

### **Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) :: *Silouans Song***

The Estonian Pärt had compositional beginnings in serialism and atonality, which earned him an official slap on the wrist from the Soviet government. That, however, was not the catalyst for his change of style. After taking time to reevaluate his compositional methods in the late 1970s, along with studying Bach, Gregorian chant, and Russian Orthodox sacred music, Pärt arrived at a new compositional philosophy that he called “tintinnabulation” (“bells”). He explained: “Tintinnabulation is like this. Here, I am alone in silence. I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played...I build with the most primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.”

Tintinnabuli, the ringing/sound of bells, alludes to the mathematical division of a note’s sound wave into the overtone series - the basis of Western music theory and its harmonic progressions - which is heard in the chaotic timbre of a ringing bell. Essentially, if you strike a single note, you are not just hearing that note but an entire sequence working together. Thus, when you hear A-natural you also sympathetically hear other tones from the A scale in a sequence of 5ths, 4ths, 3rds, and so on: A, E, A, C-sharp, E, etc.—a musical universe orbiting a single note.

*Silouan’s Song* is named for the monk St. Silouan, reflecting Pärt’s personal devotion to the Russian Orthodox Church. In the music, you hear aspects of tintinnabulation, the simple revolution and contemplation of a select sequence of notes, buffered intermittently by silence, and a subtext of yearning for spiritual renewal.

### **Iannis Xenakis (1922-2001):: *Arousa***

Some artists bring to the world a very particular style of creative energy. They are skillful not only in producing works of art, but on a grander scale, fabricating entire parallel, metaphysical universes. Hieronymus Bosch and Franz Kafka are examples. Iannis Xenakis was amongst them.

Xenakis, however, had a unique perspective. He had experience building actual physical structures, too, as he went to work for famed French architect Le Corbusier whilst residing as a Greek refugee in Paris during World War II. The City of Light also gave him Olivier Messiaen as a composition teacher.

Trying to explain Xenakis briefly is difficult. The *Readers Digest* guide to Xenakis could be titled, *Xenakis: Wagnerian Techniques on Steroids*. Replace terminology like leitmotif with “set” and sliding chord transitions with “pitch time transformation” and off you go. The result might sound like total chaos on the surface, but the supporting theories on which the entire musical structure is built are exquisitely elegant. A newspaper article once aptly described the music of Xenakis as “craggily, joyously elemental music” that “turned collections of pitches and rhythms and instruments into a force of nature.” Music critic Alex Ross described Xenakis’ process as “looking at the orchestra as a scientist looks at a gas cloud.” In other words, what’s happening is far beyond the outer limits of traditional music theory. Architecture, mathematics, disregard of traditional tonal systems, and a consuming obsession with pitch time dimensions translated into music in the mind of Xenakis. His ideas emerge on paper as excruciatingly complex works, dense with layer after layer of scientific and philosophical properties.

*Aroura* (sometimes spelled *Arura*), composed in 1971, is preoccupied with “sonorous textures” of the earth, sound, and other scientific and natural phenomena. Throughout the music, these various textures are expressed through an assortment of traditional and extended instrumental techniques including a wide range of dynamics, pizzicato, ricochet, glissando and harmonic glissando, tremolo, and scratching, to name a few.

### **Aaron Jay Kernis (b. 1960) :: *Musica Celestis***

Medieval music theorists believed the universe, in its mathematical purity, vibrated with a kind of “music.” There were three types, *musica universalis*, *musica humana*, and *musica instrumentalis*. They descended in levels of perfection.

The concept is beautiful. Followed through, its logical conclusion is that everything is music – including you and me. The act of composing music is then something like ripping open the fabric of our universe, grasping the edges with your hands and stepping through to participate in an ongoing concert. *Musica Celestis* (“heavenly music”) takes that principle as its inspiration, as well as the music of the 10<sup>th</sup> century German mystic, Hildegard von Bingen.

Kernis says the work “follows a simple, spacious melody and harmonic pattern through a number of variations (like a passacaglia) and modulations, and is framed by an introduction and codas.” Within the overarching harmonic progression of the piece there is tucked inside an implied harmonic progression that traverses the endless interlocking relationships of every key signature by the interval of a 5<sup>th</sup>. Using that circle, it tosses a lasso out into space, catching the infinite within the small confines of measures dotted with notes.

### **Béla Bartók (1881-1945) :: *Divertimento for Strings* (1939)**

Bartók was in the twilight of his life when Paul Sacher (1906-1999), founder of the Basel Chamber Orchestra, approached him with the commission for a new work, which emerged in the space of just fifteen days as the *Divertimento for Strings*. By definition, *divertimenti* are meant to be somewhat casual in nature. To some degree, that holds true as a description for this piece, but just as the creeping shadow of war continued to haunt Europe, the “night music” (a term apparently approved of by Bartók as a descriptor for his compositions with a shaded quality) of the middle movement seeps under the door frames of the outer movements adding a jolting chill. Germany invaded Poland just after Bartók fulfilled this commission.

Contrasts abound. Dance-like qualities sit next to morose melodies; folk idioms and raw shifting meters are juxtaposed with the polish of a Baroque concerto grosso, pitting a small group (*concertino*) against the whole (*ripieno*). Multi-voiced fugues inject order into chaos. It’s music that’s trying to live up to its title, acting as a not-so-serious diversion from a world about to be turned upside down, injecting the hope of first light into threatening darkness. The intense whirling energy of the final movement seems to clench its fists and grit its teeth with determination toward that end.

In a poignant turn of events, the composer who put so much effort into documenting the folk music of his native Hungary and integrating it into his work was forced to leave for New York City, and watch from across the water as his homeland sided with Germany. The Divertimento for Strings was the last piece he wrote in Europe. He would die of leukemia in the United States.

**Osvaldo Golijov (b. 1960):: *Tenebrae***

Golijov explains: “I wrote *Tenebrae* as a consequence of witnessing two contrasting realities in a short period of time in September 2000. I was in Israel at the start of the new wave of violence that is still continuing today, and a week later I took my son to the new planetarium in New York, where we could see the Earth as a beautiful blue dot in space. I wanted to write a piece that could be listened to from different perspectives. That is, if one chooses to listen to it ‘from afar,’ the music would probably offer a ‘beautiful’ surface but, from a metaphorically closer distance, one could hear that, beneath that surface, the music is full of pain. I lifted some of the haunting melismas from Couperin’s *Troisième Leçon de Tenebrae*, using them as sources for loops...The compositional challenge was to write music that would sound as an orbiting spaceship that never touches ground.”

Namesake to Golijov’s composition are the three *Tenebrae* (Latin for “darkness”) services, on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday of Holy Week in the Christian faith. Each night begins in light and ends in shadow as fifteen ceremonial candles are extinguished one by one following the reading of each Psalm. Eventually all candles in the church are put out and the congregation is engulfed in utter darkness – save for the light of one candle representing hope. The people then dismiss into the night.

The tension of the shadows sustain this haunting music in mid-air, caught between darkness and light, their metaphorical doubles of despair and hope in prolonged meditation.