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"Cantate Domino canticum novum" for Choir and Organ by Arvo Pärt Stylistic and interpretative analysis. Conductor's perspective

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Abstract: Written in 1977, the work by composer Arvo Pärt, Cantate Domino canticum novum (for organ and mixed choir), is based on the text of Psalm 96. The writing is homophonic and isorhythmic, and the tempo is lively, which, along with the piece's major tonality, constitutes exceptions in the landscape of the tintinnabuli style. The organ serves throughout the work as the Tintinnabuli voice, while the choral voices intone the Cantus firmus, taking on the role of the Melodic voice. The harmonic trajectory adheres to the tintinnabuli tradition: the entire work remains on the initially chosen pitch, noting that the organ, fulfilling the role of the T voice, exclusively intones the notes of the arpeggio in B-flat major. The melodic character of the entire work resembles the recitative style of the Catholic liturgical rite. The construction of the piece has an orderly succession based on the logic of accumulation, combined with antiphonal style, allowing the female voices to dialogue with the male voices, which then immediately come together to form a mixed four-voice texture.

Key-words: Arvo Pärt, Cantate Domino canticum novum, tintinnabuli, choral, organ

1. Arvo Pärt and Tintinnabuli

A prominent figure in contemporary music, the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) is known for his vast and original body of work, particularly due to the medieval liturgical sonorities he employs. His compositional style has been influenced by the major movements of the 20th century, starting from the neoclassicism of the Russian school, passing through dodecaphonic serialism, and leading to the minimalist movement of the 1960s. Building on minimalist principles (such as economy of means and the use of diatonic tonality), Arvo Pärt develops his own original compositional system, which he calls tintinnabuli (Hillier 1997, 6).

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His music is associated with cinematography (over 100 films)² and with dramaturgy³, with numerous documentaries being made with and about the author⁴. Pärt has received distinctions and awards worldwide⁵ and has become well-known online⁶ as well. In 2012, musicologist Andrew Shenton⁷ described him in the introductory note of *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt* as "one of the most influential and performed contemporary composers" (Shenton 2012, 8). In 2015, Günter Atteln, the director of the documentary made for the composer's 80th birthday, simply stated: "Arvo Pärt is the most performed composer in the world."⁸.

2. Cantate Domino canticum novum - Generalities

Written in 1977, the work *Cantate Domino canticum novum*⁹ (for organ and mixed choir) is based on the text of Psalm 96¹⁰, in the Latin version. Here is the original and its translation into Romanian¹¹:

- 1. Cantate Domino canticum novum: cantate Domino omnis terra.
 - Cântați Domnului cântare nouă, cântați Domnului tot pământul.
- 2. Cantate Domino, et benedicite nomini ejus: annuntiate de die in diem salutare ejus.
 - Cântați Domnului, binecuvântați numele Lui, binevestiți din zi în zi mântuirea Lui.
- 3. Annuntiate inter gentes gloriam ejus, in omnibus populis mirabilia ejus.
 - Vestiți între neamuri slava Lui, între toate popoarele minunile Lui;

³ Arvo Pärt | Robert Wilson: Adam's Passion (world premiere in 2015, in Tallinn, Estonia).

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² http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0701736/?ref =fn al nm 1

⁴ Documentaries: Arvo Pärt. November 1978 (1978), Arvo Pärt - And Then Came the Evening and the Morning (1990), 24 Preludes for a Fugue (2002), Sounds and Silence (2009) Playing Pärt (2012), The Lost Paradise (2015), Even If I Lose Everything (2015), That Part Feeling - the Universe of Arvo Part (2019)

⁵ http://www.arvopart.ee/en/arvo-part-2/honorary-degrees-awards/

⁶ The work *Spiegel im Spiegel* has the highest number of views on YouTube: 3.001.699. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QtFPdBUI7XQ)

⁷ The translations of quotes from other languages into Romanian belong to the author of this article, except for those expressly indicated as being by other authors.

⁸ Günter Atteln, descriptive note of the documentary *The lost paradise*, ACCENTUS Music ACC20321, 2015. (http://accentus.com/productions/arvopaert-robertwilson-thelostparadise)

⁹ World premiere: 28.10.1977, Riga Polytechnic Institute Student's Club, Riga, Latvia, Composer's recital: Hortus Musicus, Andres Mustonen (conductor)

 $^{^{10}}$ This psalm in the Orthodox Bible is number 95 – a fact also noted by the author in the score.

¹¹ The Bible, Publishing House of the Romanian Patriarchate, ISBN 978-973-616-119-3

- 4. Quoniam magnus Dominus, et laudabilis nimis: terribilis est super omnes deos.
 - Că mare este Domnul și lăudat foarte, înfricoșător este; mai presus decât toti dumnezeii.
- 5. Quoniam emones dii gentium daemonia: Dominus autem coelos fecit. **Că toți dumnezeii neamurilor sunt idoli; iar Domnul cerurile a făcut.**
- 6. Confessio et pulchritudo in conspectu ejus: sanctimonia et magnificentiain sanctificatione ejus.
 - Laudă și frumusețe este înaintea Lui, sfințenie și măreție în locașul cel sfânt al Lui.
- 7. Afferte Domino patriae Gentium, afferte Domino gloriam et honorem: afferte Domino gloriam nomini ejus.
 - Aduceți Domnului, semințiile popoarelor, aduceți Domnului slavă și cinste; aduceți Domnului slavă numelui Lui.
- 8. Jollite hostias, et introite in atria ejus: adorate Dominum in atria sancto ejus. Aduceţi jertfe şi intraţi în curţile Lui. Închinaţi-vă Domnului în curtea cea sfântă a Lui.
- 9. Commoveatur a facie ejus universa terra: dicite in Gentibus quia Dominus regnavit.
 - Să tremure de fața Lui tot pământul. Spuneți între neamuri că Domnul a împărățit.
- 10. Eternim correxit orbem terrae qui non commoevbitur:
 - Pentru că a întărit lumea care nu se va clinti; judeca-va popoare întru dreptate.
- 11. Judicabit populos in sequitate. Leatentur caeli et exsultet terra: commoveatur mare, et plentitudo ejus: gaudebunt campi, et omnia quae in eis sunt.
 - Să se veselească cerurile și să se bucure pământul, să se zguduie marea și toate cele ce sunt întru ea; să se bucure câmpiile și toate cele ce sunt pe ele.
- 12. Tunc exsultabunt omnia ligna silvarum a facie domini quia venit: quoniam venit judicare terram.
 - Atunci se vor bucura toți copacii pădurii, de fața Domnului, că vine, vine să judece pământul.
- 13. Judicabit orbem terrae in aequitate, et populos in veritate sua.

 Judeca-va lumea întru dreptate și popoarele întru adevărul Său.

The chosen key is **B-flat Major**, and the structure of the piece is strophic-antiphonal. Each verse is assigned numbers (delimited by double bars), and the measures are

intentionally not numbered—serving the same central ideas: the text subordinates all structural aspects of the music (melody, rhythm, meter, form, etc.). The bar line simply serves to separate the words, with each measure containing a single word, regardless of how many syllables it has (see Fig. 1).

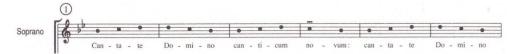


Fig. 1. Each measure contains a single word (m. 1-6)

The writing is homophonic and isorhythmic, and the tempo is lively, even though there is no metronomic indication at the beginning—we deduce the speed from the approximate duration specification at the end (duration: about 3 minutes). We can estimate the pulse value at approximately 140 beats per minute, indicating a brisk movement corresponding to the Allegretto tempo. The chosen Major key and the speed of the piece are exceptions in the tintinnabuli style landscape. Another distinctive element that is absent in this piece is the ison, or drone.

The rhythmic notation (as can be seen in the figure above) is specially chosen to ensure the interpretation of the work flows smoothly. In the score, we only see the full notes corresponding to the beats, without tails (vertical lines). Occasionally, we encounter one or two horizontal lines placed above. This is not the only example of using non-standard notation. To better serve the interpretation of his music, Arvo Pärt employs special signs in other works as well, such as *An den Wassern zu Babel saßen wir und weinten* or *Missa Syllabica*. In each case, the legend on the first page describes how to read the musical signs:

Fig. 2. Legend of note values

The organ plays the role of the *Tintinnabuli* voice throughout the work, while the voices intone the *Cantus firmus*, taking on the role of the *Melodic voice*. In this piece, the pedalboard is not used, as neither the tempo nor the recitative character would allow for its intervention. The organ has two combinations of registers described in the legend on the first page:

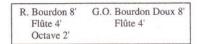


Fig. 3. Legend of the organ registers

The overlapping of the registers notated with **R**. at both hands creates the most expansive sound effect, being used only in two instances: verses 3 and 9. We can thus identify the Climax Point of the piece, the moment of dramatic culmination in verse 9, where the text is presented: "Let all the earth tremble before Him. Declare among the nations that the Lord reigns".



Fig. 4. The Climax Point (m. 91-96)

The generative model of the construction of the vocal melodic lines is based on the principle of the mirror. The melodic character of the entire work resembles the recitative style of the Catholic liturgical rite. The sequence of notes corresponds to each syllable, and the stepwise motion is characteristic of the Renaissance *Cantus firmus*, where leaps are rare and, when they occur, they are necessarily softened by a stepwise sequence in the opposite direction.



Fig. 5. Leaps followed by a stepwise sequence in the opposite direction (m. 7-13)

The entire generative model brings at the end of each verse the same note values corresponding to the respective syllables: quarter notes with a dot. We thus observe that each verse halts the recitative movement, which mostly unfolds on equal values (eighth notes), seemingly punctuating the speech by stopping on values three times longer - quarter notes with a dot. The other punctuation marks that appear (comma

and colon) are also promptly indicated by double note values (quarter notes). The author thus draws the entire sound discourse even closer to the act of speaking.

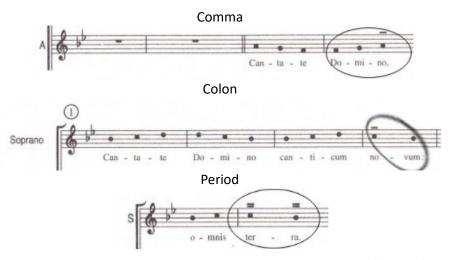


Fig. 6. The melodic discourse similar to the act of speaking (m. 9-10/ m. 1-4/ m. 7-8)

The construction of this work follows an ordered succession based on the logic of accumulation combined with the antiphonal style, so that the female voices dialogue with the male ones, only for the sections to immediately reunite, forming a mixed four-voice formula for one or two verses (only at the end do all the voices sing two verses one after the other: no. 12 & no. 13).

Here is the graphic representation of the construction meticulously crafted by Arvo Pärt, which once again reinforces his own statement: "I do not trust the flow of my music without mathematical structures." (Beck 1995, 1)

Verses [1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
С	S	S	S			S	S	S	S			S	S
H		Α	Α			Α		Α	Α			Α	Α
0			Т	Т	Т	Т			Т	Т	Т	Т	Т
R			В		В	В			В		В	В	В

Table 1. Graphical table - structure of the verses

Harmony is also indebted to the *tintinnabuli* tradition: the entire work stagnates on the initially chosen key, noting that the organ, serving as the *T voice*, exclusively intones the notes of the arpeggio of **B-flat Major** without exception. Vertically, a maximum of two melodic lines are practically superimposed, even though sometimes it is sung in four voices; the sopranos and altos are doubled at the octave by tenors and basses, respectively.



Fig. 7. Texture of 2 voices, doubled at the octave (m. 22-28)

3. Stylistic and interpretative aspects

The antiphonal verses resemble the recitative monody found in the Catholic confession liturgy. In singing, this is reflected through extreme purity, solemnity, and simplicity. In these sections, preferably performed by a solo voice, articulation is the fundamental element, and the melodic unfolding must ensure a white, non-vibrato vocal quality that is almost austere. The entire work will require an open, relaxed vocality, close to the androgynous impersonality of angels. The uniformity of the choral sound is a consequence of the degree to which this goal is achieved, aiming to bring all timbres to a greater purity, thus creating the impression of dissolving the sensuality of the female voices or the rigidity and strength of the male voices. Special attention will be given to the quarter-note followed by eighth-note formula (there will be a tendency to slow the tempo) - Figure 8, m. 4

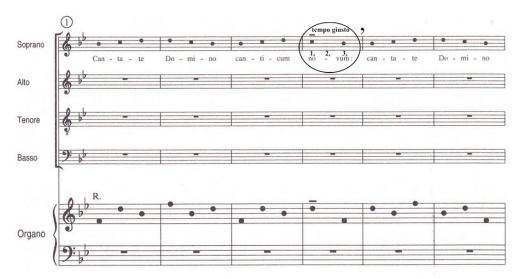


Fig. 8. Attention to the quarter-note followed by eighth-note formula (m. 1-6)

The interpretative difficulty in these passages lies in maintaining the same level of concentration among the performers with each stanza (verse), and as the nuances decrease, there may even be an increase in inner tension. The conductor can suggest to the ensemble to approach each statement of the verses as if it were the first time, constantly repeating the same fresh attitude throughout the unfolding of the music. A significant contribution to this goal is made by keeping the diction vibrant. In other words, the tempo, diction, articulation, and closure of the final consonants remain the same, even as the internal state and intensity of emotion vary—especially in the transitional passages from two choral parts to *tutti* (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. The transitional passages from two choral parts to tutti (m. 14-28)

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The greatest challenge in this recitative style is phrasing, specifically expressiveness, which involves the fluent interpretation of the melodic line. Due to the predominance of equal eighth-note values (only in moments of semicadence or cadence do quarter notes or quarter notes with dots appear - see figures with punctuation marks), there is a risk that the phrasing may become choppy and fail to provide a certain evolutionary direction to the melodic line. The overall character of the work is one of pure statement, epic in nature - as indicated by the text: "Announce Him / Proclaim Him / Praise Him, the Lord..." etc.

The interpretative attitude is one of joy in conveying God's message, with the detachment specific to the Roman Catholic singing style. However, the performers will need to sing, within this austerity characteristic of Gregorian chant, with a particular freshness in each of the 13 verses. Perhaps the most important factor for ensuring a valid interpretation is the fluency of the melodic line. In this case, the fluency of the vocal melos is achieved through an advanced vocal and pronunciation technique, consisting of combining a lively and present diction with equal force on each syllable and a timbral legato in which the voice emits a sound wave almost continuously, without the transition from one syllable to another creating sound hiatuses. The conductor must also master this style of singing and be able to demonstrate to the performers the phrasing method through which articulation remains prominent without sacrificing the inner legato of the melodic line. One way to describe this vocal technique skill is as follows: articulation must always come above the emission of sound, with the air pressure that sets the vocal cords vibrating being constant and continuous, regardless of the syllables that segment the singing; the closure achieved at the oral level by articulation should be firm, yet gradual and gentle, avoiding a sudden opening of the mouth, and more so at the labial level, not with the entire jaw.

Imagination is an essential element in vocal art. Even if performers can easily envision the ideal way of singing, describing this process is insufficient unless it is frequently complemented by live demonstrations conducted by the conductor, another singer, or a part that has a better mastery of this technical-interpretative approach. In the case of such recitative-like phrasing, where the melody unfolds gradually without bringing distinct melodic themes to the listener's consciousness, interpretation can be challenging. It risks failing to evoke interest or, worse, creating dry and insipid sounds.

At the sound level, timbre is another element that ensures the legato of phrasing. Regardless of whether it involves different registers of the voice or addresses large or difficult intonational leaps - the color of the voice should remain consistent. The equality of timbral registers is a constant endeavor for performers approaching Arvo Pärt's *tintinnabuli* style. Closely related to the constant pressure

of the air, the performer must, after finding the timbral color that feels most comfortable (and therefore characteristic), maintain the "voice in the same place" regardless of the register in which they are singing. Timbre uniformity has been a significant concern over time as vocal art has evolved and the number of professional singers has increased. In his treatise on singing, written in the mid-19th century, Emanuel Garcia identifies the three zones of the voice (bass – *Contro basso* (Garcia 1990, VIII), middle – *di petto*, and treble – *falsetto-testa*) and pays special attention to the process of equalizing these registers (it.: *Unione dei registri*) through exercises and explanations that span thirty pages, nearly half of his first volume (Garcia 1990, 14-43).

Here are a few moments from the work *Cantate Domino canticum novum* that require special attention regarding timbral unity:

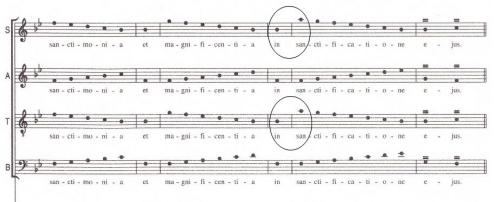


Fig. 10. Major seventh leaps and timbral unity (m. 58-63)

Two other important building blocks in achieving a performance faithful to the composer's intentions are the **sharpness of attacks** and **intonational accuracy**. Special attention must be given to passages with leaps, followed by a stepwise descent. The precision and physical and psychological preparation of the high attacks will be closely monitored. Air pressure and the placement of the sound in the area of the nasal and parietal resonators should be ensured in advance, starting from the previous sound(s).



Fig. 11. Preparation of the high notes (m. 58-63)

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The tendency to lose intonation accuracy in descending melodic passages is often encountered in singing, even among professional performers. The conductor will work on these passages in a slow tempo with each voice individually and will ask the singers to "imagine" that the descending melody is actually ascending, increasing air pressure and intonational accuracy accordingly.



Fig. 12. Sharpness of intonation in descending melodies (m. 58-63)

Another characteristic of the work from the perspective of vocal technique and acoustics is the correct pitch-taking in certain difficult passages, when, after long pauses, the voices begin to sing at a minor second (verses 2, 5) or a descending minor seventh.

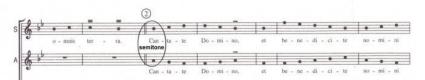


Fig. 13. Beginning of the singing at a minor second harmonic interval (m. 7-13)

The entrance of the altos and basses must be secure and precise, even though the interval created at the beginning of the verses is unusual for the start of a harmonic choral song. The same occurs at certain concluding moments of the verses, when the voices finish in minor second dissonances. These passages should be sung gently, with the ending naturally having a softer sound than what preceded it; however, the intonational firmness must persist until the close. We recognize this overlapping of minor seconds at the endings as a common technique in the *tintinnabuli* sound.

However, special attention will be given to these passages to eliminate intonational deviations. The practical method of rehearsing these passages alone is not sufficient. The attitude towards these dissonances should be one of gentleness, but with intonational precision, ensuring one's own frequency while also paying heightened attention to the vibrational harmony with the other voice. The vocal color, nuance, and emotional state of the respective passage must be uniform among the choir parts. These stylistic elements and the technical-interpretative approach to choral singing are essential constants within the *tintinnabuli* style.



Fig. 14. Final cadences on minor second intervals (m. 97-102)

In terms of the vocal colors, the piece does not deviate from the *tintinnabuli* landscape, as natural, open colors are preferred, especially in passages where voices frequently overlap. Here, the lower voices, by emulating the open sound and character of the higher voices, will more easily create the overall homogeneity we desire.

Alongside the strictly vocal challenges, another difficulty is the perfect synchronization of the pulse movement, as well as the semi-cadential and cadential moments with the organ, which serves as the *T voice*. If the tempo suggested by the composer is respected, the organ's intervention presents some difficulties due to the combination of arpeggiated formulas that, while adhering to the algorithm of the M voices, always follow the principle of the mirror when both hands are present. The organist must "breathe" in sync with the voices and closely observe the conductor's gestures during cadential moments or at breath points (such as commas and colons). The small pauses between verses will depend on the acoustics of the performance space. Given that the organ is most often found in churches, we will encounter a high reverberation acoustics. This will influence both the speed at which the music unfolds and the duration of the pauses between verses. When the reverberation in the performance space exceeds 1.5 to 2 seconds, we will be compelled to choose a more measured tempo and make longer pauses between verses. In this way, the sound message will be intelligible, and the overall atmosphere of the work, even if bright and declamatory, will simultaneously retain its solemn and tranquil character.



Fig. 15. Mirror writing of the organ part (m. 14-21)

4. Conclusion

The main aspects regarding the stylistic and interpretative approach of interpreting Arvo Pärt's *Cantate Domino canticum novum* can be structured in these few categories:

- **Stylistic Influence**: The antiphonal verses are closely aligned with the recitative monody of the Catholic confession liturgy, emphasizing purity and solemnity. This stylistic choice necessitates a specific vocal quality that is clear and austere.
- Vocal Technique: Successful interpretation requires a focused vocal approach, particularly through the use of open, relaxed vocal techniques that avoid vibrato. This ensures a uniform choral sound that blends individual timbres into a cohesive whole, creating an ethereal quality reminiscent of angelic voices.
- Interpretative Consistency: Maintaining a fresh and engaged interpretation throughout the performance is crucial, as the interpretative challenge lies in avoiding monotony in repeated verses. The conductor plays a vital role in encouraging performers to approach each verse with renewed enthusiasm.
- Phrasing and Melodic Fluency: The fluency of the melodic line is essential
 for expressiveness. Performers must focus on smooth phrasing to prevent
 the music from sounding choppy, particularly given the predominance of
 eighth-note values. This fluency can be supported by proper vocal technique
 and careful attention to the articulation of syllables.
- **Timbre and Vocal Color**: Achieving timbral unity is fundamental, as performers need to maintain a consistent vocal color across different registers. This uniformity enhances the overall sound and contributes to the work's *tintinnabuli* style.
- **Intonation Accuracy**: Precision in pitch, especially in passages with dissonance or unusual intervals, is critical. Singers should be prepared to adjust their perception of melodies to maintain intonational accuracy during challenging sections.
- Collaboration with organ: Synchronization with the organ is essential, particularly regarding cadential moments and pulse movement. The conductor's cues become important for achieving a cohesive performance, especially in acoustically reverberant environments like churches.
- **Emotional Interpretation**: Despite the work's austere character, performers are encouraged to convey joy and detachment in their delivery, aligning with the spiritual message of the text.

Overall, achieving a performance that aligns with the composer's intentions requires a delicate balance of technical skill, emotional engagement, and interpretative consistency, all of which contribute to the unique soundscape of the *tintinnabuli* style.

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(https://carturesti.ro/muzica/the-sound-of-arvo-part-403328870)

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Arvo Pärt - And Then Came the Evening and the Morning (1990)

24 Preludes for a Fugue (2002)

Sounds and Silence (2009)

Playing Pärt (2012)

The Lost Paradise (2015)

Even If I Lose Everything (2015)
That Part Feeling - the Universe of Arvo Part (2019)

Musical Scores

Cantate Domino canticum novum (©1977 by Universal Edition, Wien/UE 31058) extracted from Arvo Pärt Collected choral works, (©2008 by Universal Edition, Wien/UE33880)