

**MEDIEVAL MANNERISMS IN MODERN MUSIC:
THE MUSIC OF ARVO PÄRT AND PATRICIA VAN NESS**

Jennifer C. Post

December 8, 2007

MCY 524 – Contemporary Musicology

Professor Melissa de Graaf

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
History.....	2
Ideologies behind the use of chant and early music.....	4
Language.....	8
Musical Examples.....	9
Public Reception.....	10
Conclusion.....	12
Bibliography.....	13
Appendix - Interview with Patricia Van Ness conducted by Jennifer Post.....	15

INTRODUCTION

Listening to the music of Arvo Pärt and Patricia Van Ness requires more than the ear alone; one must also use the soul. Common threads of faith and simplicity bind these seemingly different composers together. Such differences include country of origin, ethnicity and sex, formal musical training and denomination of faith, to name a few. However, these differences only serve to make the composers' current similarities appear even more striking. While the Estonian Pärt subscribes to Russian Orthodoxy, the American Van Ness describes herself as "intensely spiritual," though not specifically affiliated with any denomination.¹ However, intense belief and personal relationship with God is evident in the music, methods, and ideologies of each artist. These ideologies fuel their works, particularly through their inclination towards Gregorian chant and practices through the Renaissance. The result is music with a similar spirit and a common goal: to express God's personal work in their lives.

HISTORY

Arvo Pärt, born in Estonia in 1935, began his formal musical training at the age of 7 or 8.² After decades of compositional training and successful experimentation with twentieth-century idioms, his formal studies in total serialism led him to a proverbial brick wall.³ Pärt's avant-garde piece entitled *Credo*, written in 1968, would only hint at the very beginning of a prolific strain of faith-based composition. After *Credo*, however, Pärt entered into a period of virtual creative silence for about eight years, writing only two concert works during that time.⁴ However, his life

¹ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview. 27 November 2007.

² Hiller, Paul. *Arvo Pärt*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Page 26.

³ Ibid. Page 32.

⁴ Ibid. Page 32.

began to reawaken around 1976 when he met his second wife and became a member of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵

Patricia Van Ness, born in 1951 in the United States, also experienced her own compositional silence, though it might better be described as a compositional birth.⁶ Van Ness did not begin writing until she was 32, and even then never took up formal compositional training.⁷ She grew up playing the violin, which would prove to be paramount in her instrumental and choral writing later in life.⁸ Before she took up composing, however, she played rock violin with the group *Private Lightning*, of which she and her brother Paul were founding members.⁹ The band released an album of the same name in 1980.¹⁰ After the band parted ways, Van Ness began writing instrumental music with a flair for the sounds of the Renaissance.¹¹ She fostered a fruitful relationship with the Boston Ballet.¹² After writing a very large work for the Ballet, Van Ness began to venture towards choral music, often setting her own impassioned texts for concert and liturgical use.¹³

IDEOLOGIES BEHIND THE USE OF CHANT AND EARLY MUSIC

Perhaps the greatest similarity between Pärt and Van Ness lies in the ancestry of their musical ideas back to the beginning of church music: Gregorian chant. As described by Katherine Bergeron, “chant is typically regarded as a kind of Ur-repertory, a practice that both precedes and

⁵ Hillier, Paul D. “Arvo Pärt.” Grove Music Online.

⁶ Van Ness, Patricia. “Biography.” <www.patriciavanness.com/bio.html>

⁷ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

gives rise to more complex, or ‘developed’ musical types.”¹⁴ This is especially true for the writing styles of both Pärt and Van Ness, though their music should not be considered strict imitation of the style in either composer’s music. According to the foremost authority on the music of Arvo Pärt besides the artist himself, Paul Hillier explains how “it was primarily the spirit of early music that interested [Pärt], far more than the technical procedures by which it was put together.”¹⁵ Hillier also notes the “strong correspondence that exists between medieval Russian chant (and polyphony) and the spiritually charged Russian icon.”¹⁶ Chant, for Pärt, stands as the ultimate return to simplicity, purity, and awe; these all serve as welcome relief from the realm of maximalism from which Pärt desired to escape.

Pärt has been quoted asking, “What does a single sound, a single note stand for? This innumerable stream which flows past our ears has dulled our perceptive apparatus.”¹⁷ Specifically, Pärt devised his signature tintinnabuli sound as a “flight into voluntary poverty” that is “based on the simple sound elements which seem to have existed for centuries.”¹⁸ Though the term tintinnabuli refers to the sound of bells, it may be gathered that the style grew out of the simplicity of chant or perhaps “as derived from measured organum” in relation to this two-part writing style.¹⁹ Pärt’s tintinnabuli style has been described as music emerged from silence, quite literally the composer’s compositional silence between 1968 and 1976.²⁰ In the words of Paul Hillier, tintinnabuli is the result of “Pärt’s own progress through the mute years of exploration towards the

¹⁴ Bergeron, Katherine. “Chant, or the politics of inscription.” *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*. Edited by Tess Knighton and David Fallows. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992. Page 101.

¹⁵ Hillier, Paul. Page 79.

¹⁶ Ibid. Page 4.

¹⁷ Savenko, Svetlana. “Musica sacra of Arvo Part.” *Ex oriente: Ten Composers from the Former USSR*. Edited by Valeria Tsenova. Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2002. Page 162.

¹⁸ Ibid. Page 160.

¹⁹ Ibid. Page 165.

²⁰ Hillier, Paul. Page 1.

uncovering of a new musical language and his own personal sense of renewal.”²¹ In the 1997 BBC documentary *Modern Minimalists*, the Icelandic artist Björk aptly explains how “It’s very brave these days to look complete things straight in the eye and just say, ‘calm down.’ You can do all these things with only one note. Sometimes inside a note, there is a whole micro cosmos, especially with textures.”²² Pärt himself explains the value he ascribed from chant: “Gregorian chant taught me what a cosmic secret is hidden in the art of combining two or three notes.”²³ In truth, Pärt’s tintinnabuli style is essentially minimalist in that it strips down the music to two important lines: one line moves melodically, and the other line touches solely upon notes of the triad. Pärt explains, “One line is my sins, and another line is forgiveness [of] my sins. Mostly the music has two lines. One is more complicated and subjective, but another is very simple, clear, and objective.”²⁴

For Van Ness, the propensity towards using chant in her works grew out of her love for the perfect fifths that resonate from the strings of her violin.²⁵ Chant and drone are naturally drawn from the pure sounds attained while tuning. Though the use of chant brings an air of antiquity to Van Ness’s music, she writes original chants for her choral works, rather than recycling the chants of old.²⁶ Whereas Pärt created the tintinnabuli style after being influenced by chant and early music, Van Ness created a style all her own which she calls “stacked chant.”²⁷ Stacked chant involves the very elements that its name would suggest: the composer writes multiple chants which are stacked at different moments. The result is very modern, spoken, dissonant texture. This style

²¹ Ibid. Page 75.

²² Pärt, Arvo. Interview with Björk Guðmundsdóttir. *Modern Minimalists*. BBC. 1997.

²³ Savenko, Svetlana. Page 159.

²⁴ Pärt, Arvo. Interview with Björk Guðmundsdóttir.

²⁵ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

is especially prevalent in her work *Nine Orders of the Angels*, particularly in the fourth movement, “Angeli Potestatis,” translated to “Angels of Power.” The piece reveals a markedly contemporary and fresh utilization of the ancient techniques, something which “Hildegard might have written had she been alive today.”²⁸

Though Van Ness began her career as a composer by writing for instruments, she simply “fell in love with the human voice.”²⁹ The composer herself describes her music as “a balance between passion and restraint.” In her own words:

I try to balance between passion and restraint. I think if it goes one way or the other, it’s not doing what I want it to do. My texts are often very revealing of my heart more or less, and I find them to be very passionate. In order to restrain them a little bit, I have them translated into Latin because Latin necessarily puts a veil between the listener’s ear and the singer’s mouth. You’re not hearing the words straight out.³⁰

Van Ness’s primary motivation for writing choral music was to break down her *own* brick wall. She saw her instrumental music as “being entrenched in a sort of major/minor mode” and decided to start experimenting with the old church modes, which led quite naturally to chant.³¹

Paul Hillier describes the “phenomenon of early music as an increasingly integral part of the twentieth-century musical world,” so much that this marriage of two styles has been “directly responsible for the rediscovery of early music It has become part of the music of our time.”³² This is especially relevant in Van Ness’s case regarding the music of Hildegard von Bingen. Not only has her style been compared to Hildegard, but her relationship with God has been paralleled to hers as well: “A dominant and distinguishing characteristic shared by these composers is how

²⁸ Higginson, Gary. “Recordings of the Month.” *Music Web (UK)*. 2003. <http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/May04/bingen.htm>.

²⁹ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

³² Hillier, Paul. Page 66.

deeply passionate are the motivations of faith, expressed both intellectually (Hildegard) and personally (Van Ness).”³³ Van Ness describes the “strongest motivating force” in her life, which is “the seeking and finding of beauty . . . Beauty has been my conduit to God. For me, beauty, love, music and God, or divine love, are inextricably entwined.”³⁴ In her music, especially her *a capella* choral works, this beauty is captured sonically, and it effectively transports the listener to a very introspective place.

LANGUAGE

Both Pärt and Van Ness share a common affinity for using Latin in their works. Pärt in particular has never written music in his native language of Estonian, though he has written in Church Slavonic.³⁵ He has also written a number of pieces in English. Van Ness has only recently begun writing choral music in English and some in Spanish, though her primary joy lies in the “beautiful vowels of Latin.”³⁶ Not only does Latin provide the restraint for her passionate texts, which are originally written by the composer in English, Latin functions for Van Ness in two other ways. First, Latin is, for Van Ness, “found art.” She explains:

Twentieth century sculptors would go out and find something like an old rusty bed spring and say, ‘This is art.’ It is called ‘found art’ because it is something that has been discarded. In many ways, Latin is like that; not many people use it so I thought I would.³⁷

³³ Monahan, Laurie (2003). *Tapestry; Sapphire Night* [Liner notes]. Mandelsloh: MDG. Page 5.

³⁴ Van Ness, Patricia (2003). *Tapestry; Sapphire Night* [Liner notes]. Mandelsloh: MDG. Page 7.

³⁵ Hillier, Paul. Page 24.

³⁶ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

³⁷ Ibid.

Second, using Latin versus English or any other language provides a way of honoring the tradition along which her music follows.³⁸ Her scores, which are made available free to the public on her website www.patriciavanness.com, include the English translation not only on the cover pages of each piece, but also on top of the staff at the beginning of every new vocal line. The singer is always aware of her textual surroundings in the fullest ability. Latin is not a dead language to Van Ness; it is alive in her music.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Though Pärt primarily turned to words after he turned to religion, his instrumental music has assumed a holy quality with no words required. His beloved (and often self re-orchestrated) *Fratres* uses no words at all, yet speaks volumes. The title, which means brethren or the plural of brothers, alludes to the two melodic voices which move stepwise a minor or major tenth apart from one another.³⁹ In between these “brethren” moves the mediator, which is the tintinnabuli voice, in symmetrical triadic motion relative to the two voices. The drone is reminiscent of “the stationary pitches in organum.”⁴⁰ The piece gradually unfolds over time, beginning with moments of bittersweet harmonics (referring to the version for eight cellos), to the languished, guttural moans that are only brought back into check by the relatively restrained, unchanging drone of the perfect fifth.

In contrast, Van Ness’s *Cor meum est templum sacrum* (My Heart is a Holy Place) sets a very personal and moving poem by the composer exalting God. In keeping with methodology of passion and restraint, the text was translated into Latin and set syllabically. Though Van Ness is

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Hillier. Page 106.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

particularly fond of melismatic vocal writing, it simply was not practical when setting this particular text.⁴¹ Like Pärt's *Fratres* (though her piece was not influenced by the work), the outer voices also move a tenth apart throughout the piece. The piece alternates between quiet reflection as seen in the beginning and end of the piece and the solo soprano sections, and between the emotional outpourings of wonder, as when illuminating the "rivers of gold flowing in elegance" beginning at measure 25. The piece has a forward, flowing motion set in place by the descending bass line, whether moving down the notes of the g minor scale or chromatically. *Cor meum*, as the composer refers to it, was dedicated to the choir and music director of First Church in Cambridge, Congregational in Massachusetts, where she has experienced a prolific residency.⁴²

PUBLIC RECEPTION

The story of the struggle between composer and consumer is familiar. Oftentimes, the struggle is won posthumously for the composer whose work was so beyond the understanding capacity of their active generation. These two living composers, however, are fortunate to be respected in their own time but not without criticism at some throughout their careers.

Though the terms "holy minimalism" or "neo-gothic minimalism" have been assigned to such composers as Arvo Pärt, Henryk Gorecki, and John Taverner, the labels do not exactly compliment. Musicologist Tim Rutherford-Johnson explains how Pärt's music does touch upon "minimalist-like strategies for composing large amounts of music with small means."⁴³ In fact, according to Kevin Doyle Smith, D.M.A., "many features of minimalism are anticipated in the music of the middle ages."⁴⁴ At points, the resurfacing of these minimal and tonal elements in the

⁴¹ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. "Music Since 1960: Pärt: *Cantus In Memoriam Benjamin Britten*." Blog. 14 Feb 2006. <<http://johnsons-rambler.blogspot.com/2006/02/music-since-1960-prt-cantus-in.html>>

⁴⁴ Smith, Kevin D. "The Style of Meditation: A Conductor's Analysis of Selected Motets by

music of Pärt and Van Ness has brought criticism to the validity of their work. If certain composers decided to abandon maximalism or total serialism, the intellectual community may react harshly. For Van Ness there was a controversy in the 80s and early 90s stemming from the academic community regarding her writing of melodic, accessible twentieth-century music. She continues:

It took a great deal of courage for me to keep writing what I did. I was helped by finding people who really loved what I did and just hearing them say, “I love what you do – now keep doing it,” such as Peter Sykes [Music Director of First Church in Cambridge]. [He said,] “You’ve found your own voice. Now, write within that framework endlessly.”⁴⁵

Fortunately, the tumultuous battles for creative acceptance have been won by Van Ness. Her music is widely respected by both the general and academic communities and is consistently garnering well-earned acclaim.

Though Pärt also had the academic community to contend with, his struggle moved beyond the borders of academia to the very struggle of communism in Eastern Europe. The title of his piece *Credo* caused a serious scandal, as the very title of the piece proclaimed Pärt’s Christian faith.⁴⁶ After he began composing in the tintinnabuli style, many of his subsequent pieces were more ambiguously named as a result of the uproar. According to Hillier, “[Pärt’s] position as a composer of overtly religious music in an austere and seemingly simple tonal style endeared him neither to the Soviet authorities nor to the academic establishment.”⁴⁷ He and his family finally left their native land in 1980, eventually settling in Berlin.⁴⁸ This pressure and upset did not make Pärt or his style crack. Rather, “The heresy of euphony into which Pärt lapsed is really forbidden for a

Rihards Dubra.” Dissertation. 27 April 2007. <http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-06032004-215359/unrestricted/Smith_dis.pdf> Page 8.

⁴⁵ Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview.

⁴⁶ Savenko, Svetlana. Page 155.

⁴⁷ Hillier, Paul D. “Arvo Pärt.” Grove Music Online.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

contemporary artist who has been trained in the Adornian system – and particularly so for the Soviet avant-garde composer who cries out against totalitarianism using dissonance.”⁴⁹ Pärt himself is a staunch figure in the “anti-avant-garde” discussion: “Where does the meaning of creative work lie?” asks Pärt. “There are millions of composers who are so creative that it is terrifying. One could drown in the sewage of contemporary music. The ability to select and the need to select are vital.”⁵⁰ Even though his work has been considered minimal, mystic, holy, and even “new-age,” musicologist Svetlana Savenko aims to make the following clarification:

These attempts [at definition] are rather disorientating although there is undoubtedly some similarity. . . . However, this is a soil on which many very different plants will grow. And Pärt’s tree, *Arbos*, is not like its [neighbors] – one only has to hear several bars of his music. Free from the naiveté of neo-primitivism, the return to the past in fact illuminates the path to the future.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

Many similarities exist between Arvo Pärt and Patricia Van Ness in regard to their musical processes, including an affinity for Gregorian chant and music through medieval times. This propensity for music from one millennium past paired with the personal experiences of the present day results in music that is timeless, elegant, and still relevant to our deepest needs; to contemplate the Creator through whichever means He has given us. In the case of Pärt and Van Ness, He has given them music.

⁴⁹ Savenko, Svetlana. Page 160.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Savenko, Svetlana. Page 172.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bergeron, Katherine. "Chant, or the politics of inscription." *Companion to Medieval and Renaissance Music*. Edited by Tess Knighton and David Fallows. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992. Page 101.
- Higginson, Gary. "Recordings of the Month." *Music Web (UK)*. 2003.
<<http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2004/May04/bingen.htm>>
- Hillier, Paul D. "Arvo Pärt." Grove Music Online.
- Hillier, Paul. *Arvo Pärt*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Monahan, Laurie (2003). *Tapestry; Sapphire Night* [Liner notes]. Mandelsloh: MDG. Page 5.
- Pärt, Arvo. Interview with Björk Gudmundsdottir. *Modern Minimalists*. BBC. 1997.
- Rutherford-Johnson, Tim. "Music Since 1960: Pärt: *Cantus In Memoriam Benjamin Britten*." Blog. 14 Feb 2006. <<http://johnsons-rambler.blogspot.com/2006/02/music-since-1960-prt-cantus-in.html>>
- Savenko, Svetlana. "Musica sacra of Arvo Pärt." *Ex oriente: Ten Composers from the Former USSR*. Edited by Valeria Tsenova. Berlin: Verlag Ernst Kuhn, 2002. Pages 155-178.
- Smith, Kevin D. "The Style of Meditation: A Conductor's Analysis of Selected Motets by Rihards Dubra." Dissertation. 27 April 2007. <http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-06032004-215359/unrestricted/Smith_dis.pdf>
- Van Ness, Patricia. "Biography." <www.patriciavanness.com/bio.html>
- Van Ness, Patricia. Personal Interview. 27 November 2007.

Van Ness, Patricia (2003). *Tapestry; Sapphire Night* [Liner notes]. Mandelsloh: MDG. Page 7.

APPENDIX

Interview with Patricia Van Ness conducted by Jennifer Post on November 26, 2007.

Transcript of Telephone Interview

(To be attached in a few days.)