Arvo Pärt (b.1935) Fratres (1977)

Fratres was one of the first pieces that Estonian Arvo Pärt wrote in his radically new style "tintinnabuli". His early compositions, following Shostakovich and Prokofiev, had been neo-classical. They included film and theatre music, and found favour with the Soviet authorities. He subsequently studied the few serialist scores that leaked into the USSR, leading to the composition of Credo in 1968 in which the famous Bach C major prelude is gradually distorted by 12-note row techniques before returning to tonality. It was condemned by the Soviet authorities, more for its avowal of Christianity than for its invocation of Schoenberg.

There followed seven creatively very lean years when Pärt explored monody and simple two-part counterpoint inspired by his studies of medieval and renaissance music and Gregorian chant. He also changed his religious allegiance from Lutheranism to Orthodox Christianity. Eventually, in 1976, he started fluently composing again; his studies had sired a new style which he called 'tintinnabuli' after the bell-like sound of the notes of a triad. The technique involves two voices: a melodic voice moving stepwise around a central pitch, and a tintinnabuli voice sounding the notes of the tonic triad. The relationship between the two voices follows a predetermined numeric or prosodic scheme and is certainly not, as one would indeed expect from a student of the works of Schoenberg, haphazard. Pärt's subsequent work has broadly continued in this style; dubbed 'holy minimalism' along with the related work of Górecki and Tavener, it has proved immensely popular.

Fratres (Brethren) consists of a theme and eight variations. The theme is a very constrained six-bar phrase (illustrated); its first three bars have 7, 9 & 11 beats respectively, with two extra notes being added to the middle of the previous bar. The simple, chant-like melody is played in parallel tenths by the upper and lower notes of each chord, while the middle (tintinnabuli) note comes from an A-minor chord (A,C,E). In the second three bars, the melody in the upper and lower notes is inverted and a different A-minor note is chosen for the middle. In subsequent variations, the central pitch of the theme (initially C#) descends.

The original 1977 composition left the instrumentation open, but Pärt produced a version specifically for violin and piano in 1980 which he dedicated to Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer and his wife. The variations explore in turn different technical possibilities of the violin.

Edgar Alan Poe perhaps anticipated Pärt's style in his well-known 1831 poem "The Bells".

Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
To the *tintinnabulation that so musically wells
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

*Poe's use of the word popularised it so that by 1880 The Daily Telegraph's legal section reported "a clause authorising the tintinnabulatory 'promulgation' of muffins".