



Arvo PÄRT

Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten

Arvo Pärt (born 11 September 1935) is an Estonian composer. Wanting to experiment musically, Pärt would press the top and bottom notes of the family's piano, as the middle register was damaged. He began studying music formally at 7 and composing when he entered his teens, despite not showing any exceptional talent. At 19, he began a more disciplined musical education at the Tallinn Music Middle School, but temporarily abandoned it to fulfill military service, where he played oboe and percussion in the army band. In 1957, Pärt enrolled at the Tallinn Conservatory where he studied under prominent Estonian composer Heino Eller. He graduated by 1963, having worked as a recording engineer for Estonian Radio throughout his student years, and wrote several film scores and other works during this period. Pärt continued to compose music mainly in the serial vein (a compositional style derived from Arnold Schoenberg's 12-tone technique) throughout the 1960s without success, as the method of composition was disliked throughout the Soviet Union. To add to his struggle, Pärt – a deeply religious man – composed his first overtly sacred piece *Credo* (1968), leading to his unofficial censorship and a creative crisis. For the next 8 years, Pärt composed very little, focusing instead on studies of medieval and Renaissance music in order to find his new musical language. He would unveil a new compositional style in 1976 – which he called *tintinnabulation* – with the piano work, *Für Alina*. This musical style is characterized by two types of voice, the first of which (the "*tintinnabular* voice") arpeggiates basic triads, and the second of which moves diatonically in stepwise motion. Pärt found great success in this minimalistic style, and now stood at the top of the modern classical music world. In 1980, due to continued political oppression in Estonia, Pärt and his family emigrated to Vienna, and then to West Berlin. He returned to Estonia around the turn of the 21st century (where he currently resides), and is now seen as an icon of Estonian music. In fact, he was appointed a member of the Pontifical Council for Culture by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011, and was described in 2014 by *The Daily Telegraph* as "possibly the world's greatest living composer" and "by a long way, Estonia's most celebrated export". From 2011 to 2018, Pärt was the most performed living composer in the world, proving how far-reaching and widely-enjoyed his music has become.

Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten (1977) is a canon for string orchestra and bell. Written in Pärt's renowned *tintinnabuli* style, the piece is a meditation on death. On his reaction to Britten's death, Pärt pondered, "Why did the date of Benjamin Britten's death – 4 December 1976 – touch such a chord in me? During this time I was obviously at the point where I could recognise the magnitude of such a loss. Inexplicable feelings of guilt, more than that even, arose in me. I had just discovered Britten for myself. Just before his death I began to appreciate the unusual purity of his music – I had had the impression of the same kind of purity in the ballads of Guillaume de Machaut. And besides, for a long time I had wanted to meet Britten personally – and now it would not come to that.

After 3 beats of silence, a solitary tubular bell (pitched on A) is struck softly 3 times. This funeral bell – immediately reminding us of the commemorative namesake of the piece – honours Pärt's feelings about the passing of Benjamin Britten, and continues throughout much of the piece. The strings enter after 3 more beats of silence, introducing the first round of the prolation canon (a canon in which the voices play the same melody at different speeds). Most of the harmonic content stays upon the A natural minor scale (also known as the Aeolian mode, which historically has been associated with early liturgical music, a known influence on Pärt's music) with a simple descending pattern being layered over an outlined tonic triad. The intensity finds a way to seamlessly build, putting the ongoing bell strikes into the background. As the final bell toll sounds in silence, the overtones become prominently audible – in fact, the fourth overtone gives the impression of an A major chord. Pärt may likely have been trying to evoke the common Renaissance and Baroque technique of "*tierce picarde*", in which a minor piece of music resolves unexpectedly on the tonic major chord, portraying a hopeful and peaceful resolution despite the previous darkness. Of the initial and final written rests, Pärt's biographer, Paul Hillier, suggests that, "this silence creates a frame around the piece and has spiritual significance...we come from silence, and return to silence; it reminds us that before we were born and after we die we are silent with respect to this world."