

RECORDING OF THE MONTH

Arvo Pärt *In Principio*

In the stew of musical treasures to be found in the ever-expanding world of YouTube.com is a film of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt being interviewed in herky-jerky fashion by none other than that irascible imp, spiritualist, former Sugarcube, and now investment banker, Björk.

The sight and sounds of a native Icelandic speaker interviewing, in English, an Estonian who now lives in Berlin, is a multicultural mish-mash that's pretty amazing to watch. But seeing Björk struggle for an English word like *lush* also points out the serious side of this bizarre encounter: that the power inherent in Arvo Pärt's marvelous music is, in many ways, far beyond the power of words. Pärt's is music at its most ethereal, most powerful, most life-changing. In that same conversation, Pärt, who rarely gives any kind of interview—and, when he does, inevitably ends up sounding like a nasal Nostradamus—hints at what he shoots for in a piece like *La Sindone*, a grand, bracing orchestral work based on the story of the Holy Shroud of Turin, on his latest release, *In Principio*: "You can kill people with sound," he says with a straight face, "and if you can kill them, maybe there is also a sound that is opposite of killing. The distance between these two parts is very big, and you are free, you can choose."

Twenty-five years ago, Pärt's famed instrumental work *Tabula Rasa* was the title composition of the first release in ECM's much-praised New Series. Nothing on *In Principio*, his 11th disc for the label and one containing four premiere recordings, shows that his compositional style has changed dramatically since then, but that's not a surprise; Pärt's style of simple tonal techniques, choral bursts, his striking use of vocal triads, and the often hypnotic, drone-like quality of his unbroken lines haven't changed in years. And that brings up another of Pärt's gifts: While the source of power in his style is difficult to describe in words, once you've heard it, it's hard to forget.

One of the most fascinating aspects of Pärt's canon has always been his uncanny ability to compose music that, while extremely religious/spiritual in both its lyrics and its passionate drive—what music writers call his, "Holy Minimalism"—also sounds secular in its sonorities and melodic inventiveness. Nowhere is this more obvious than in this collection's centerpiece and title track, which opens with a vocal passage that bespeaks Pärt's long interest in and study of such vocal forms as plainsong, chant, and renaissance polyphony, and closes with a movement that features dynamic shifts between loud and soft, another common Pärt-ism.

In between—and in the aforementioned *La Sindone*, which is wonderfully menacing yet delicate—there is much of the key ingredient of Pärt's musical magnetism: silence. Spaciousness in music, portent-laden quiet, have rarely, if ever, been used with more mastery. In another interview, recently quoted in an announcement of Pärt's being awarded Denmark's 2008 Leonie Sonning Award, the composer, again in his own consummate way, got at something deeper in his music than mere space and silence: "Tranquility is always more complete than music. One just has to learn to listen for tranquility. The world is full of tranquility. There is so much in the air that

we are not noticing at all. We do not see any angles here, but they are here. They are next to me. Generally, people do not notice. They do not want to listen to what tranquility is."

If tranquility is one pole of Pärt's extraordinary vision, then the other and equally affecting pole is a flood of sound, much of it increasing in volume as a work progresses. Another of *In Principio's* premiere recordings, *Cecilia, vergine romana*, for mixed choir and orchestra, tells the story of the Roman maiden Cecilia, who continued to sing God's praises even as she was being martyred and for her trouble became a patron saint of musicians. The steady rhythmic pulse and gusts of violins, gentle woodwinds, and soaring horns give this vital piece what critic David Vernier has accurately pegged as "drama within stasis."

Though not a showpiece like *Annum per Annum*, one of what Pärts calls *tintinnabuli* (eg, like the ringing of bells), the organ work *Mein Weg hat Gipfel und Wellentäler*, heard here in a transcription for 14 strings and percussion, is another revelation. The senses of constant change and motion in this kaleidoscopic work, whose original version tested all of an organist's dexterity, are here preserved as ringing chimes, fluttering violins, and increasingly louder strings that pulse madly toward an abrupt ending not at all unlike some of today's electronic music. It is no stretch to credit Pärt, who's never worked in the medium, as being one of the influential forefathers of the now-maturing genre of electronica.

Throughout *In Principio*, the singing of the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir has an extraordinary unity and expressiveness, while the playing under the baton of conductor Tõnu Kaljuste of both orchestras is forceful and precise. None of this comes as a big surprise, considering that ECM sagem Manfred Eicher was in charge. Both recording locations, the Estonian Concert Hall and Niguliste Church—both in Tallinn, Estonia—are resonant and alive. Like Pärt, Eicher continues to get a rich, transparent sound that is most assuredly his own.

So much stronger and more distinctive than the compositions of such like-minded musical contemporaries as John Tavener and Henryk Górecki, Arvo Pärt's cosmos of sound and passion is an expanse of deep commitment and easy accessibility that, as the examples on *In Principio* continue to prove, is utterly unique in this terrestrial kingdom.

—Robert Baird

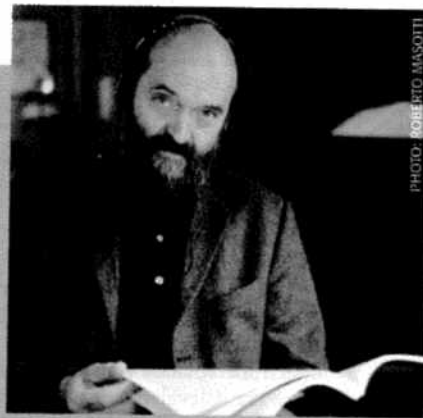


PHOTO: ROBERTO MASSOTTI

In Principio, *La Sindone*, *Cecilia, vergine romana*, *Da Pacem Domine*, *Mein Weg*, *Fur Lennart in memoriam*, *Tõnu Kaljuste*, Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, Estonian National Symphony Orchestra, Tallinn Chamber Orchestra
ECM New Series 2050 (CD). 2009. Manfred Eicher, prod.; Teije van Geest, Margho Kolar, engs. DDD. TT: 70:44
Performance ★★★★★
Sonics ★★★★★