

## Elements of the minimalist composition technique in Arvo Pärt's works based on psalmic texts

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**Abstract:** Estonian composer whose creation was classified by the critics in the artistic musical movement called "holy minimalism", Arvo Pärt (1935-) is a special creator, author of many opuses of film music, works for organ, piano, orchestra, choral pages with accompaniment but also a cappella. Arvo Pärt expresses its beliefs and life principles in sonorous works with the help of the *tintinnabuli* composition technique. With a profound hermeneutical and semantic load, his music stems from his life philosophy, uses a simple language, but not simplistic. "De profundis" and "Zwei slawische Psalmen" are two works based on psalm texts that use the minimalist composition technique.

Key-words: *tintinnabuli*, psalm, minimalism

### 1. Elements of the minimalist composition technique in Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli*

*"For me, the most important thing is that what I cannot express in thousands of words I can express in a few notes". (Arvo Pärt, our translation)*

Estonian composer whose creation was classified by the critics in the artistic musical movement called "holy minimalism", Arvo Pärt (1935-) is a special creator, author of many opuses of film music, works for organ, piano, orchestra, choral pages with accompaniment but also a cappella. Musical minimalism "refers to a postmodern orientation which manifests itself in the composition of a repetitive sonorous flow, often long, where music is gradually transformed by the repetition (...) of the smallest components of the discourse" (Dediu 2010, 335). Supporter of this type of musical expression, Arvo Pärt expresses its beliefs and life principles in sonorous works with the help of the **tintinnabuli** composition technique. With a profound hermeneutical and semantic load, his music stems from his life philosophy, uses a simple language, but not simplistic, and reminds us of the compositional equilibrium of the Middle Ages.

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Fig. 1. *Tintinnabulum of Antique Rome*

The concept of tintinnabuli (from Lat. Tintinnabulum – bell or ensemble of bells) was created after a period of imposed “compositional silence”, when Arvo Pärt expressed his desire to withdraw from his activity as composer, to return to the musical values of the Middle Ages and to crystalize an original style to express his most honest feelings. The years of compositional silence (1968-1976) overlapped with the composer’s conversion to Orthodoxy, which is worth mentioning for a better understanding of the spirituality of the Maestro’s music (Cargile 2008, 1-17). Thus, it is not an accident that psalmic texts are used in Arvo Pärt’s masterpieces, the composer expressed on many occasions his desire to compose music based on the guiding values of his life. The music speaks for itself, Arvo Pärt’s religious creations are aimed at everyone, they are deeply contemplative and are based on minimalist compositional elements.

### **1.1. Arvo Pärt’s works based on psalmic texts**

We chose to discuss the composer’s works based on psalmic texts, which he composed after 1976 in the tintinnabuli minimalist technique. “De profundis” (1980), a work for male choir with the accompaniment of an organ and percussion

instruments, is a musical representation of David's Psalm 130 where we can identify elements of the minimalist composition technique.

The musical score for "De profundis" is presented in a multi-staff format. At the top, the tempo is marked as  $\text{♩} = 63 \text{ ca}$ . The vocal parts are arranged in four staves: Tenore I, Tenore II, Basso I, and Basso II. The instrumental parts include Campana in mi, Tam-Tam, Gran Cassa, and Organo. The organ part is detailed with registrations: SW: Board 16; Flute 4; Trem., Flute 8, and Ped: 16; 8. The lyrics are: "De pro - fun - dis cla - ma - vi ad te Do - mi - ne: Do - mi - ne ex - au - di vo - cem". The score includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *pp*.

Fig.2. *Fragment from "De profundis"*

From the point of view of their rhythm, the musical compositions previously mentioned do not represent a development, they do not resort to diminishing or augmenting the rhythm, instead the composer chose to base his discourse on a repetitive rhythm of equal values with the syncopations on the organ music sheet. A brief metro-rhythmic analysis highlights the composer's preference for simple language, the alternative measures are the ones that guarantee the overlap of the metric accent with the textual one, while the equal repetitive rhythm generates a contemplative and balanced atmosphere.

The limitation of the sonorous universe in Arvo Pärt's music stems from the melodic restrictions he imposes, thus the tintinnabuli technique must be explained as a composition technique using two types of melody, i.e. "T" and "M". "T" is the melodic string based exclusively on the three sounds of the tonic agreement,

whereas “M” is the melodic line based mainly on gradual evolution. The two melodic lines progress at the same time according to a philosophical principle: “T” is the will and divine law, whereas “M” is the course of human life where foreign agreement sounds represent man’s searchers and limitations (Hillier 2002, 86-97). Thus, the aim of the song based on agreement is “to guide” towards the second melody.

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I  
B  
II

ob - ser - va - ve - ris Do - mi - ne:

ob - ser - va - ve - ris Do - mi - ne:

Fig. 3. *The tintinnabuli technique applied to the discourse of masculine voices in “De profundis” (T, M)*

The overlap of the two melodic lines is done according to the principle of the parallel melodic evolution, never to the contrary. “De profundis” displays minimalist melodic exposure in tintinnabuli style for two voices, but also for three voices (M, M, T – in the order chosen by the composer) and four voices (M, M, T, T – in the order chosen by the composer for the exposure of the phrases).

81

T  
II  
I  
B  
II

in - i - qui - ta - ti - bus e - ius. \_\_\_\_

in - i - qui - ta - ti - bus e - ius. \_\_\_\_

in - i - qui - ta - ti - bus e - ius. \_\_\_\_

in - i - qui - ta - ti - bus e - ius. \_\_\_\_

Fig. 4. - *The tintinnabuli technique applied to the discourse of male voices in “De profundis” (M, M, T, T)*

The elements of the minimalist composition technique in “De profundis” are obvious; from the point of view of harmony, there is no development, the entire musical discourse gravitates around the minor agreement of the keynote. From the point of view of the melody, we witness a gradual development, but also one in leaps among the elements of the agreement, and the feature of syllabic music highlights the importance of the text in the compositional vision. The rhythm is based on equal values and equal syncopations, and repetition is the only way of developing the rhythm.

**1. lobet den herrn, alle helden (psalm 117)**

♩ = 108

**Soprano**  
Khva-lee-tye Go-spo-da fsee ya-zui-tsui, po-khva-lee-tye

**Alto**  
Khva-lee-tye Go-spo-da fsee ya-zui-tsui, po-khva-lee-tye

**Contratenor**

**Tenore**  
Khva-lee-tye Go-spo-da fsee ya-zui-tsui, po-khva-lee-tye

**Basso**  
Khva-lee-tye Go-spo-da fsee ya-zui-tsui, po-khva-lee-tye  
Хва-лѣ-те Го-спо-да вси х-зи-иы, по-хва-лѣ-те

**S**  
Ye-go fsee lyu-dee-ye, ya-ko u-tver-dee-sya mee-kost

**A**  
Ye-go fsee lyu-dee-ye, ya-ko u-tver-dee-sya mee-kost

**Cl**

**T**  
Ye-go fsee lyu-dee-ye, ya-ko u-tver-dee-sya mee-kost

**B**  
Ye-go fsee lyu-dee-ye, ya-ko u-tver-dee-sya mee-kost  
Е-го вси лю-ди-и, х-ко у-твер-дѣ-ся ми-лостъ

Fig.5. The tintinnabuli technique applied to the discourse of choir voices in “Zwei slawische Psalmen” (M, T, M, T)

“Zwei slawische Psalmen” (1984, revised in 1997) uses as textual support fragments from David’s Psalms 117 and 131. This piece for mixed a cappella choir revolves around the compositional concept of tintinnabuli. The basic agreement which “guides” the melody of the voice is the keynote agreement in minor. The first measures reveal the creator’s musical philosophy; the low voices intone in parallel octaves the “T” melodic line, while the “M” lines of the high voices perform a parallel development in sixth measure. Thus, the melody which symbolizes the divine will is intoned in a medium low register, which reminds us of the introvert prayer atmosphere specific for the orthodox faith.

The minimalist compositional strategy is also revealed in the metro-rhythmic parameter, the two Slavonic psalms are exposed on a rhythm of equal repeated values. The lack of rhythmic and harmonic-polyphonic developments, the faithfulness to the keynote agreement, the isorhythm and the syllabic composition that we find in the above mentioned creation are emblematic for the compositions in the tintinnabuli style.

The choice of these psalmic texts is not meaningless. In an interview, the composer stated that: “*Words are very important for me, they define music. We can say that the structure of the music originates from the text construction*” (Kimberley 2016, 6).

## 2. Conclusions

In conclusion, the tintinnabuli technique with its minimalist elements in the composition mark, from a stylistic point of view, Arvo Pärt’s creation (after 1976), the musical language used to translate the composer’s values is clear and balanced. Arvo Pärt’s music appears as a symbol of his faith, as an honest confession, in a whisper. The world’s eternal dualism is symbolized suggestively in the minimalist technique by the tintinnabuli composition, the composer seems preoccupied with deep meanings, with the relationship God-man, soul-body. Arvo Pärt’s creation constructs a world in itself, a universe which proposes an original way of understanding the musical art – as a road towards redemption.

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