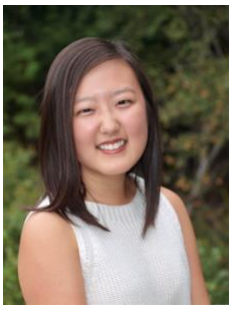

Sonic Ritual: Defending Theological Beauty in the Music of Arvo Pärt

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I. Introduction

A MAN ONCE PRESENTED HIS SON to his town's esteemed visitor, Fyodor Dostoevsky. The young boy, only twelve years old, had quickly gained recognition throughout the town as a poet, and his father was in search of an appraisal. As Dostoevsky read through one of the boy's pieces, the town held its breath. Finally, an evaluation was pronounced: "your poetry…is meaningless." Stunned, the town inquired after the verdict, to which Dostoevsky conveyed a simple sentiment: because the boy was only twelve—because he had not experienced any suffering in life—his art lacked the capacity to have depth, meaning, and beauty.

The place of suffering in beauty is an idea which Christian theologians have given serious consideration throughout history. For Christians, the fullest demonstration of beauty occurred on Easter morning, when the body of Christ was resurrected from the dead. In considering this claim, theologians are quick to emphasize the latter portion of the clause: the resurrection is beautiful precisely because it was a resurrection *from the dead*. In order to comprehend the immensity and height of the resurrected Christ, Christians first need to be thoroughly acquainted with the depths of the preceding days. Jeremy Begbie summarizes this complex: "*In and through* this particular torture, crucifixion, and death, God's love is displayed at its most potent." Only through

Christ's sufferings can Christians begin to grasp God's beauty; we come to understand that God's beauty is that which reaches, extends toward, and redeems even the most "abysmal ugliness of sin."[1]

If fullness of theological beauty is made possible only through careful recognition of "abysmal ugliness," failure to dwell appropriately on the events of the cross, theologians conclude, results in sentimentality, not beauty. When the cross is bypassed, theologians instruct a strict forfeit of the description of "beautiful." The tendency towards sentimentality is a slippery slope and can be described as a "premature grasp for Easter morning, a refusal to follow the three days of Easter as three days in an irreversible sequence of victory over evil." In other words, sentimentality arises when victory in itself is desired, rather than recognizing the necessity of a counterpart over which to have victory. Because the fullness of beauty was made possible only in and through the suffering and death of Christ, the Christian narrative is one which demands protection against sentimentalism.

To guard against this "premature grasp," Begbie and others suggest an active attunement to Christ on the cross: "a constant remembrance of the cross will prevent the pleasure that rightly attends beauty from sliding into sentimentality, for beauty at its richest has been forged through the starkness and desolation of Good Friday: indeed, as the Revelation to Saint John reminds us, the risen Lamb on the throne bears the marks of suffering."[2] Begbie aptly acknowledges the "pleasure" and ease that seems to accompany sentimentality. To be sure, skipping directly to the resurrection has its appeal. The theological account of

[1] Jeremy Begbie, *A Peculiar Orthodoxy*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2020), 43. Italics added.

[2] Ibid., 44.

beauty, however, claims that in doing so, one denies themself the possibility of encountering "beauty at its richest."

Scottish composer James MacMillan considers himself actively engaged in the work of counter-sentimentality. Deeply concerned about attention to the cross, MacMillan crafts narrative arcs in his music, utilizing "music of different qualities to battle and to create their own dramas as expressive of that conflict that God came to engage in Jesus Christ."[3] Through complex, dissonant, eclectic means, MacMillan paints landscapes of sonic suffering which he then transforms into "novel and utterly beguiling beauty."[4] By sequentially walking through musical conflict, the beauty MacMillan eventually arrives at is *that much* deeper, richer, and reflective of theological beauty.

The idea of transformation certainly appears to be a non-negotiable theological premise to the fullness of beauty. Notably, theologians are not the only scholars to stress this concept. From a musicological standpoint, a similar conclusion arises regarding what deems a style of music "spiritual." Robert Sholl discusses spirituality—as opposed to modernity—as "a search to understand God despite such 'rationality.' It is not a form of escapism from modernity. Rather, spirituality is a consciousness that has absorbed and even reconfigured the problems of modernity through alternative and sometimes equally rational discourses."[5] Sholl's language is highly reflective of Begbie's description of theological beauty: spirituality in music, according to Sholl, is *not* an 'escape' from the conflicts of modernity, but rather a 'reconfiguration'—a transformation—of modernity's means towards a beautiful end.

[3] Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 181.
[4] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 182.
[5] Robert Sholl, "Arvo Pärt and spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion To Arvo Pärt*, ed. Andrew Shenton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 141.

MacMillan's music is not the only kind to emerge as a decidedly religious style since the 20th century. The so-called "Holy Minimalist" tradition, commonly identified as the music of Arvo Pärt, Henryk Górecki, and John Tavener, emerged towards the end of the 20th century as a spiritually-oriented take on minimalism. Broadly put, the music can be characterized by its contemplative nature created through reductionistic, static, and repetitive means. Although the tradition has garnered and sustained mass appeal—both in scholarly and popular circles—MacMillan is less than compelled:

> The New Simplicity style sets out to be iconic. It sets out to have no sense of conflict. It's a music that's in a kind of transcendent state and that's why it's beautiful. But that's also why it exists in one level, there is a deliberate avoidance of conflict…an avoidance of the dialectical principles that have been in Western music through Beethoven and before…for me spirituality is not something you hive off into some kind of aesthetically pure, sanitized environment but it's something that has come out of our nature, physical and corporeal existence.[6]

MacMillan seems to charge music of the "New Simplicity" with sentimentalist tendencies. Because much of the music of the Holy Minimalist tradition exists in an aurally pleasing, transcendent state for its entirety, working through simplicity rather than complexity, MacMillan is wary of its identification as "spiritual music." He points to the apparent avoidance of conflict, suggesting that the music reaches prematurely for victory without raw, true contact with adversity.

In a review in *Music & Letters*, David Clarke expresses similar concerns. Clarke cautions against the "bubble" constructed by some Holy Minimalist music—an idea which resonates with MacMillan's critique of the music creating an "aesthetically pure, sanitized environment." Clarke unpacks his concern: "[Pärt's] tintinnabuli style—with its rejection of atonality and other modernist complexities—thus becomes a cloister in

[6] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 179-180.

which to immure himself against the conflict, confusion and fragmentation of both the social conditions of the outside world and the language of the symbolic artefacts created in response to them. It is almost a refusal to engage with musical developments at all: a kind of resolute silence articulated through music."[7]

The theological groundedness of criticisms from MacMillan and Clarke prompts serious questions: is the beauty experienced when engaging with music of the Holy Minimalist tradition mere sentimentality? And what of the mass appeal to this music—does this speak to a larger cultural tendency towards sentimentalist ease? Through an examination of his musical attention to time and special consideration of ritual in relation to the Orthodox faith, this paper constructs a defense of theological beauty in the music of Arvo Pärt, responding to MacMillan's critique by adjusting the criteria of what qualifies as the theologically beautiful in music.

II. Dwelling Respite

At first listen, Pärt's *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) appears to serve as prime feeding material for MacMillan's charges. Translated as "Mirror in the Mirrors," *Spiegel* is one of Pärt's most well-known works, representatively showcasing the composer's tintinnabulation technique as one of the first works composed in this style. Scored originally for solo violin and piano, the piece has since enjoyed twelve different scorings due to its mass appeal. From an analytical standpoint, MacMillan's choice of the description "simple" is apt, and it is tempting to attribute *Spiegel's* successful reception to the apparent ease with which one can listen to the piece. A brief analysis of Pärt's compositional style and its exemplification through *Spiegel* will assist

[7] David Clarke, "Review," *Music & Letters* 74, no. 5 (1994): 658.

in both dissecting and considering the validity of MacMillan's critique.

Any analysis of Pärt's music would be remiss without discussion of his tintinnabulation technique, a method of composition developed by the composer after an eight-year hiatus of compositional silence. A tintinnabulous work consists of two voices: the "melody" voice moves stepwise diatonically, and the "triad" voice plays notes contained in the tonic triad.[8] Throughout the entire work, melody and harmony are conflated, where one gives definition to the other. Paul Hillier describes the aural effect as "a blend of diatonic scales and triadic arpeggios in which harmonic stasis is underpinned by the constant presence (actual or implied) of the tonic triad."[9]

As one his first tintinnabuli works, *Spiegel* helpfully demonstrates Hillier's description.[10] Both instruments, violin and piano, remain rhythmically consistent for the entirety of the piece. The pianist's right hand provides the triad voice, opening the piece with broken F-major triads in second inversion. The harmonic underpinning Hillier mentions is immediately introduced as the left hand of the piano strikes a pedal F in octaves in the second measure, reinforcing the already-overt F-major tonality. For the most part, the piano holds faithfully to F-major triads, occasionally drifting to closely-related harmonies for a measure (e.g. m. 4, m. 8, m. 12, etc.) before returning back to the tonic. Notably, the piano part is notated on three staves; on either side of the right hand's triad voice, the left hand alternates between sustaining low pedals and striking single notes in the high register above the triad voice, reminiscent of bells. A sense of registrational balance is

[8] Paul Hillier, *Arvo Pärt*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 90.
[9] Ibid., 90.

[10] The first page of the score can be found in Appendix A.

maintained as the left hand offsets each low pedal with a ringing note in the opposite register.

Married to the triad voice is the melody voice played by the violin. In sustained pitches, the violin moves in paired gestures, giving aural rendering to the work's title, "Mirror in the Mirrors." Following three measures of rest, the violin begins on an G, held for the duration of the measure, before moving stepwise to A, held for two and a half measures. The latter fragment of the gestural pair—separated from the first two notes by rest—"reflects" the preceding ascent, beginning on B, and then descending stepwise to A, both notes held for corresponding durational lengths, and followed by rest. The next gesture begins on F, moves to G, and rises to A, and then is reflected by a mirrored descent beginning on C, descending to B, and arriving on A. This pattern continues for the work's entirety. Each pair of gestures in the violin consists of a diatonic ascent with a corresponding descent, with the scale elongated by one note at each iteration.

Spiegel is entirely self-contained within a single tonality, and consists of only broken triads and sustained stepwise movement. It is for these reasons that MacMillan points to the "musical means" of Pärt's compositional style as simple and "monodimensional."[11] As opposed to the harmonically complex musical conflict featured in MacMillan's works, the label of "simple" undoubtedly carries negative connotations. To be sure, *Spiegel's* rhythmic pattern never changes, and the range of pitches is impressively limited for a ten-minute work. Moreover, MacMillan's observation of the "lack of transformation" seems equally valid: the music hardly departs from an F-major tonality, overtly established by broken tonic triads in the pianist's right hand. From the

[11] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 180.

standpoint which recognizes the traditional teleological arc as the single way to express transformation into beauty, one may conclude that *Spiegel* has no place next to a passion narrative.

A closer examination of MacMillan's conclusive arrival at "simplicity" from "reduction" is critical in crafting a response. Andrew Shenton offers a different perspective on simplicity: "reduction certainly doesn't mean simplification, but it is the way…to the most intense concentration on the essence of things."[12] The consistency of rhythm and minimal harmonic material contribute to a reduced musical medium with which Pärt works. However, to Shenton, it is imperative that this not be mistaken for simplicity. Through reduced resources (limited melodic and harmonic range and static rhythm), Shenton argues that Pärt's music calls for an intensified concentration—a heightened level of engagement *necessarily demanded* by the sparseness of its means. Quite contrary to increased 'ease,' the reduction of materials actually requires greater concentration. Maeve Heaney agrees, illuminating unique corporeal capacities of "empty" music:

> There are other types of music that… stretch our awareness of ourselves, those around us and the world we inhabit, precisely because of their "emptiness." We wonder what's coming next, and wait for it; we become more aware of the other notes and their relationship to each other, precisely because there are so few, rather like being in a room with one other person as opposed to a crowd: attention is heightened.[13]

Both Shenton and Heaney point to the "emptiness" of simplified musical means as precisely the way in which greater awareness is prompted. Without competing harmonies walking the listener through a storyline, fulfilling expectations and filling

[12] Andrew Shenton, *The Cambridge Companion to Arvo Pärt*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.

[13] Maeve Louise Heaney, *"Can Music 'Mirror' God? A Theological-Hermeneutical Exploration of Music in the Light of Arvo Part's Spiegel Im Spiegel." Religions* 5, no. 2 (2014): 366.

the ear with constant movement—without clashing melodies and rhythmic busyness—the listener is forced to sit with the reduced material, forced to reckon with stillness. Indeed, as composer Igor Stravinsky repeatedly observed, there is a difficulty in crafting Apollonian unity that is far beyond that of Dionysian chaos and contrast. Rather than a simplification of music, the self-contained unity Pärt creates in *Spiegel* is an invitation into heightened concentration on the moment at hand. In this way, it is perhaps a misconception to attribute the wide receptivity of this piece to its ease on the ears of listeners. Perhaps *Spiegel*'s success speaks to a larger cultural hunger for space to dwell within a single moment.

A look at one of *Spiegel's* appearances in film scores supports this suggestion. In *Wit* (2001), *Spiegel im Spiegel* accompanies four different scenes, the content of the second lending particular insight to the idea of dwelling spaces. In this scene, Vivian, a 48-year-old professor with terminal cancer, breaks the fourth wall and addresses the audience:

> *Do not forget that you are seeing the most interesting aspects of my tenure as an in-patient receiving experimental chemotherapy of advanced metastatic ovarian cancer. But as I am a scholar I feel obliged to document what it is like here most of the time between the dramatic climaxes. In truth, it is like this: "You cannot imagine how time can be so still...It hangs. It weighs. And yet there is so little of it. It goes so slowly. And yet it is so scarce. If I were writing this scene it would last a full 15 minutes. I would lie here and you would sit there…*[14]

Vivian's remark reveals how inaccurately media—whether films or classical music—portrays the temporality of real experiences. *Wit*, by its nature as a film, operates under time constraints, having no choice but to jump from crux to crux in Vivian's narrative. Vivian implores the audience to recognize, however, that this portrayal of her story is not reflective of the lived experience. Her time with cancer consisted

[14] *Wit*, directed by Mike Nichols, (HBO Films, 2001).

of much *in-between* space. In a culture dominated by action-climax-resolution trajectories, Vivian highlights the equal importance of the *in-between*—the space without "drama," where nothing "happens." She speaks to the necessity of recognizing this space: "If I were writing this scene it would last a full 15 minutes. I would lie here and you would sit there…" It is not surprising that *Wit* chose to employ *Spiegel* for this scene. The meditative, suspended temporality evoked by *Spiegel* offers an aural rendering of the "in-between" space Vivian implores the audience to remember. And further, the reduction of musical means challenges the listener to an intensified level of concentration on this intermittent space.

If Shenton's proposal suggests that an intensified concentration induced by *Spiegel* invites listeners into an opportunity to dwell on a single moment, Vivian's story further suggests that spaces which are immobile—those which are "non-dramatic," the merely "in-between"—are actually better reflections of lived experiences, and that the nature of cultural pace and storytelling denies this innate part of human experience. The propositions argued and alluded to by Shenton and Vivian respectively have deeply theological implications. Remembering that MacMillan's critique rests heavily on the seeming "lack of Good Friday" in Pärt's music, I suggest that MacMillan's need for teleological sequence fails to sit inside Holy Saturday in the manner which it would have been experienced by those living through those three days in history. Alan Lewis calls for two simultaneous readings of the passion narrative. On the one hand, readers of the narrative *should* read Good Friday in light of Resurrection Sunday; armed with the luxury of an awareness of the larger picture, modern readers can and should read with anticipation of the events of Sunday. However, at the same time, Lewis entreats

readers to a gospel reading which is "discovered only as it happens."[15] Although the narrative can be read with the expectation of the resurrection, an empathic connection to those present at the crucifixion is lost when this is the only way the story is read. Lewis reminds modern readers: "On the day after his death, Jesus is no hero, savior, or redeemer. He is dead and gone, convicted as a sinner, a rebel and a blasphemer, who has paid the price of tragic failure."[16] In order to become accurately acquainted with the depth of the crucifixion, one must remember that for those who were there, a whole day separated Good Friday from the resurrection; there was a full twenty-four hours of desolate *space* between elements of the narrative which are often too hastily joined together.

It would seem that a musical focus on trajectory, such as the one MacMillan adheres to, is akin to the first kind of biblical reading, that which reads the cross in light of the resurrection. To engage with the second kind of reading, a representation—be it musical or otherwise—must account for the full day separating the two dramatic cruxes. Just as important as the nodes of climax is the thread connecting them: the dwelling space which spins *in-between* the narrative junctures. The in-between static despair of Holy Saturday, which modern readers easily bypass—is central to the story of Good Friday. I am suggesting that the full attention to the cross, which Begbie and MacMillan identify as critical to counter-sentimentalist work, must account for dwelling space to sit within Holy Saturday, and that it is only when a two-fold reading of the passion narrative is embraced that one can truly attune themself to the conflict of Good Friday. The static suspension of time

[15] Begbie, *A Peculiar Orthodoxy*, 41.

[16] Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection, A Theology of Holy Saturday*, (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003), 45.

evoked in Pärt's music offers such a dwelling place. Rather than jumping from crux to crux, *Spiegel* draws out a single moment—the single Saturday—and suspends time. It calls attention to time itself, creating an environment that invites listeners to sit and dwell. It promotes not passivity, but *heightened concentration* on the moment of dwelling. Why does it appeal? Because inherent to human nature, inherent to the biblical narrative of the fullest demonstration of beauty, is the desperate need for space to stop and dwell. When the din of the city clamors on, deep suffering begs for stillness.

III. Ritualistic Transformation

Critics would likely point out that the Holy Minimalist invitation to dwell in the in-between spaces still fails to address the issue of transformation, which has already been established as a critical facet of expressions of theological beauty. I have worked to make the case that Pärt's music sits inside Holy Saturday, evoking a suspension of time that allows for attention to the in-between space that is necessary if one is to engage with a reading of the passion narrative which is "discovered only as it happens"—the type of reading that is indispensable if one is desiring to fully attune themself to the depths of the crucifixion. That being said, beauty still requires transformation; no amount of dwelling on the "abysmal ugliness" of sin and brokenness is of value unless it is to be transformationally redeemed. While dwelling is crucial—and, I suggest, too often dismissed by the teleology of Western culture at large—it cannot be the full picture.

MacMillan seems to imply that there is a particular method of musical representation that is most fit for expressing transformation. As already discussed, MacMillan's style utilizes a transformation

of dissonance.[17] The depth of Good Friday, painted through eclecticism and the battling of "different qualities" of music, is transformed into an "utterly beguiling beauty."[18] MacMillan's conception of beautiful transformation, then, centers on a *transformation of* the same dissonant, complex means through which he expressed turmoil. Because Pärt instead remains harmonically and rhythmically static, the accusation against him is that the music is non transformative. How can such a work convey the transformational component that is part and parcel of theological beauty? Benjamin Skipp suggests an alternative take on the concept of transformation:

> It is possible that the subject of the work *is* about transformation, but in an entirely different manner to the kind of transformation experienced within dialectical works. There is no sense of dramatic conflict followed by synthesis. The work occupies a ritualized space, presenting a fixed framework of an action repeated nine times at the same time as enabling those taking part to enter various new spiritual states. In this way it is most closely resembled by the processional character of certain rituals within the Christian liturgy.[19]

Skipp claims capacity for transformation based not on dialectical principles, but through musical semblance to ritual. To fully consider this suggestion, it is helpful to examine the musical elements in action, representatively demonstrated in Pärt's *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* (1996).[20]

The piece, a canon for string orchestra and one bell, begins with the single bell, striking an A4 four times with varying lengths of rest in between each note. In so doing, the bell dictates the tonal parameters for the rest of the piece: all seven minutes of *Cantus* sit within an A-minor sonority. The first violins, divided, are the first strings to enter. In perfect fifths, they begin at E6 and

[17] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 181.
[18] Ibid., 182.
[19] Benjamin Skipp, "Out of Place in the 20th Century: Thoughts on Pärt's Tintinnabuli Style" *Tempo* 63, no. 249 (2009): 10. This particular quote is in reference to *Fratres* (1977), hence the specification of "nine" repetitions, but can be conceptually applied to other tintinnabuli works. Italics added.
[20] See Appendix B for score.

A6 and descend three notes diatonically in a half-note, quarter-note alternating rhythm.[21] After three notes, they begin again at E6 to start another descent, this time four notes long. The pattern continues. At each iteration, one note along the descent of an A-minor scale is added, thereby extending the line in an additive fashion, continually delaying the return to the top E6, and thwarting any sense of rhythmic predictability as both the agogic placement and durational value of the top E6 are unpredictable. As the number of pitches in each iteration of the descending scale increases by one note at each iteration, the top note—which a listener may attempt to latch onto as the best possible candidate for a dependable "agogic foothold"—does not maintain durational consistency. At times, it is one beat long, and at other times, it lasts for two beats. At times, it falls on the downbeat, and at others, it arrives on beat four. Thus, it cannot serve as an anchor.

Without a dependable foothold, *Cantus* denies the listener anticipatory points of arrival, thwarting any notion of an expectation-fulfillment complex. Narrative arc, which requires points of arrival and goals to build toward, is a nonentity. *Cantus* effectively uproots the possibility of latching onto narrative footholds, thus creating a static, suspended single moment. Rather than propelling forward—narrating a story as is the aim of traditional tonal harmony—*Cantus* freezes a single tick on a timeline, expanding it upwards, outwards, inwards, suspending the present moment.

A similarly disorienting effect is achieved between all five voices of the canon. After the first violins begin, the second violins, also divided and in perfect fifths (E4 and A4), enter one measure later in the same

[21] Further analysis in this paragraph considers only the top line of the first violin part, as this line contains the melody voice; the bottom line serves as the triad voice, and for the purposes of describing a pitch-related compositional structure, will be disregarded.

fashion as the first violins. The difference, however, lies in rhythmic duration: the second violins sustain each note for double the rhythmic value as the first violins. In other words, the second violins move through the same pitches at half the rate as the first violins. The three remaining voices—viola, cello, and double bass—continue the pattern, each presenting the minor descent at double the durational values (moving at half the speed) as the previous voice, creating a proportionally augmented canon. By presenting each voice in augmentation, Pärt simultaneously evokes five distinct layers of temporality.

Both of these compositional tactics—the horizontal additive elongation within a voice and vertical augmentation between voices—exemplify quasi-repetition that is frequently found in Pärt's music. Whereas American minimalism is broadly characterized by the motoric, exact repetition of short phrases, Pärt's music distinguishes itself through its *quasi*-repetitiveness; listeners of his music can sense a repetitive circularity as the music hovers within a limited range of pitches, but they never receive the exact restatement of a phrase or gesture. Pärt's lines are constantly undergoing subtle changes. Skipp's suggestion that Pärt's music is aligned with Christian ritual seems to be founded on the nature of these "almost" repetitions. Notably, the pattern itself is easily identifiable. A simple rule governs the individual lines and their interactions with each other, and the work abides faithfully for its entirety. Thus, it is clear that compositionally, Pärt's music operates out of a fixed, formulaic technique; a prescribed set of rules serves as a rigid framework.

However, the ends of these means are very much *unfixed*. Although a fixedness could also be attributed to styles such as American minimalism which presents exact restatements of repetitions, it is precisely

through Pärt's quasi-repetition which grants his music semblance to ritual in a way that would be inappropriate to associate with American minimalism. Pärt's ritualistic repetitions are fixed in that they are governed by a fixed rule (a rule of elongation or augmentation), but not fixed in that they do not exactly repeat themselves. Thus, the aural effect of his music is considerably different from that of his American counterparts. The listener of *Cantus* cannot perceive the fixedness. Because of the continual disorientation (by way of rhythmic, durational, and agogic unpredictability) the listener is not consciously aware of just how rigid the formula actually is. With the exact restatements of American minimalism, the listener is granted the benefit of full predictability. By contrast, listeners of Pärt are denied any sense of predictability; they are denied the ease of literal repetitions which allow the mind to "turn off." How does a work like *Spiegel* or *Cantus* evoke a heightened concentration on the moment at hand? It is precisely through their unpredictability—an unpredictability made possible only through a fixed, formulaic compositional structure—that the listener must concentrate more intensely than if they could harmonically or melodically anticipate the music's direction.

The theological parallels to the practice of Christian ritual are striking. In ritualistic practices, such as the recitation of a liturgy or confessional prayer, the practitioner begins with an established set of text—a prescribed "set of rules": a liturgy is recited every Sunday…the same words of a confessional prayer are lifted each morning at sunrise. There is a fixity inherent to ritualistic material and the manner in which it is engaged. However, in and through the fixed framework of repeated texts and rites, the practitioner is seeking something foundationally and necessarily

*un*predictable: engagement with the divine. This claim is illustrated well through the particular Orthodox practice of hesychasm. In hesychastic practices, Orthodox Christians quiet themselves into a state of silence, repeating a short phrase—whether it be a prayer or line of scripture—over themselves. The two fixed components of quieting the self and repeating a phrase are practiced with the intention of entering into a state of open receptivity; the aim is to quiet one's own soul in order to embody utmost receptivity to the voice of God. Hesychasm, like Pärt's quasi-repetition, utilizes fixed practices in order to sever the mind from its desire for control and rationality, instead challenging the practitioner to intensified concentration on the task of listening receptively to the free, unpredictable movement of the divine. The unfixity born out of fixity, then, unites the music of Pärt with the concept of ritual.

This semblance is critical when addressing MacMillan's criticism of a lack of transformation, for, to be sure, the goal of ritual—the hope of those engaging in ritualistic practices—*is transformation.* The fixed framework of ritual is available for the person of faith to walk through the practices of faith even when they do not feel as though they have faith at that moment. The ritualistic practitioner, always seeking transformation towards greater proximity to the divine, can turn to the rituals of tradition to cultivate a heart open to transformation.

Moreover, tintinnabulation as a whole serves as a further illustration of ritualistic transformation. Because the melody voice moves in stepwise motion against a triad voice which sits on pitches of the tonic triad, dissonances and resolutions permeate Pärt's tintinnabulous works. *Cantus*, demonstratively, consists of continual tensions and releases as sustained pitches a major second apart frequently sit against

each other before resolving to consonant intervals. Although not teleological, where a contained section of tension and conflict becomes transformed into a contained beauty, Pärt's tintinnabulations, instead, creates a sea of tensions (conflict) and resolutions that are continually at play. Pärt paints a circular, continual cycle of Good Friday to Resurrection Sunday, much like the continuous nature of ritual, where there is unceasing transform*ing*.

Although it may be considered static by the standards of traditional harmonic analysis, there is much in Pärt's music which lends itself to the language of transformation—and more specifically, to a state of *continuous* transformation. An amendment to a premise of MacMillan's charge is now made possible: far from a "sanitized" space free of conflict, Pärt's music is structurally *made up* of tensions and releases which ebb and flow fluidly throughout the work's entirety. Through evoking a continuous state of transformation, as opposed to a contained section of conflict followed by an equally self-contained section of resolution, Pärt's music embodies a live, present transformation—as if it is occuring in the moment. Where MacMillan demands teleological sequence, Pärt paints a sonic rendering of a fixed practice which leads to continuous transformation towards the unpredictable, *unfixed* freedom that comes when posturing oneself receptively towards the divine.

IV. Conclusion

Although the religiously-associated music of Arvo Pärt may not contain the musical elements that have been identified by scholars like Begbie and MacMillan as theologically accurate expressions of beauty, my aim through this paper has been to adjust the criteria for what qualifies as the theologically beautiful in music.

MacMillan's critique rested on the "lack of conflict" and, consequently, the lack of transformative capacity. He charged Holy Minimalist music as existing solely in a "transcendent state," as something "sanitized" and "hived off," thus refusing raw contact with the adversity of the crucifixion.[22]

To address these charges, this paper first examined *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978), revealing the way that Pärt grants *unique* attention to the cross. Through reduced melodic and harmonic means, Pärt challenges the listener to a heightened level of concentration on the moment at hand, inviting the reader into the in-between space which narrative teleology often dismisses. Pärt's music acquaints a listener to the depths of the crucifixion precisely by evoking a suspended timescape characteristic of deep suffering. His music expresses the passion narrative as it would have been endured by those living through those three days in history; his music grants space to dwell inside Holy Saturday.

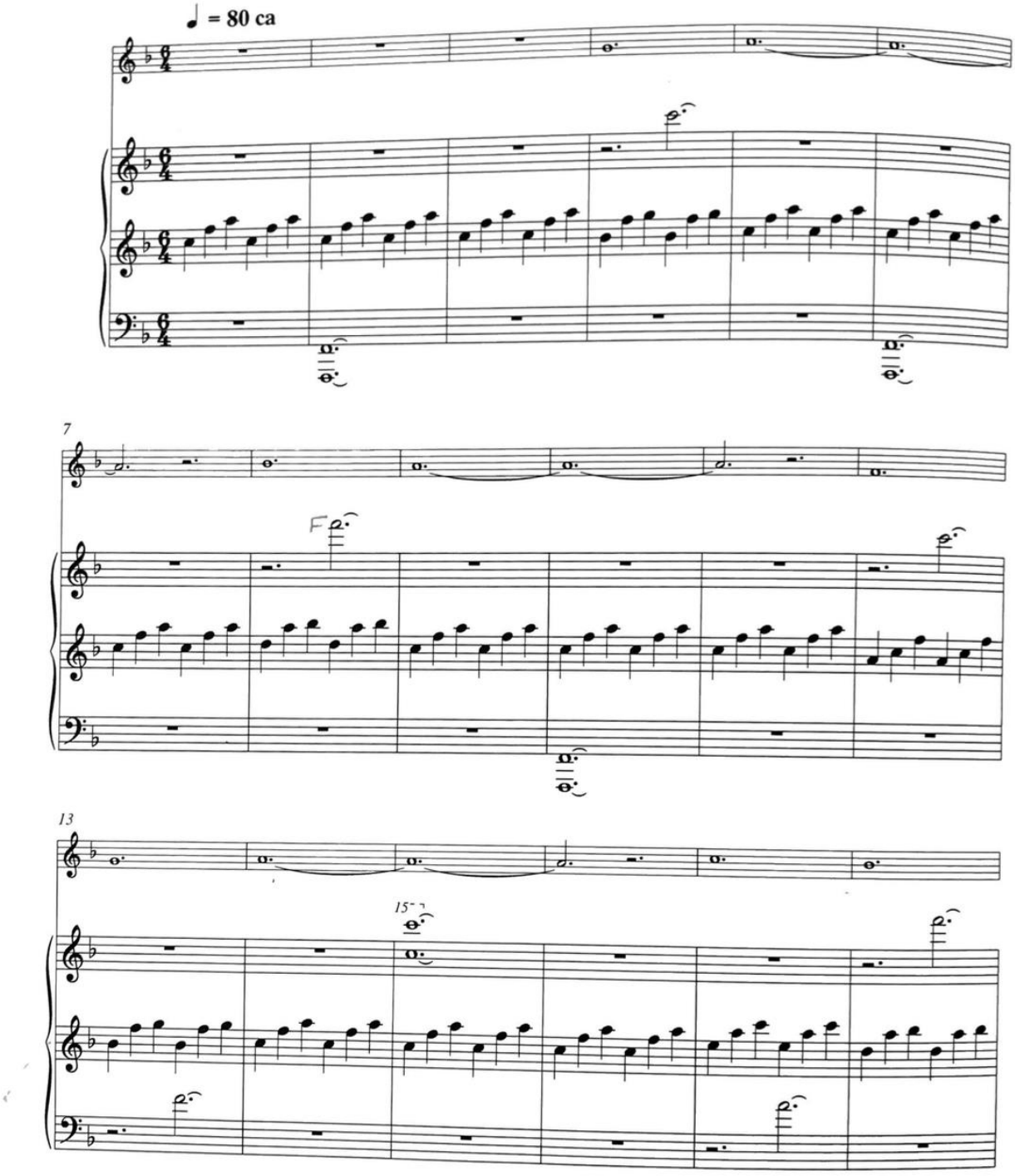
To address MacMillan's second criticism, I turned to *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten* (1996) to examine Pärt's use of an additive formula and proportional augmentation to craft multiple layers of quasi-repetition. Precisely through these fixed means, Pärt thwarts expectations, denying the listener the ease of teleological predictability and instead inviting the listener into a receptive openness towards the unpredictable. The continuous dissonances and resolutions resulting from the mechanisms of tintinnabulation, too, contribute to the presence of transformation in Pärt's music. And, just as with Christian rituals, the end aim of fixed practices is transformation of the individual. Thus, there is transformation at work in Pärt's music. Although it does not take linear shape like

[22] Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, 180.

MacMillan's music, it is an equally potent expression of transformation which cannot be dismissed.

To be sure, there is room within the conversation on theological beauty for both MacMillan's sequential, teleological expression and Pärt's continuous, suspended evocation, and, undoubtedly, others as yet to be explored. I have strived to illuminate a possible response to criticisms leveraged against the music of Arvo Pärt by broadening the criteria for musical representations of theological beauty, with the hope that future scholarship will continue to pursue consideration of beauty and its sonic renderings.

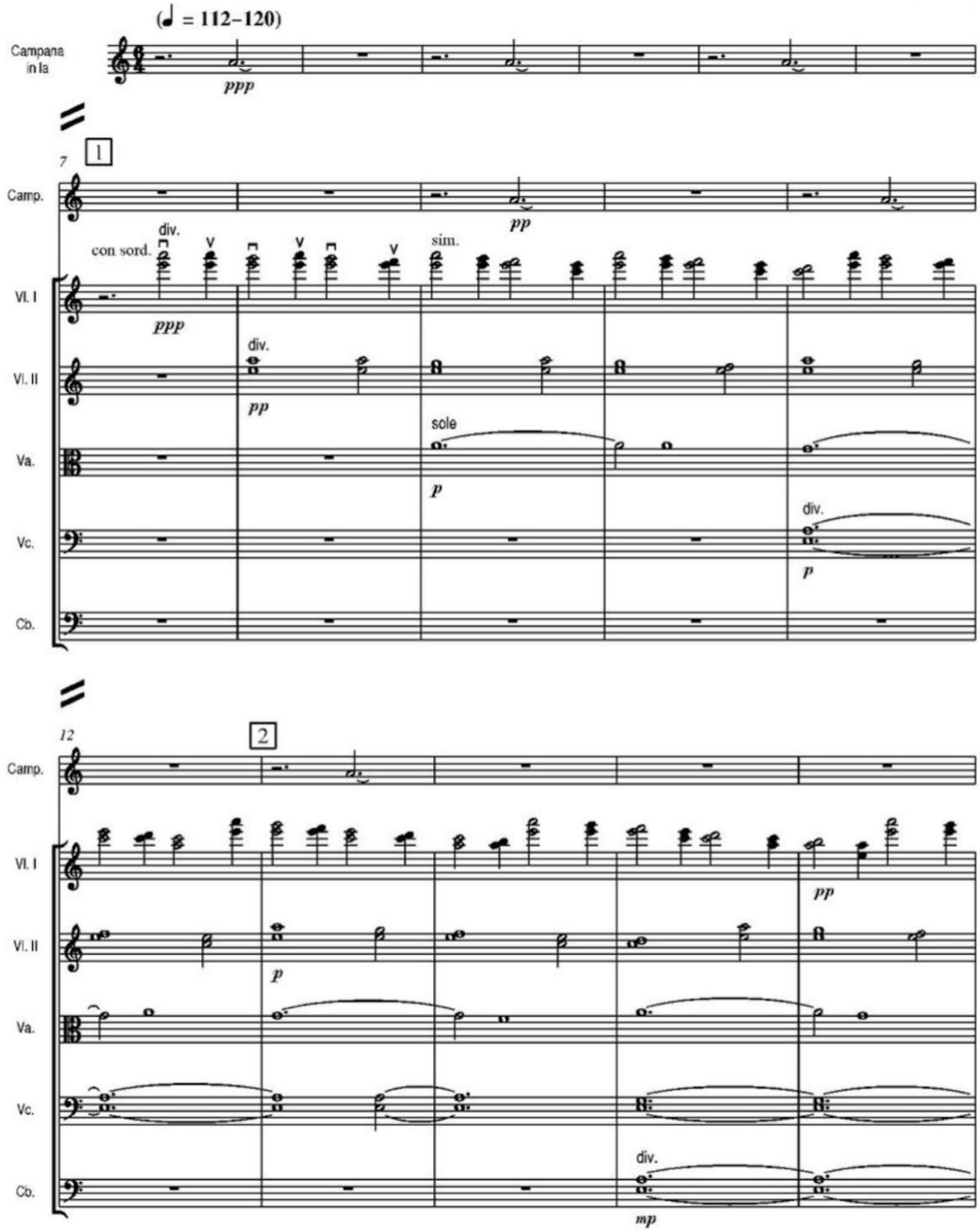
Appendix A



Arvo Pärt, *Spiegel im Spiegel*, mm. 1-18.

Appendix B

Arvo Pärt, *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, mm.1-16.



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