

Press release  
31 March, 2020

## The BBVA Foundation recognizes Arvo Pärt, creator of ‘tintinnabuli’, a new musical language centered on the voice and stripped of all accessory elements that has connected with a wide public

- **Following a long period of self-searching**, Estonian Arvo Pärt emerged in the mid-1970s with a musical language uniquely his own, which he has gone on developing to this day. Deceptively simple, it is in fact underpinned by a high degree of technical complexity, consisting of interlinked musical lines that dispense with all superfluous elements
- **His work marks a fresh approach** to spiritual music, especially choral: the voice is primordial in his musical output and particularly the word, drawn in most cases from liturgical texts or prayers
- **Pärt was exiled by the Soviet regime**, which had taken issue with his spirituality and compositional innovation. He returned to Estonia in 2010.
- **Arvo Pärt’s music** has found favor with the most varied publics, is heard constantly at concert venues around the world and features on the soundtrack of numerous films, making him one of today’s most widely performed contemporary composers

Due to the COVID-19 public health crisis, the international committee deciding the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Music and Opera assessed the 31 nominees by remote means, and resolved to bestow the award in this twelfth edition on Estonian composer Arvo Pärt “for cultivating an original language, which has led to the creation of a unique sound world; a fresh approach to spiritual music, especially in his choral oeuvre, that reduces the musical material to the essence.” On hearing of the award, Pärt –who was nominated by the director of the Pau Casals Foundation, Jordi Pardo– declared himself “delighted and grateful.”

Arvo Pärt was born in 1935 in Paide, Estonia, just four years before the country’s incorporation into the Soviet Union. He studied piano, flute, oboe and percussion before the age of twenty, when he made his first forays into composition.

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In 1954 he began higher studies in composition at the Tallinn conservatoire, but had to break off his training for compulsory military service. By the time of his graduation year, he had attained a formal mastery evident in his Symphony No. 1 (1963), written while he was working as a sound engineer for a state radio station. Some of the output of his student years still forms part of his official catalog, including orchestral pieces like *Nekrolog* (1960) or *Perpetuum mobile* (1963): “A good number of extraordinary works,” that flow from “a profound exploration of the modernist vocabulary,” in the words of committee chairman Paul Hillier, Artistic Director of the Theatre of Voices (Denmark).

The music he went on to create in the late 1960s stands out for its distinctive use of the collage technique, darker and more dramatic, with a clear indebtedness to the Baroque tradition, in compositions that reflect an internal struggle between two competing worlds. This inner dialogue would find its fullest expression in *Credo* (1968), which marked a turning point in his life and work.

*Credo*'s premiere was an epic event for the public in attendance, who would not stop cheering until the piece was played again in its entirety. The Soviet regime saw a threat in both the work and its composer for their innovating spirit and ability to convey a spiritual truth that connected with listeners.

Pärt responded by embarking on a return to the origins, studying Christian vocal music, Gregorian chant, the Notre Dame School and Renaissance polyphony. This period coincided with two milestones in his personal life: marriage to Nora, his inseparable partner, and his official reception into the Orthodox Church.

### **His own path: 'tintinnabuli'**

Pärt's output in these years was thin, despite including some major works like his Symphony No. 3 (1971). Then in 1976, with the short piano piece *Für Alina*, he re-emerged with a radically distinctive voice. The two worlds that Pärt had been exploring found their perfect outlet in a new technique called *tintinnabuli*. Two musical lines stripped of all accessory elements. The Artistic Director of the Gran Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona and committee secretary Víctor García de Gomar defines it as “the invention of a musical grammar that is uniquely of itself, comprising repetitive sequences of a certain contained energy, chords that overlay one another so that each shift is almost a miracle. They are subtle, but change their color in such a way that the whole meaning of the structure changes with them.”

In the forty years since then, Pärt has continued to develop the technique which would underpin

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all his subsequent production. Indeed the birth of this new language ushered in an especially prolific year, 1977, when he wrote some of his most celebrated works: *Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten*, *Fratres*, *Summa* and *Tabula Rasa*. Committee member and conductor Pedro Halffter describes these works as imbued with a “personal, communicative language that has fascinated both the most demanding and the broadest publics. His music is admired, recognized and performed by the world’s leading musical and cultural institutions.”

### **The human voice as a perfect instrument**

The premiere of *Tabula Rasa* was another event, this time in Tallinn, which extended his fame beyond national borders. His growing influence and popularity with audiences, his radically individual artistic voice and his religiosity were considered a threat by the Soviet regime, whose attempts at interference led Pärt to take a public stance. He was detained at Moscow airport, accused of dissidence, and the press began denouncing him as a “traitor to the Motherland.” Finally the Soviet authorities recommended that he leave Estonia.

He went into exile with his family in January 1980, living first in Vienna and then in Berlin, where he would remain for almost thirty years. In Estonia, meantime, performances of his works were banned.

For Pärt, the textual element is enormously important. This is evident even in his instrumental pieces, where the word features heavily, drawn almost always from liturgical texts or prayers. However, it is his vocal music that most powerfully reflects this predilection for the textual – he has repeatedly stated that the human voice is the most perfect instrument – and that has won him the acclaim he enjoys on the global stage. The chair of the committee, Paul Hillier, rates him one of the most important contemporary composers of choral music. Pärt’s vocal output includes such major orchestral works as *Passio* (1982), *Stabat Mater* (1985), *Te Deum* (1985), *Miserere* (1989/1992), *Como cierva sedienta* (1998/2002) and *In principio* (2003).

Germany would prove a richly fertile period in Pärt’s output, thanks in no small measure to his professional relationship with Manfred Eicher, whom he met in 1984. The founder and producer of music label ECM Records chose *Tabula Rasa* to inaugurate a successful series of new recordings, which took Pärt’s music to audiences around the world. His works began appearing in the programs of top international festivals, orchestras and ensembles, and in radio and TV broadcasts.

Estonia was restored to independence in 1991, and Pärt renewed his relationship with his home country, both personally and artistically. His music was again regularly performed, and the

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places he had passed through in his youth began celebrating tributes to him on his birthday. In 2010, he made the decision to move back, and has lived there ever since. That same year, he and his wife Nora founded the Arvo Pärt Centre, to house and maintain the composer's impressive personal archive, while serving as a meeting place for musicians, researchers and music lovers everywhere.

"Arvo Pärt, who creates music of great purity and spirituality, is an oasis in a world oversaturated with technology. His music is an invitation to transcend individuality," says Víctor García de Gomar. "Reserved and generous by nature, he chooses to be close to people, his fellow humans, and does not hesitate to place his art at the service of great tragedies." The committee secretary is referring here to *Da pacem Domine* ("Give peace, Lord"), written two days after the events of March 11, 2004 in Madrid, a six-minute choral prayer which the composer dedicated to the 192 people killed in the terrorist attack.

Pärt's music has connected with all kinds of public. "Both believers and non-believers are affected by its profound depth and sensitivity," explains Robert Sholl, Professor of Music at the University of West London (United Kingdom) and also a member of the award committee.

In the words of the citation, "it is no exaggeration to say that Pärt's work is constantly being performed somewhere in the world." His versatility and expressiveness have also found an outlet in film, and his music features in hundreds of titles by directors like Paolo Sorrentino, Víctor Erice and David Trueba. Two albums by the Estonian composer have been winners of a Grammy, and for the last eight years the largest database of live classical music performances, published by the magazine *Bachtrack*, has listed him as the world's most widely performed living contemporary composer.

### **Music and Opera committee and evaluation support panel**

The committee in this category was chaired by **Paul Hillier**, baritone and Artistic Director of the Theatre of Voices and Ars Nova Copenhagen (Denmark), with **Víctor García de Gomar**, Artistic Director of the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona (Spain) acting as secretary. Remaining members were **Mauro Bucarelli**, Artistic Administrator of the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome (Italy); **Pedro Halffter**, a conductor and composer, **Andrew McGregor**, a presenter with BBC Radio 3 (United Kingdom), and **Robert Sholl**, Professor of Music at the University of West London.

The **evaluation support panel** of the **Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)** was



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coordinated by **M. Victoria Moreno**, the Council's Deputy Vice President for Scientific and Technical Areas, and formed by: **María Gembero Ustarroz**, tenured researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution (IMF); **Idoia Murga Castro**, tenured researcher at the Institute of History (IH); **Emilio Ros Fábregas**, scientific researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution (IMF); and **Juan Manual Vicent García**, scientific researcher at the Institute of History (IH).

### **About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards**

The BBVA Foundation centers its activity on the promotion of world-class scientific research and cultural creation, and the encouragement of talent.

The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards, established in 2008, recognize and reward contributions of singular impact in diverse fields of science, technology, social sciences and the humanities that have demonstrably expanded the frontiers of the known world, opening up new paradigms and knowledge fields. Their eight categories are reflective of the knowledge map of the 21st century, encompassing basic research in Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics, Biology and Biomedicine, Information and Communication Technologies, Humanities and Social Sciences, Economics, Finance and Management, Ecology and Conservation Biology, Climate Change, and, within the arts, the supremely creative realm of music.

The BBVA Foundation is aided in the evaluation process by the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC), the country's premier public research organization. The Foundation and CSIC jointly appoint the evaluation support panels charged with undertaking an initial assessment of the candidates proposed by numerous institutions across the world and drawing up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the award committees. CSIC is also responsible for designating the chair of each committee, formed by eminent authorities in the subject area.

### **Calendar of announcement events**

<b>Humanities and Social Sciences</b>	Wednesday, 15 April, 2020
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