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Susan Bradshaw

Arvo Paart

Arvo Paart was born in Paide in Estonia in 1935. An only child, his parents separated almost before he was old enough to remember, and he was brought up by his mother, who was a kindergarten teacher, and stepfather. There was, he says, no music of any kind at home, not even on the radio, and it was only when the family moved to Rakvere, to a house where there happened to be a grand piano, that he was able to begin piano lessons at a children's music school in the town.¹ He was then eight years old and, right from the start, found that the pieces he was given to play were of frustratingly limited interest; he quickly got the idea of supplementing them with improvised compositions of his own and, from the age of about twelve, with fully notated ones.

Paart remained a pupil at the junior music school up to the age of 17, but he had no opportunity of hearing orchestral performances until as a teenager he discovered that recordings of classical music were sometimes transmitted over the public loudspeaker system in the town square; by bicycling round and round the square on those occasions he was gradually able to extend his musical horizons beyond the somewhat meagre educational fare offered by the school.

Paart's course as a full-time student at senior music school in Tallinn was interrupted by two years' compulsory military service, so it was not until 1958 that he was able to enrol as a post-graduate student at the conservatory there. At the same time he started work as a sound engineer at the local radio station—a post he held for the next ten years. At the conservatory Paart was a composition student of Heino Eller, who had been taught by Glazunov—Paart acknowledges the Russian composer as his 'musical grandfather'. Eller was evidently an open-minded mentor, giving his pupil every encouragement to explore the music of the post-war avant garde, which was beginning to filter through from the West in the early 1960s. Meanwhile Paart's tonal cantata *Meie aed* (Our garden; 1959) for children's voices and orchestra, had been awarded first prize in a state composers' competition. This demonstration of official approval perhaps did something to mitigate what he describes as 'the great scandal' that arose a couple of years later when, after studying such twelve-note scores as he could lay his hands on and working alone at a series of exercises by Eimert and Krenek, he produced the first twelve-note work by an Estonian composer.

By 1968 Paart was receiving sufficient offers of outside work to be able to leave his job at the radio station and become a freelance composer; from then until he left the Soviet Union for good in 1980 he lived mainly by writing music for films (around 50 in all), a task that gave him the chance to experiment with mixtures of tonal and serial composition. He also received a number of state and private commissions for his own, non-commercial work—*Pro et contra*, for example, was written at the request of Rostropovich—and towards the end of his time in Tallinn he was beginning to get his music published and to enjoy a certain public acclaim as the result of performances both at home and, increasingly, abroad. Three years ago he emigrated with his wife and two young sons to Vienna, and he is now an Austrian citizen though,

following a year spent on a scholarship from the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst in 1982, the family has settled in West Berlin. With 80 performances of his work throughout Europe in 1982 alone, Paart's reputation seems set to assure his material future—especially as he already has a number of commissions awaiting fulfilment, including a work for chamber ensemble and a cello concerto; he also has plans for another large-scale setting of biblical texts, as a companion-piece to his *Johannes-Passion* of 1981-2.

The decade following the composition of his prize-winning cantata saw both the beginning and the end of Paart's twelve-note period. *Credo* for piano, chorus, and orchestra (1968) was the last work written partly in this harmonic idiom, for he had already undergone an experience that changed his whole way of thinking. It was in 1967 that he first encountered plainsong, and he was completely overwhelmed by it; from that moment his path into the future seemed clear: chant, he says, offered 'a way to proceed', and he immediately began to search out old liturgical music of all kinds and to study the possibilities of unaccompanied melody in particular. Although a devout Russian Orthodox Christian, he had avoided crossing swords with the Soviet authorities until, in the wake of his discovery of plainsong, he started setting forbidden religious texts (the score I have of *Credo*, smuggled out through Helsinki, has no words). Paradoxically it was for religious reasons (his wife is Jewish) that he was finally permitted to leave the USSR.

Paart has travelled a long way in the 20 years that separate the *Johannes-Passion* from *Meie aed*, exploring remote musical terrain as a lone voyager rather than the well-beaten tracks of the package tourist. In many ways he seems to have been largely self-taught: for example, he says that when he rediscovered tonality as a pliable, workable language he had to learn it as if from scratch—his academic training had done little to prepare him for its living reality. Nor had his life as a freelance composer in the Soviet Union done anything to prepare him for a similar existence in the capitalist West. His first visit outside the Eastern block (to London in 1979) was clearly something of a shattering experience: having assumed himself to be an isolated voice, crying in the musical wilderness of his own choosing, he was suddenly brought face to face with more composers than he had ever known existed, and the wilderness turned out to be an already well-cultivated garden. He illustrates his naivety about life outside the USSR by relating how, when he found himself in Vienna, free for the first time in his life to telephone anywhere in the world, he immediately set about ringing all his friends—I myself received a call from him at peak time on a weekday morning—without realising that he would later have to pay for the pleasure!

Although Paart is now one of hundreds of composers in western Europe, he seems to be that one in a hundred who is unmistakably himself. He describes composing as a voyage of self-discovery, a 'search for one's own personality': 'music is no *job* for me; it's a matter of life and death'. Ever since he began so passionately to espouse the musical language of an earlier age, his prime consideration has been that of clarity, of 'simplifying things for *myself*'. He seems, in other words, to be trying to avoid any hint of complication for complication's sake; eschewing musical verbosity above all, he believes that anything that has no properly audible (as opposed to merely textural or cerebral) purpose has no place in his work.

Example 1a *Quintettino*, last movement

1b *Quintettino*, closing bars

Example 3 *For Alina*

Example 4 *Missa sillabica*

Not that Paart was ever a complex composer, even at the height of his twelve-note period: Example 1a, from the *Quintettino* for wind, is typically woven around the steadying influence of a simple ostinato; he even seems at that time to have adopted a certain tongue-in-cheek attitude (see Example 1b, the end of the same work), which is quite alien to the almost religious fervour of his post-serial works. *Credo*, the piece that bridges the gap between the twelve-note and the tonal music, is based on the C major Prelude from Book I of Bach's 48. Here the argument between two irreconcilable harmonic styles is finally resolved as the serial element is literally blacked out (Example 2) by an improvised cacophony that makes way for a triumphant consolidation of the work's underlying tonality. In this respect the piece is not only a setting of the words of the Credo but also a personal affirmation of musical faith and a declaration of musical intent. There is also more than a suggestion of an abstract dimension to the harmonic conflict—of evil (in the form of twelve-note elements) exorcised by good (represented by tonality); ostensibly because of its overt liturgical connections, but perhaps also because of this underlying Christian message, the work was banned in the USSR for 13 years following its first performance, which took place, according to the composer, 'as if by a miracle'.

After completing *Credo* in 1968 Paart seems to have needed a breathing-space in which to consolidate his new ideas. The next eight years were devoted mainly (and usefully) to writing incidental music of various kinds; the only serious work he produced during this period was *Symphony no.3* (though 'serious' might be a misleading term if the piece reflects any of the Cageian do-it-yourself ideas that are reputed to colour *Symphony no.2*—unfortunately scores of all three symphonies have proved unavailable at the time of writing). Then, over the next couple of years, came a spate of small pieces (the longest lasting twelve minutes, the shortest only two minutes) quite unlike anything he had written before. Sparked off by the tiny occasional piano piece *For Alina* (Example 3), composed as a gift for a young Estonian girl on her own in London (which I was deputed to play for her!), other miniatures of a similar kind have played an important role in Paart's recent development. Written in what he calls his 'tintinabuli style', almost all of them are in rhythmic unison, being freely notated in the manner of plainsong, and seem to savour the simplest possible combinations of notes, often through repetition (Example 4). Several, such as *Fratres*, *Arbos*, and *Pari intervallo*, exist in more than one version, which underlines the impression they give of being music in the abstract, unrelated to particular qualities of sound; as in the music of an earlier age, only their different ranges distinguish those written for voices from those for instruments.

Not until *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten* (1977) did Paart allow himself to revert to a more strictly intellectual organisation of his material; but although a series of rhythmic canons forms a frame for the work, the idea of a quietly insistent repetition of the same melodic fragment still remains to the fore (Example 5). Both *Cantus* and *Tabula rasa*, also composed in 1977, were first performed in Tallinn later the same year. *Tabula rasa*, the first of two concertos for two string instruments and orchestra, is a chameleon-like work, which so closely mirrors the style of the Italian Baroque string composers that on casual hearing it seems more closely related to pastiche than to original composition. But a study of the score soon reveals that the composer is in fact subjecting each minutely different variant of his 'borrowed' style to the most careful personal

Example 2 Credo

40

2 Ott.
2 Fl.
2 Ob.
2 Cl. in sib
2 Cl. b. in sib
2 Fg.
2 Cfg.
4 Cor. in fa
4 Tr. in sib
3 Tbn.
Tb.
Timp.
Xil.
Vibr.
Camp.
Tamt.
Piatti
Piatto
Tamb.
Tamt.
Gr. cassa
S.
A.
Coro
T.
B.
Pf.
VI. I
VI. II
Vle
Vc.
Cb.

Example 5 *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, opening

$\text{♩} = 112-120$

Violin I: *ppp*

Violin II: *pp*

Viola: *p*

Cello: *p*

scrutiny, and that there is a lot more eventfulness of a coolly undemonstrative kind than at first meets the ear that is unprepared for so dispassionate an experience.

On his arrival in Vienna in 1980 Paart spent some time producing new versions of relatively old pieces and writing two small-scale works for voices and instruments—*Summa* and *De profundis*. He then embarked on the Concerto for violin, cello, and chamber orchestra (first performed in London in 1981) and his *magnum opus* to date, the *Johannes-Passion*, properly entitled *Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem*. There is no score of the last work in London at the moment and, indeed the resources needed for an adequate examination of Paart's work are lacking generally; this article, then, can be no more than an interim report, pending the availability of further scores and recordings, and the mounting of British performances. But even on the current evidence, Paart has a wholly original, refreshingly untarnished outlook on the musical world of the late 20th century. He fits no obvious pigeon-hole, and while his work has featured recently in a festival of 'minimalist' music, he would seem to be attempting to derive the maximum expressive truth from means that are minimal by virtue of inner necessity rather than calculated design.

¹ All quotations come from conversations between the composer and the author.

Works

Information on publication is given in parentheses; Paart's music is now handled by Universal Edition (UE).

- Sonatine, piano, 1958 (Tallinn: Muzfond, 1958) [5']
 Partita, piano, 1958 (Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1959) [6']
 Meie aed [Our garden], children's choir, orchestra, 1959 (Moscow: Sovetsky Kompozitor, 1963) [10']
 Sonatine no.2, piano, 1959 (Tallinn: Muzfond, 1963) [5']
 Nekrolog, large ensemble, 1959 [10'30"]
 Perpetuum mobile, large ensemble, 1963 (UE 13560, 1968) [6']
 Musica sillabica, 12 instruments, 1964 [12']
 Quintettino, wind quintet, 1964 (Leipzig: Peters, 1977) [4']
 Diagrams, piano, 1964 [4']
 Solfeggio, unaccompanied choir, 1964 (Moscow: Sovetsky Kompozitor, n.d.) [3']
 Polifoniline sümфония [Symphony no.1], string orchestra, 1964 (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1967) [15']

- Collage on B-A-C-H, oboe, harpsichord, strings, 1964 (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1969)
 Symphony no.2, large ensemble, 1966 (Leningrad: Muzyka, 1971) [12']
 Pro et contra, cello, orchestra, 1966 (Leningrad: Sovetsky Kompozitor, 1973) [9']
 Credo, solo piano, mixed choir, large orchestra, 1968 (UE, 1982) [12']
 Symphony no.3, large ensemble, 1971 (Leipzig: Peters, 1981)
 For Alina, 1976, piano (UE 17247) [2']
 Trivium, organ, 1976 (Moscow: Muzyka, 1977) [7']
 Pari intervallo, 4 instruments ad lib., 1976 (UE) [3']
 In spe, 4 voices, 10 instruments, 1976 [7']
 Kui Bach oleks mesilasi pidanud [If Bach had been a beekeeper], harpsichord, electric guitar, chamber orchestra, tape; or harpsichord, string orchestra, 1976 (UE) [9']
 Dies irae, choir, organ, 6 instruments, 1976-81 (UE) [7']
 Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten, string orchestra, bell, 1977 (UE 17498, 1982) [6']
 Tabula rasa, 2 violins, string orchestra, prepared piano, 1977 (UE 17249, 1981) [25']
 Fratres, ensemble of early instruments, 1977 (UE) [9']
 Arbos, 7 wind instruments, 1977 (UE) [7']
 Missa sillabica, 4 voices/chamber choir, 6 instruments, 1977 (UE) [12']
 Cantate Domino canticum novum, 4 voices (SA/TB/SATB), 4 instruments, 1977 (UE) [5']
 Variatsioonid Arinuška terveks saamiseks [Variations on Arinushka's recovery], piano, 1977 (UE 17248) [4']
 Peegel peeglis [Mirror within a mirror], violin, piano, 1978 (UE) [8']
 Fratres, violin, early instruments, 1980 (UE) [9']
 Fratres, violin, piano, 1980 (UE 17274, 1981) [8']
 Annum per annum, organ, 1980 (UE 17179, 1982) [11']
 Pari intervallo, string quartet/organ, 1980 (UE) [3']
 Peegel peeglis [Mirror within a mirror], violin, piano, string orchestra, 1980 (UE) [8']
 Arbos, recorders, 1980 (UE 17443, 1982) [7']
 Summa, tenor/baritone/SATB, 6 instruments, 1980 (UE 17224, 1983) [7']
 De profundis, men's voices, organ, percussion, 1981 (UE 17410) [8']
 Pari intervallo, 4 recorders, 1981 (UE 17444, 1981) [3']
 Concerto, violin, cello, chamber orchestra, 1981 (UE 17416) [22']
 Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem [Johannes-Passion], 4 male voices, SATB chorus, organ, instruments, 1981-2 (UE) [90']
 Fratres, 12 cellos, 1982 (UE) [9']
 Fratres, strings, percussion, 1983 (UE) [9']

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