: I am like you or worse as a composer; each time I must start anew. I never know how something will grow - edible or a weed? One never knows how a kernel will sprout and grow; it is always different. Suffering gives one creative energy and power; if one has the gift to suffer, one has great power. Composers can write with pencils, pens, tears, blood. Blood is not like ink. Every note must be considered very carefully; none can be wasted. Different composers have accompanied me at different times in my life - Schubert, Tchaikovsky. Schubert never heard his symphonies; this constant rejection gave him power. There is a lot of noise in our lives, in this world, all around us and *inside* of us. Some composers resort to cosmetic surgery; these masks may be pretty now, but they will turn ugly later. Evil comes into our lives unknowingly, slowly.

Q: How has the economic and political situation in Estonia affected you?

P: I am not interested in politics, but of course I cannot escape it. It was totally absurd, the misunderstanding of my *Credo* [for Piano, Mixed Choir and Orchestra, 1968]. This is a religious and personal piece, not a political protest against the Soviet Union. My *Cello Concerto* was a protest [*Concerto for Violoncello and Orchestra "Pro et Contra"*, 1966, commissioned by Rostropovich]. It starts with a major triad which is related to the national anthem of the Soviet Union - the politically correct thing to do - and then a chaos chord reacts against this, crashes against this.

Q: What was your first piece in the tintinnabuli style [note: this is Pärt's description for his musical style since 1976, a style which makes use of interchanging

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combinations of scales and triads in often shifting, yet stable patterns]?

P: *Für Alina* [for Piano, 1976], although many pieces came in about the same time.

Q: What is your concept of dissonance in the tintinnabuli style?

P: One must think first of two-voice polyphony, independent of *and* dependent on each other. One part is unchanging [*note*: here, Pärt, to the hushed enjoyment of all present, went to the piano and loudly played a single line in quarter notes - f2, e2, d2 and then harmonized that line with a second line beneath it, in parallel quarter notes - d2, a1, c2]. One voice is fixed, one is totally free - from this the entire score grows. Well, perhaps *not* totally free, but with more freedom than the other, fixed voice. From this combination comes unexpected sounds which even the composer doesn't expect.

Q: What guides you in your decision to make new versions of different works [e.g., *Fratres*, for String Quintet or String Orchestra and Percussion, 1977, rev. 1983; for Violin and Piano, 1980; for 12 Violoncelli, 1980; for Violoncello and Piano, 1992; also, *Summa* for Voices, 1978; for Orchestra, 1991; for String Quartet, 1991]?

P: The two lines are the most important thing. Timbre and instrumentation are not always the most important. As long as the structure is maintained, it may be revealed by different timbres and instrumentations. I should say here that the best recording and performance of the violin and piano version of *Fratres* is the one by Gidon Kremer and Keith Jarrett.

Q: What are your thoughts about the influence of older music - medieval, Bach - on your own?

P: Back then, people walked on two feet; today people walk on two feet. It is the same. But today people can jump off a cliff with a sail; they didn't do this before. I would like to do this some day.

Q: Do you feel yourself influenced by folk music at all?

P: Folk music is very distant from my music, but I think sometimes I should have paid

more attention to this music. Its roots are very deep, but I have no direct relationship to this myself.

Q: How do you view your place in history?

P: I don't think about this.

Q: What are your compositional plans for the future?

P: I normally don't make plans, but, if I did, I wouldn't share them. Like humans going too close to a bird's nest, the mother will abandon the eggs. As far as composing goes, I am in a boat with oars and a sail; mostly I go on my own power, but sometimes a commission provides a bit of wind...

Frequently, there were questions at which Pärt demurred or shrugged off, either because he felt the music spoke for itself or because he felt it was not possible to truly address certain compositional issues in the context of "small talk." Some examples of these types of questions were:

Q: What is the meaning of silence for you? What is your compositional process? Does the downward gesture in the *Elegy for [sic] Benjamin Britten* [*Cantus in memory of Benjamin Britten* for String Orchestra and Bell, 1977] reflect your feelings about him?

During such moments Pärt clearly showed his discomfort at being the center of attention. Yet he was always polite and gracious; even in trying to avoid as much as possible the "cult of personality", he did not wish to draw undue attention to himself by being impatient or gruff. Pärt also demonstrates in other ways that he is the antithesis of how one might "normally" conceive of a senior, career composer. For example, he frequently turns down commissions that don't move him. As well, he doesn't give interviews and usually stays away from conferences and festivals (it is to the credit of Rilling, Kyr, the directors of the Bach Festival and Manfred Eicher, his producer at ECM, that the experience for Pärt at the Oregon Bach Festival was such a success on his own terms). After the music, what impresses and moves one the most about Arvo Pärt is the combination of his quiet strength, humility and focused sense of self coupled with a determination of purpose and a clear

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5TH TALLOIRES INTERNATIONAL COMPOSERS CONFERENCE JULY 2-8, 1995

Tufts University European Center, Talloires, France. Robert Cogan, Pozzi Escot, Shirish Korde, directors. The conference provides a meeting ground for composers from the entire world for performances of their works by the renowned Talloires Conference Chamber Ensemble.

CONTACT: Talloires International Composers Conference, 24 Avon Hill, Cambridge, MA 02140. Tel: 617-868-0215, 508-233-4165; Fax: 508-256-7615.

4TH INTERNATIONAL FLUTE SUMMER COURSE

"For the Contemporary Flutist." From Aug. 22 to Aug. 27, 1995, Dutch flutist Will Offermans will be giving a flute course in contemporary techniques. The course will be organized by Studio E in cooperation with Foundation The Magic Flute and will be open for flute students, flutists, and flute teachers with or without experience in contemporary music.

CONTACT: Studio E, Vrolijkstraat 195D, 1091 TX Amsterdam, Holland. Tel: 011-31-20-6682478; Fax: 011-31-20-6651425.

5TH INTERNATIONAL MASTER CLASS FOR COMPOSITION

August 28-October 9, Rheinsberg, Germany. Consultation with Paul Heinz Ditrich (Germany) and Gerard Grisey (France); lectures about contemporary music from the sight of interpreters and solo-recitals with Carin Levin (USA, flute), Brenda Mitchell (UK, Singer), and Friedrich Schender (Germany, trombone). Lectures about voice and music by Pierre Garnier (France), Karl Mickel, Carlfriedrich Claus, and Hartmut Zelinsky (Germany). Two concerts (one could be arranged with compositions for piano and/or voice and/or vocal ensemble). Discussions (September 7-9) about the situation of the new music from the chosen European nations: Italy, Lithuania, Rumania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Hungary; expanding of the association for contemporary music Europe.

CONTACT: Brandenburgisches Colloquium für Neue Musik, Luisenstrasse 58-60, D-10117 Berlin, Germany. Tel: 011-030-28448231; Fax: 011-030-2823475.

1995 NATIONAL ORCHESTRAL COMPOSERS' SCHOOL NOVEMBER 12-18, BRISBANE

The 1995 National Orchestral Composers' School, managed by the Australian Music Centre in collaboration with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, will be held at ABC Studios in Brisbane with the Queensland Symphony Orchestra, conductor William Southgate, and composition tutor Gerard Brophy. The selected participating composers are Brendan Colbert, Stuart Greenbaum, Christine McCombe, and Kevin Purcell, who will compose works specifically for the orchestra. The culmination of the School is a public performance and a recording for subsequent broadcast.

CONTACT: Australian Music Centre, P.O. Box N690, Grosvenor Place NSW 2000, Australia. Tel: 011-02-2474677; Fax: 011-02-2412873; E-mail: amc@slim.slrsw.gov.au.

CENTRE DE CREATION ET COMMUNICATION D'ILE DE FRANCE

Composers and their performers: A course organized by the Centre de Creation et Communication d'Ile de France and l'Institut Supérieur de Composition Musicale. The course is set up for young composers and their performers. There are two complementary parts:

1) Analysis - composition - orchestration: a three hour class each Tuesday and Thursday during the entire year by Patrice Sciortino; composition classes will be given by guest teachers: Alexandre Mullenbach (Salzburg), Helmut Flammer (Stuttgart), Umberto Rotondi (Milan). The works of the students will be performed by l'Atelier Musique de Ville d'Avray.

2) Introduction and advanced courses on new playing techniques as used in contemporary music written for clarinet (Jacques di Donato), flute (Patrice Bocquillon), violoncello (Jacques Wiederker), guitar (Duo Horreaux-Trehard). Courses each first Monday and Thursday of the month. All students' compositions and orchestrations will be considered individu-

ally. Apart from the standard study-repertoire, each student interpreter may propose study-pieces of his own choice. Public: teachers, musicians from orchestras and ensembles, soloists, composers, orchestrators. Location: the Chateau de Ville d'Avray.

CONTACT: Chateau de Ville d'Avray, 10 rue de Mames, 92410 Ville d'Avray, FRANCE. Tel.: 011-33-47-50-44-28; Fax: 011-33-47-50-53-90.

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and Temple Universities, and the *Concerto for Wind Ensemble* was performed at Northwestern, Kent, Michigan State and Cornell Universities. His *Concerto for Violoncello* and *Sonata a Tre* will be performed in May during the Spring in Prague Festival, and his *Landscapes for Brass Quintet* will be performed at the International Brass Festival at Indiana University and at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May.

Arvo Pärt, cont. from pg. 2

apprehension of what is truly valuable in life. In this world of ours, full of "noise...all around us and inside of us," rather than being the antithesis, Arvo Pärt should be the model.

Jeremy Beck is an Assistant Professor of Composition and Theory at the University of Northern Iowa. He has received degrees from the Yale School of Music, Duke University and the Mannes College of Music. Recently he was awarded a series of grants from the American Council of Teachers of Russian to present lectures on American Music at Herzen University and the Conservatory in St. Petersburg, Russia.

CORRECTION

An item in a previous issue of the *Newsletter* indicated that submissions to the SCI CD series should go to the home address of Richard Brooks. This is not the correct address for submissions. Please send submissions for the CD series to the New York City Office: Society of Composers, Inc., PO Box 296, Old Chelsea Station, New York, NY 10113-0296