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Rapides Symphony Orchestra

Arvo Pärt (Born 1935)
Fratres for string orchestra

Born in Estonia in 1935, Arvo Pärt is today regarded as one of the most important and original contemporary composers. In fact, his importance rests upon his originality for – in rejecting the various avant-garde styles that predominated art music early in his career – he developed a quite personal method for recapturing the tonal stability that many composers had either denied or found unattainable since the outset of the twentieth century. Pärt calls this method *tintinnabuli*, from the Latin word for "bell," and it has been this process of tying a simple flowing melody to the equally simple accompaniment of tolling chords that has guided Pärt's compositions since he developed the method in the 1970s.

The deceptive simplicity of this method and the consequently static music it creates has led many commentators to label Pärt a "minimalist" as if he were among the ranks of American composers like Philip Glass, John Adams, and Steve Reich. More astute commentators have reminded us, however, that, while the "minimalism" of these Americans constantly builds in energy and often includes an electronic component, Pärt's "minimalism" achieves a meditative effect and shuns electronic media. Furthermore, Pärt's music since his conversion to *tintinnabuli* in the 1970s has belonged to a vein that these Americans have only matched in the past two decades – music which cannot justifiably be consigned as "minimalism" any more than can Pärt's mature compositions.

Pärt's devout faith – one which borders on mysticism – has encouraged categorization with other spiritually-minded contemporary composers. Unlike the Russian Sofia Gubaidulina or the Finn Einojuhani Rautavaara, however, Arvo Pärt has completely abandoned the chilling dissonance, exacting serialism, and expanded aural palette that these two composers have inherited from the avant-garde. Nor has Pärt like the British mystic John Tavener or the American Alan Hovhaness found his inspiration from non-western musical cultures. Much like the Pole Henryk Górecki, Arvo Pärt has taken his inspiration from the Christian tradition, and, for Pärt in particular, the emphasis has been the sacred music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In response to these influences, Pärt has often used his *tintinnabuli* method to construct choral music like his massive *St. John Passion* as well as smaller works like his settings of the *Magnificat* and the *Beatitudes*.

Although in recent years Arvo Pärt has favored choral music, he has also produced a prominent body of instrumental compositions. One such work is *Fratres* – the composition appearing on this afternoon's program. Pärt composed *Fratres* in 1977 during the first rush of creative excitement that accompanied his discovery of *tintinnabuli* and his reemergence as a composer after nearly a decade of silence.

Like *tintinnabuli*, the word *fratres* is also from Latin where it means "brothers." Pärt has not revealed exactly why he gave this title to the piece, but several explanations are possible. The answer could be as simple as a desire to musically illustrate that essential Christian institution – the monastic community –, but, then again, other considerations must also be made. Historically, he composed *Fratres* for the ensemble Hortus Musicus, a closely-knit body of musicians dedicated to the recovery and performance of early music. This historical consideration can be applied musically to the piece as its four instrumental lines function alongside one another in equal partnership much like brothers. None of these answers are mutually exclusive, and all are possibilities.

Fratres exists in at least twelve different arrangements, most created by Pärt himself. Besides the version for string orchestra, these include versions for string orchestra and percussion; string quartet; four, eight, or twelve cellos; wind orchestra and percussion; violin and piano; viola and piano; and cello and piano. In an interview, Arvo Pärt and his wife Nora together explained why this was the case: Nora began, "While other composers habitually […] paint with 'colours,' Arvo draws…," "…in black and white," he interjected. Nora resumed: "And this is also the reason for the existence of so many different versions of *Fratres*. Right from the beginning, the concept of *Fratres* was not conceived with a particular colour in mind." Pärt writes music that maintains its identity despite changes in medium. His music has a certain timeliness to it – one that allows it to subsist beyond both popular and artistic trends.

When listening to *Fratres*, notice its meditative qualities – this is not music directed towards a musical destination but one of an eternal stasis. Notice also the flowing melody – reminiscent of ancient chant – and the low-pitched drone – also symbolic of eternity. Both elements foster an atmosphere of tension, but one that can be overcome by trusting in the eternal truth they provide.

To learn more about Arvo Pärt and listen to other works he has composed, I suggest Nick Kimberley's informative and accessible *Arvo Pärt: A Portrait* available from Naxos Educational.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
Keyboard Concerto in A major, BWV 1055

Today, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is regarded by many listeners, performers, and music scholars as the greatest of all composers. Yet, during his lifetime, that was not the case. For the majority of his career, Bach was employed as a music director, cantor, and school teacher who was only occasionally hired-out as an organ tuner and who only occasionally had the chance to demonstrate his technical skills on the organ and harpsichord. Certainly, for the latter half of his career – those 27 years he spent in Leipzig from 1723 to 1750 –, Bach's composing opportunities usually came as a component of one of his other duties. Thus, it was for the practical purpose of demonstrating his skills as a keyboard virtuoso that he composed his series of keyboard concerti.

Based on the surviving manuscripts, scholars have dated the fourteen surviving keyboard concerti to Bach's Leipzig years. Of these fourteen concerti, eight feature a solo keyboard while the other six feature multiple keyboards. Of these initial eight, seven survive in a single manuscript that has been dated to roughly 1738 or 1739; it is this manuscript which contains the Keyboard Concerto in A major, BWV 1055, heard on today's program.

Scholars have two theories surrounding the origin of this manuscript of seven concerti. For years, the predominate theory was that Bach composed these seven concerti for performance with Leipzig Collegium Musicum, a group of students and professional musicians who gathered to discuss and perform music solely because they enjoyed doing so. A new theory states that Bach composed these seven concerti in anticipation of a visit to Dresden. Regardless, of which theory one favors, scholars agree that Bach intended that he himself would be the soloist and that these concerti would display his abilities as both a virtuoso performer and a talented composer – two roles that his employers in Leipzig underappreciated.

Although scholars disagree about the occasion for which Bach composed these concerti, there is little debate about how. Clearly, Bach arranged his keyboard concerti from older works, most of which he himself composed in Cöthen where he was stationed from 1717 to 1723. In the case of the seven concerti of the 1738-39 manuscript, scholars believe that Bach arranged these concerti from older concerti for melody instruments, namely the violin, oboe, and oboe d'amore. Of the seven, four of the originals have been lost over time, but three survive – for these final three include arrangements of the two surviving concerti for one violin and the *Fourth Brandenburg Concerto*.

Scholars are almost positive that Bach arranged BWV 1055 from a concerto for oboe d'amore. The oboe d'amore is a variant of the oboe that first appeared around 1717; the oboe d'amore is pitched a minor third lower than the regular oboe, and thus possesses a slightly warmer quality. Some scholars have argued that, because the oldest surviving oboe d'amore dates from 1717, Bach must have composed the original version of BWV 1055 after he had already arrived in Leipzig. But, it remains very possible that Bach did, in fact, have access to an oboe d'amore while still at Cöthen; in fact, a lot of what we know about antiquated Baroque instruments is due to research into Bach's music for he experimented with all sorts of strange new instruments.

There is another issue about which musicians disagree in regards to these keyboard concerti: which instrument should they be played upon? Organ is certainly not the correct answer, and the quiet clavichord is equally unlikely. From a historicist standpoint, these concerti should be played on the harpsichord for this instrument was almost certainly the one that Bach intended his keyboard concerti to be played upon. Although the piano – or more properly "pianoforte" – had been invented by this point in time, the instrument was still very different from the modern piano. It took another hundred years after Bach's death to perfect the pianoforte: it took powerful advocates like Mozart before the pianoforte truly replaced the harpsichord and powerful pounds from unhappy customers like Beethoven before the pianoforte was strong enough to withstand some of the music to which the Romantics subjected it. Although Bach had contact with the pianoforte, he believed it was a passing trend, and it certainly did not have the same refined sound quality it has today nor in Bach's day could it match the conciseness of the harpsichord. Yet, the harpsichord is a temperamental instrument which sometimes needs to be completely retuned halfway through a concert. The instrument is, therefore, expensive to maintain, not to mention the difficulties in finding a harpsichordist. Therefore, Bach's keyboard concerti are often played on the piano for practical reasons whereas the harpsichord remains the more historically appropriate instrument. This afternoon, we have chosen the former option in inviting the talented pianist Loredana Lentini to be our soloist.

When listening this afternoon, keep in mind the playful twists and turns of the soloist as she imitates the oboe d'amore of the original. The concerto opens with a radiant and cheerful first movement *Allegro*, whereas the second movement *Larghetto* sounds more disparaged as the piano and strings become estranged from one

another; the third movement *Allegro ma non tanto* witnesses restored cooperation between soloist and ensemble accompanied by a new driving force. Unlike many compositions by Bach, this concerto is particularly lighthearted. But, that is in no way an unwelcome change.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)
Serenade for Strings in C major, Op. 48

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) composed his *Serenade for Strings* in C major, Op. 48, over the winter of 1880 to 1881. This period of Tchaikovsky's life was full of both triumphs and disasters. When he began his Serenade, he had just completed the moving *1812 Festival Overture*. And, only a few years earlier, he had composed some of his most lasting compositions: the late 1870s witnessed the creation of his most famous opera *Eugene Onegin*, the fateful Symphony No. 4, the popular Violin Concerto, and the tremendously underappreciated Piano Concerto No. 2. These productive years were equally eventful as it was during this time that Tchaikovsky – afraid of his latent homosexuality – entered into that brief marriage that became so despicable to him that he attempted to commit suicide. This was also the time that he began the much more distant relationship with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck, who remained his dedicated patron for fourteen years until 1890.

All of this aside, the *Serenade for Strings* is a delightful work very much removed from the emotional excesses of many of Tchaikovsky's compositions. The *Serenade* began as either a symphony or string quartet – a factor reflected by the four-movement structure typical of those genres. The first movement *Pezzo in forma di sonatina* possesses the faster tempo of the first movement of a symphony or string quartet while its sonatina layout parallels the typical sonata-allegro structure. The second movement *Valse* takes the place of the symphony's dance-like movement which Russian composers often placed second. The *Elégie* clearly parallels the slow movement of a symphony or string quartet. And, the fourth movement *Finale. Tema russo* could have easily served the same function it does here within the other genres. Furthermore, the coherent tonal plan ties together these four movements more tightly than usual for suites of this kind.

These descriptive movement titles also hint at another interesting feature of this work: here, while titles in Italian and French indicate western ideas like the sonatina and waltz, they also identify the "Russian theme" that features in the final movement. In the *Serenade*, Tchaikovsky successfully combines Russian melodies with Western forms. Such attempts were not always as fruitful for Tchaikovsky. The eminent composer Mily Balakirev shunned Tchaikovsky from his circle of Russian composers – known today as either "The Five" or "The Mighty Handful." At their peak, this group argued for an overtly nationalistic brand of music created by amateurs unschooled in Western theory – a far cry from Tchaikovsky's personal and emotionally expressive approach which combined Russian themes with the Western forms he had picked up when studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

The ballets that today form much of Tchaikovsky's popular reputation are not completely foreign from the *Serenade* either. While all of the movements possess a touch of the ballet rhythms and sprightliness familiar from *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*, the second movement *Valse* would have fit just as perfectly in one of these works as it does here. In effect, Tchaikovsky has inserted a *divertissement* into this work in the same fashion as he did in his ballets.

With its measured sentiment, pleasant melodies, tonal unity, formal brilliance, Russian emanations, and balletic liveliness, the *Serenade for Strings* continues to please audiences and critics alike as it has since its premiere.