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features

## Arvo Pärt's White Light

In 2018, Estonia celebrated the centenary of its independence by opening the new Arvo Pärt Centre. As the Australian Chamber Orchestra and Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir prepare to tour together, we look into the prism of Pärt's music, with the help of the composer's son Michael Pärt.

by *Jansson J. Antmann* on January 16, 2019



“In the beginning was the Word”... so begins the 2014 publication *In Principio. The Word in Arvo Pärt's Music*. As Michael Pärt, the composer's son and Chairman of the Arvo Pärt Centre, which published the book, explains, this quote from John 1:1 in the *King James Bible* was chosen because, “Arvo Pärt's music is text driven. The choice of text is very important, as well as how Arvo lives with the text in order to digest it and understand it. Each word in itself has a shape and rhythm, which, combined with its position within the verse or sentence creates context. The word dictates music.”



Arvo Pärt. Photo © Birgit Püve

“Arvo’s *tintinnabuli* (Latin for ‘little bells’), refers to a set of rules and equations which bring the melodic and accompanying counterpoint into a particular relationship with each other. It’s all mathematical and at the same time intuitive,” says Michael Pärt. “Even instrumental pieces without a sung part have written texts, which you could sing in theory. For example, in the case of the score of *Für Lennart in memoriam*, text is written into the orchestral score in order for the musicians to understand the phonetic syllables and meaning in the phrasing. They instinctively understand in their hearts that it should be played the way they would say it – ‘cantabile’.”

Richard Tognetti, Artistic Director of the Australian Chamber Orchestra, is no stranger to this approach. “I experienced something similar with Peter Sculthorpe when we worked together on *Irkanda IV*. Peter turned up with text from a D. H. Lawrence poem and wrote them in my part. In a way, it was a song without words,” he says.

As to the mathematical nature of Pärt’s *tintinnabuli*, Tognetti says, “Even though we’re not necessarily conscious of it, the music has a very complex structure and it makes a lot of sense that it was written using the greatest structural language we know – maths. Then again, surely *My Heart’s in the Highlands* was the result of Pärt’s visceral response to the voice of the countertenor David James. It couldn’t have simply been a question of maths or Robert Burns’ 1789 poem on which it’s based.”





Or could it? Arvo Pärt has stated that Burns' text had resonated within him his whole life, before he wrote that piece. As Tognetti says, "Everyone has a starting point – their own 'key to the savage parade' as Arthur Rimbaud put it. We don't necessarily know where it comes from. Whatever the inspiration and initial meaning, interpretation lies with the musicians and listeners and there are no rules for that. It's the same with architecture. Look at the Sydney Opera House. There's still debate as to where Jørn Utzon's inspiration for the sails came from. Whatever it was, the building means different things to different people. For some it's a cathedral to the arts, for others it's a billboard."

In February, the ACO opens its 2019 season with a celebration of Arvo Pärt and Bach for which it is joined by the famed Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir. The national tour will take in the Perth Festival, where the Grammy Award-winning Choir will perform two other concerts featuring Pärt's meditative, sacred music.



**Nieto Sobejano's design for the Arvo Pärt Centre, Estonia**

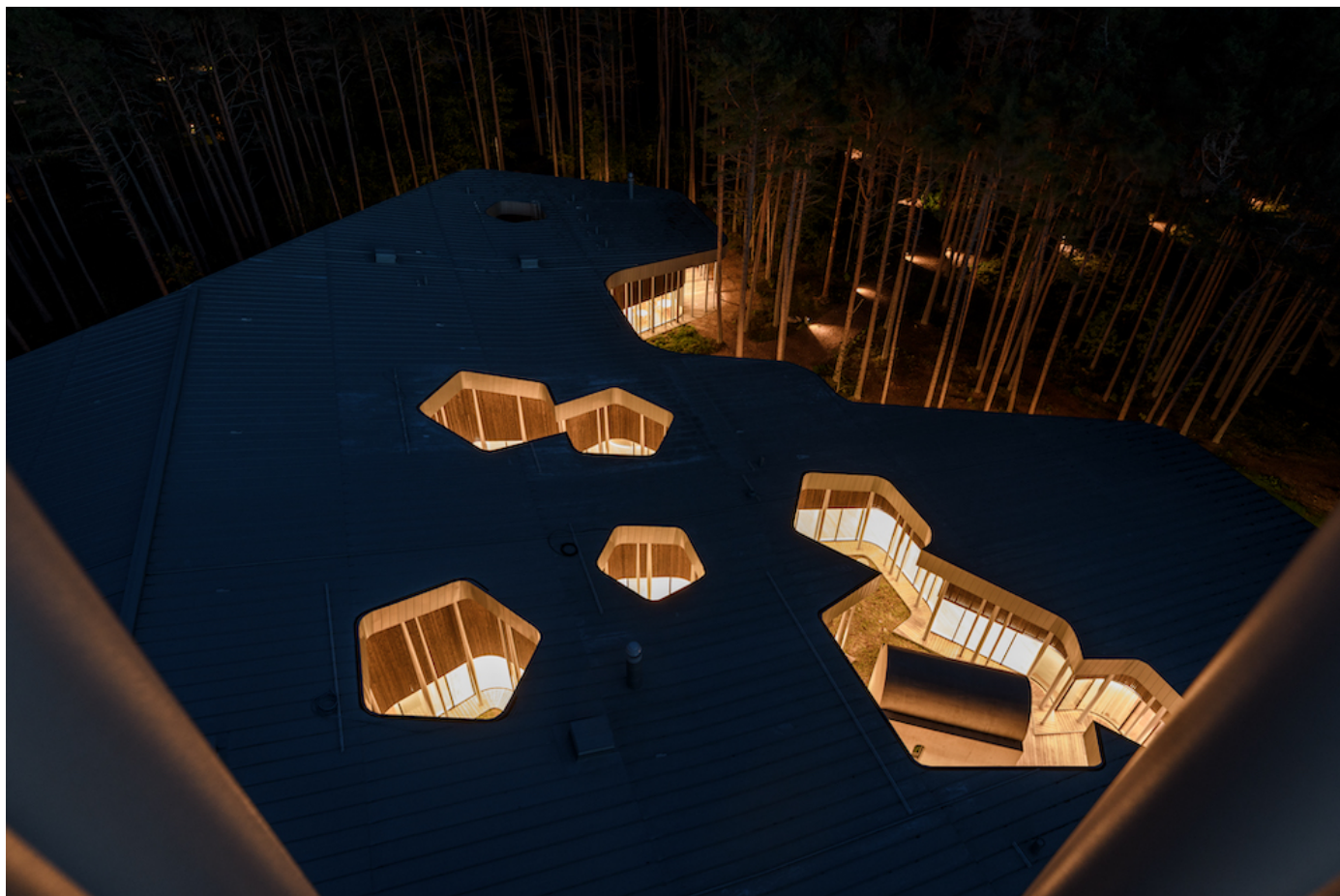
Pärt has used architectural terms such as 'light', 'geometry' and 'rhythm' to describe his own music. The architects Fuensanta Nieto and Enrique Sobejano were keen to reflect this in their design for the new Arvo Pärt Centre, which opened last October. Located in Laulasmaa, 35 kilometres west of Tallinn,



and situated in a scenic pine forest, the centre's design unites geometry, nature and music.

According to Sobejano, "time in music is the equivalent to space in architecture. In the work of Arvo Pärt, intimate and profound, silence takes on a special significance. In our project, the voids, the interstitial spaces, give meaning to it. Our proposal is structured as a sequence of empty courtyards that are repeated as variations of the same theme. These patios save the large pines of the forest and integrate the new building naturally into the environment."

The Centre is a physical manifestation of Pärt's music. Similarly, the recent installation *Memory and Light* in the V&A's Norfolk House Music Room, in London, was inspired by Pärt's famous quote: "I could compare my music to white light, which contains all colours. Only a prism can divide the colours and make them appear; this prism could be the spirit of the listener". Commonalities have emerged in the ethereal lines of both designs, suggesting a 'Gesamtkunstwerk', where every sense is touched in one holistic piece.



**Arvo Pärt Centre. Photo © Tõnu Tunnel**

Michael Pärt agrees. "Yes, this is sometimes the analogy listeners of Arvo's music use. It's about successfully addressing the senses that you want to address, in the most dignified way possible. I think *Memory and Light* succeeded in that. Certain senses were being touched and it was up to the curator, Clare Farrow, to find a balance between them. In my opinion, she chose the correct path to take Arvo's quote. We were in a baroque space at the V&A and the installation was a great contrast to all the gold ornamentation. It was like trying to see virtue in a busy world. It's the same idea as the prism or indeed my father's compositions in the first place," he says.

The opening of the Centre and the installation has meant increased exposure to that busy world for Michael's parents. "When we lived in Berlin, they increasingly acknowledged the way the music was being received. As that grew, they withdrew from the public eye to keep their lives to themselves as much as was realistically possible (and necessary). In today's information age and with the opening of the centre, there are certain elements that undermine this process of self-preservation. My parents quite rightfully chose to keep their creative environment intact, because it is a very fragile place. We really need to choose our environment in which to be creative, because as human beings we are all affected by our environment."

Michael grew up in an environment surrounded by his father's music. "It was very natural because at home music was everywhere," he says. "There were graphical outlines and overviews on the walls and on the kitchen table. Sometimes I travelled with my parents, if they had a rehearsal or concert which wasn't too far, or we'd combine it with the school holidays and I'd hang around. It was a very simple and normal way of life for my parents and they continue to live like that today."

While Michael Pärt's upbringing ensured an inherent link to his father's work, Tognetti took longer to embrace it. "It was a rocky relationship at first and I wasn't totally engrossed. I had the recording of *Tabula Rasa* featuring Gidon Kremer on violin, but it was so far removed from what I wanted to pursue. I was very much into the New Complexity and had a certain neo-complex composer describe Arvo Pärt's music to me in derogatory terms such as 'Neo-Neanderthal'. It was as though you weren't writing serious music unless you obscured all the inroads to it, like a kind of musical minefield. I hadn't come to terms with the fact that as a serious musician, you need to embrace something larger than yourself and move beyond your personal tastes. At the time, I still wasn't into the American minimalists or Pärt," says Tognetti.





Estonian Philharmonic Chamber

Choir. Photo © Kaupo Kikkas, Julian Kingma

Pärt's lifelong friend, Tõnu Kaljuste, was the founding conductor of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, which has recorded many of Pärt's works, including the renowned *Te Deum* in 1993, conducted by Kaljuste with ECM Records, and the 2007 Grammy Award-winning *Da Pacem*, conducted by Paul Hillier and released by Harmonia Mundi. He can relate to Tognetti's early days as a music student.

"All young contemporary composers go through a stage when they hate melodic music and want to develop their own techniques outside the 12-tone or major/minor systems that came before. Arvo can connect both, because of his own experiences with the 12-tone system and in creating his *tintinnabuli*. People come to him in the hope of finding a new key to writing music. He educates through his music and people who like his music choose to educate themselves," he says.

Michael Pärt hopes the new Arvo Pärt Centre will be a source of inspiration for future composers and support music education. "It's not a question of writing music like Arvo. I hope we can be an incubator for out-of-the-box thinking. How did a piece come about? How does a piece progress from commission to conception and composition until it's finally ready? My father has often said that a piece of music is like a child that you nurture, but eventually let live its own life," he says.

"We need time to find a shape and form for this nurturing so that we can guide visitors through an experience that encourages listening on a different level to that of today's Instagram generation. It's all about preserving something that we all have at the outset but lose. We learn to say, 'I don't know how to do

that.' We become intellectually driven as opposed to just saying, 'Of course I can do that.' We want to develop education programs that will undo this unlearning."

Tognetti is living proof that Pärt's music can open up a new outlook. "In 1995 I visited Tõnu Kaljuste in Estonia. I was a recalcitrant performer coming to terms with Arvo Pärt's music," he says. "You usually need to interpret music to bring it to life, but that's not the case with Pärt. Tõnu told me to just allow the music to be. You'll hear musicians ask if there's more to it, but in the end they all discover that, through very efficient means, he unlocks extraordinary doors. Pärt opens up portals to heaven and hell. He is, without a doubt, one of the great composers of our time."

Kaljuste began his own musical journey singing in his father's choirs as a child. He sees great value in music education. "Choirs bring hope to our schools. Every school should have a choir and all children should sing. My own father, Heino, was an exponent of the Kodaly Method which encourages musical development in very young children through, for example, folk songs. Twenty-five years ago, my first recording was connected to Estonia's earliest shamanic folklore," he says.

Kaljuste arrived at Pärt's music out of a need for peace. "I decided to concentrate on Bach, Pärt and Gregorian chants. It was a kind of physical need and a sharp contrast to what I'd done before. I was like Arvo. He'd also done crazy things at the beginning and then went in search of something else."

In November, Arvo Pärt travelled to Warsaw to receive both an honorary doctorate from the Fryderyk Chopin University of Music and the Gold Medal for Merit to Culture – Gloria Artis, the highest honour in Poland. Accepting the award, Pärt said, "Forty years ago, in 1978, I came here at the invitation of the Warsaw Autumn Music Festival. Gidon Kremer and Tatiana Grindenko played a work of mine, accompanied on piano by Alfred Schnittke. The work was *Tabula Rasa*. As a composer I was embarking on a new journey. Warsaw listened to me and helped me feel more secure as I set off on this new path."

Kaljuste and Tognetti have gone on a similar musical journey. In February, they will tour Australia together performing a program of music by Pärt and Bach. What can Australian audiences expect from these concerts? Kaljuste says, "Feelings, rhythms, melodies and colours. The rainbow needs different colours. This is a live experience and the audience is integral to that."

If, as Pärt said, the listener is the prism that makes those colours appear, then a truer word could not have been spoken.

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**The Australian Chamber Orchestra and Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir perform Arvo Pärt & JS Bach in Sydney, February 2 – 6, Canberra, February 9, Melbourne, February 10 – 11, Adelaide, February 12 and Perth, February 13. The Choir performs at Perth Festival, February 15 – 16**

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