

Arvo Pärt

- Biography -

Arvo Pärt, born on 11 September 1935 in Paide, Estonia, began studying composition with Heino Eller at the Conservatory in Tallinn in 1958. Already as a student, Pärt caused a stir with his *Necrologue* for Orchestra No. 5 (1960) to the victims of fascism, first performed in Moscow and Leningrad: the first serial composition in and from Estonia received thoroughly negative reactions in the Soviet press. In 1962, however, Pärt received First Prize at the All-Union Competition in Moscow for young composers for *Meie aed* [Our Garden] for children's choir and orchestra (Eno Raud, 1959), a tonal work, and for the oratorio *Maailmaa samm* [The Step of the World] (Enn Vetemaa, 1961). In 1963 Pärt completed his studies at the Conservatory. From 1958 until 1967 he was a sound engineer at the Estonian Radio, after which he lived as a freelance composer in Tallinn.

His *Credo* for piano, mixed choir and orchestra (1968) gave offence to the cultural authorities due to its spiritual content; for Pärt, however, it was the crisis-point and endpoint of his first creative period for stylistic reasons. This was followed by a period of silence and study of medieval music until 1976, interrupted by only two works: the *3rd Symphony* (1971) and the symphonic cantata *Laul armastatule* [Song to the Beloved] (Šota Rusthaveli, 1973; rev. 1974).

The new style since 1976, based on the triad and elementary melodic models, with its almost provocative simplicity, had to meet with bafflement in a cultural milieu that was gradually prepared to tolerate avant-garde tendencies. Moreover, it was no secret that for Pärt, all music is ultimately religious. Pärt had to hide the biblical content of *Saara oli 90-aastane...* [Sarah turned 90 years old] for soprano, violin, double bass (or two electric guitars), harpsichord and percussion (1976) with the title *Modus*. In 1980 he came to Vienna with his family via Israel. A DAAD stipend for West Berlin in 1981/82 caused him to settle in that city. He has slowly but constantly accumulated a large following with his calm, harmonising music; for certain circles he has almost become a cult figure and – largely unjustly – claimed by catchwords and fashions such as new simplicity, minimal music, meditative music and new age.

In 1978 and 1989 Pärt received annual music prizes in Estonia for *Tabula rasa* (1977) and *Te Deum* (1984/86), in 1980 a half-year stipend of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Sport as well as from the Heinrich Strobel Foundation of the German Southwest Radio, in 1983 the large cultural prize of the Estonian Union in Stockholm as well as a stipend of the Musagetes Institute in Zürich, and in 1984 a year's stipend of the Austrian Federal Ministry of Education, the Arts and Sport.

Pärt's first compositions – a *Partita* and two *Sonatinas* for piano (all 1958) – follow the neoclassical tradition. But already with the *Necrologue* for Orchestra No. 5 (1960) there begins a non-dogmatic, individual confrontation with serial technique that Pärt learned from the textbooks of Herbert Eimert and Ernst Křenek. At a time when the serial era was coming to an end and was replaced by a phase of aleatorics and sound composition, Pärt brought in a strongly sonorous component into his serial works right from the beginning. Thus, in *Perpetuum mobile* for Orchestra No. 10 (1963), he gradually builds up the row vertically to form a cluster and then back down again. The old is always retained within the new: in his *1st Symphony "Polüfooniline"* (1964) and *2nd Symphony* (1966), Pärt combines elementary rhythms of a neoclassical cast with a primarily melodic twelve-tone technique, the art of canon (which he still cultivates today), clusters and aleatoric fields.

The stylistic quotation, especially from the baroque period, is characteristic of the mid- 1960s. This ranges from the *Collage on B-A-C-H* for oboe, harpsichord, piano and strings (1964) and the violoncello concerto *Pro et Contra* (1966), the slow movement of which is merely a cadenza on the baroque lamento bass, to *Credo* (1968), which is "almost purely Bachian music" and which signified a crisis and boundary for the composer: "There is no more point in writing music if almost all you do is quote" (Pärt 1991).

Pärt fell silent as a composer for several years and studied medieval music. In the *3rd Symphony* (1971), with which he interrupted this silence, he adapted himself to the style of this music. After the oratorio *Song to the Beloved* (1973; rev. 1974) there was another creative break until Pärt presented a completely new style of simplicity with the little piano piece *Aliinale* [For Alina] (1976) which has determined his style ever since: the simplest melodic traits, often scale excerpts are entwined with the notes of a single triad over long stretches of time, sometimes for the entire work; these notes of the triad resemble a bell-like sound background: "Tintinnabuli Style" (from the Latin tintinnabulum = small bell). Pärt has increasingly applied this style to larger forms. *Tabula rasa* for two violins, prepared piano and string orchestra (1977) reflects the baroque form of the double violin concerto; several versions of a composition with various scorings bear the title *Fratres* (since 1977). Sacred music occupies a special position in Pärt's output. The word has a strong effect on the form in such works, both in the large-scale dimension and in small details: "Words write the music" (Pärt 1991). The most substantial works of this kind are the passion compositions *St. John Passion* (1977/1982; rev. 1988), *Stabat Mater* (1985) and *Miserere* (1989/90), works of praise such as the *Te Deum* (1984/86) and the *Magnificat* (1989), in more recent years a *Missa sillabica* (1977/91) and a *Berlin Mass* (1990/91).