

Calm or Tension? The Musical Demands in *Strung Out* (1967) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978)

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Abstract—Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) and American composer Philip Glass are composers who have shown their similar musical influences yet different compositional styles in their 1970s works written for amplified violin and violin and piano. *Strung Out* (1967) is an example of minimalist music and use of amplification. *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) is an example of tintinnabuli compositional technique and minimalist music. This research will examine *Strung Out* (1967) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978), two selected examples for learning and performing experimental music. Both composers applied minimalist ideas and applied different techniques into their compositions. In *Strung Out*, Glass uses circular rhythmic patterns and varied these patterns by groups. Pärt utilizes simple harmonic tone and structure, varied by repeated and unchanged rhythm in *Spiegel im Spiegel*. Both works challenge the performer's musical interpretation, performance flexibility, and appreciate a new way of musical execution.

Index Terms—Experimentalism, minimalist music, tintinnabuli, violin.

I. INTRODUCTION

Experimental music is a compositional style that arose in the late 1950s. Based in New York, North America, John Cage (1912-1992) is better known as one of the pioneer that utilized it in his compositions [1]. Based in Paris, Europe, Pierre Schaeffer (1910-1995) led the *musique concrète* studio and began to use the term *musique expérimentale* and incorporated with tape music and live electronics [2]. The term experimental music was introduced by Michael Nyman (b. 1944) to define Cage and other New York-based composers including Earle Brown (1926-2002), Morton Feldman (1926-1987), and La Monte Young (b. 1935). Minimalism and electroacoustic music are also part of this trend.

There are many ideas and concepts introduced by experimental composers and presented by different musicians. For example, these skills consist of extend performance techniques, graphic notation, prepared instruments and amplification. This research will examine performing contemporary solo violin work with different philosophies of interpretation and perspective for performance strategies and the learning of violin. *Strung Out* (1967) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) are selected examples of learning and performing experimental music. *Strung Out* is an example of minimalist music and use of

amplification. *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) is an example of tintinnabuli compositional technique and minimalist music. This research will also illustrate the challenge of learning and performing this type of music. The violinist needs to practice for flexibility in both hands and exercise the sensibility of listening.

II. COMPOSERS' BACKGROUND

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) is an Estonian composer, whose compositions display many of the twentieth century's musical styles. His early works is based on piano, a neoclassical idiom. Later he changed his interest to serial music and continued creating works with serial techniques throughout 1960s [3]. After his "self-imposed silence" period (during the years 1968-1976), Pärt emerged with a new musical style, which he called tintinnabuli. Although, this technique was influenced by music from the medieval period, the texture and function of its musical style cannot be described easily in terms of any single musical technique of the past [3]. Arvo Pärt, is a composer whose music indeed emerges from his 'whole inner being', and the catalogue of his works is very extensive [4].

Philip Glass (b. 1937), American composer, is noted for his minimalist style compositions, along with other famous figures such as La Monte Young (b. 1935), Terry Riley (b. 1935) and Steve Reich (b. 1936). These composers have been prolific in the minimalist genre and have been essential in the musical criticism that occurred against the atonal and serialism music. The new musical style that Glass was evolving was eventually dubbed "minimalism." As he explained in his biography, Glass never liked the term and preferred to speak of himself as a composer of "music with repetitive structures." [4]. Much of his early work was based on the "extended reiteration of brief, elegant melodic fragments that wove in and out of an aural tapestry." Glass' music has "immersed a listener in a sort of sonic weather that twists, turns, surrounds, develops" [5].

Pärt and Glass are both classically trained in harmony and influenced by Baroque composer, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) through their study in the traditional music school. They both demonstrate using traditional compositional skills in their works such as diatonic scale and harmony. Besides existing published numbers of traditional musical compositions like other composers, Pärt and Glass also have similar significant contributions in writing film music, minimalist music and collaborated performance with music festival and Television programs.

This nature of minimalist music reads reasonably simple and yet the fact is the opposite. This is the mystic of learning and playing minimalist music. Before the

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performance, this type of music requires a good understanding of musical concepts and patience to practice the music. This research will explore specific compositional skills applied by composers and musical and technical demands in two selected compositions.

III. MINIMALIST MUSIC AND TINTINNABUL TECHNIQUES

Minimalism is a twentieth-century Western Art music style which explores the limits of sound and sonority, often combining non-Western elements such as Indonesian gamelan or African polyrhythms with basic Western harmonic structures. Minimalist compositions are not simple, despite common notions towards the music genre. Although the name implies the sparse sound that a listener often hears in minimalist works, the minimalist technique is about building on a single chord or scale to explore its many harmonic variations [5]. Writing a full-length piece around one or two chords or based on scales is viable and sustainable, and this idea is illustrated in Philip Glass' *Strung Out*. The whole piece is built upon the C major scale, particularly, the tonic triad (C-E-G) varied by different rhythmic patterns [6]. In the 1970s, Pärt worked in a minimalist style and developed his self-invented compositional style Tintinnabuli. Tintinnabul means the ringing of bells. He once said:

“*This one note, or a moment of silence, comforts me. I work with very few elements – with one voice, with two voices. I build with primitive materials – with the triad, with one specific tonality. The three notes of a triad are like bells. And that is why I call it tintinnabulation.*” The result is music of undramatic, uneventful, monk-like simplicity.” [6].

Fundamentally, tintinnabuli is a two-voice compositional style. Tintinnabuli uses a melodic voice, which moves around a central pitch, and the tintinnabuli voice, which outlines the tonic triad. [7]. As shown in Fig. 1, the tintinnabuli works, whose structure is predetermined by number or by textual outline, are rhythmically simple and do not change tempo.

Fig. 1. Arvo Pärt. *Spiegel im Spiegel* für Violine und Klavier. Wien: Universal edition, 1978. All rights reserved. Used by permission [8].

IV. *STRUNG OUT* (1967) AND *SPIEGEL IM SPIEGEL* (1978)

Pärt once said “... I’m talking of an inner tone...” and “musicians can see it, they know the character, the dynamic and the tempo of the music.” [9]. This concept explains the expectation between the composer and the performer. Their music has shown the concept in the title, therefore, the composers expect performers to execute the beauty of the music and deliver the message to the audience. Simplistic and recurrent ideas are adapted and transformed by minimalist and tintinnabuli styles in these two pieces.

Spiegel im Spiegel was written in 1978 for violin and piano, just prior to Pärt’s departure from Estonia. Its title translates as “mirror in the mirror”, based on Pärt’s self-invented tintinnabuli style of composition. Existing versions include for violin and pinao, and for cello and piano. Three versions all dated from 1978. For the first thirty-two bars of *Spiegel im Spiegel*, the piano (the tintinnabuli voice) outlines in the key of F major (one flat) a triad in second inversion (C-F-A) with occasional variations. The violin part is centered on A, and it creates a melody around that center by a simple process of adding notes on the direction of ascending or descending musical development. The piano (tintinnabuli voice) changes to accommodate the violin, echoing its adding pitches.

Strung Out is written for amplified solo violin, composed in the summer of 1967. In the performance procedure indicated by Glass, the violinist begins playing on the short leg of the “L”, walks down to the corner and then on to the long leg, taking, in all, about twenty-one minutes. The title of *Strung Out* has three meanings: “1) the music was strung out along the wall; 2) it has to do with the idea of stringing a violin; 3) it played on the contemporaneous colloquialism of being strung out, which has been described as ‘being at the end of one’s tether, or being dragged to the very edge of something’.” [10] Lodal examined in the *Music: Minimalism: Philip Glass: Analysis*, the score for *Strung Out* is visually stimulating due to the symmetry of the notational progression. It is written in the key of C major and contains no accidentals. *Strung Out* demonstrates a visually musical form of writing minimalist music [11]. In another way, it is not so easy to play exactly same pitches throughout the whole piece. Is the music is as simple as we think? Is the music is very easy to execute?

“*The best Thing is to hear it all ways at once: that’s the most fun.*” [12].

Strung Out is based on seconds and thirds slurred grouped quaver notes pattern, with a very irregular fourth slurred grouped quaver notes pattern, and the central interval is the slurred quaver notes E and G that is repeated throughout the piece. (See Fig. 2) As Lodal addressed in *Music: Minimalism: Philip Glass: Analysis Strung Out*, the music was analyzed in a mathematic symmetry, although the music is not symmetrically written in a mirrored form. But it demonstrates a certain replication in pattern that reflects upon the symmetry of the overall form. One would expect that the sounds reflect the patterns, creating a similar effect for the listener as the score creates for the visual spectator. Given the simplicity of the piece, it is easy to play on the tuned instruments such as piano or any adventurous readers can discover the sound that matches the image [13]. Piano is

a tuned instrument, however, and it is not easy to play on string instruments. The performer should carefully control the pressure of the finger pressing the string and bow speed in order to maintain the intonation and sound of the music precisely. In the following section, the discussion will focus on the performance requirements and the challenge of both compositions.

Fig. 2. Philip glass. First page, *strung out* for amplified violin. New York: Duvnagen music publishers, 1967. All rights reserved. Used by permission [14].

V. PERFORMANCE REQUIREMENT AND CHALLENGE

Strung Out (1967) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) have shown minimalist elements and varied by amplification and tintinnabuli styles respectively. These two pieces require solo violinist or/and pianist to be classically trained with accurate good control of fingers and muscles as well as sensibility of musical interpretation. The notation of *Strung Out* and *Spiegel im Spiegel* look very simple and easy. In fact, it is not as easy to perform as it print. *mf* is the only dynamic marking indicated at the beginning of *Strung Out* and tempo indication is = 144 (mechanically). *Spiegel im Spiegel* has no dynamics indication but the tempo is precisely indicated = 80 ca on the score. Performers may not be able to play like a metronome throughout the whole piece but performers should try to make the music flow, specify the character of the music and interpret the music with enjoyable articulation. *Strung Out* does not indicate any rests throughout the whole piece. By contrast, *Spiegel im Spiegel* always have a dotted half-rest to complete the phrase before the music changes to the next phrase. The next indication is a type of silence to ease the tension of the music and the performer could use it as a short break to prepare for the next phrase execution.

The intonation and bow change are the most challenging parts in learning both compositions. The right-hand must control the bow speed steadily and bow pressure carefully. Legato and detaché bow techniques are major bowing requirement in both pieces. The violinist has to find the right place and time to change the bow without unexpected accent.

Strung Out also requires the violinist to play the music and walk at the same time. The amplification would make the unexpected sound obviously. The bow control must be more rigorous and precise whilst practicing or live performance.

The left-hand finger control must be identical. Numbers of repetition regularly show on both compositions. The violinist has to practice the intonation precisely and produce exactly same pitch as written, which requires high degree of concentration and attention of listening. Both compositions also contain interval variations. The violinist should have carefully attention to tuning of pure intervals and rehearse the music slowly to understand the cycle of the music that must be expressed. These works present serious challenges to the mind, the ear and physical control.

VI. CONCLUSION

Strung Out (1967) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) are unique pieces that require the performer's attention to all details. Performers should comprehend the music genre and achieve the performance requirement. Each one must explore the various ways to practice and execute the music even with amplification. Glass and Pärt only specify limit dynamics and tempo markings at the beginning of the music. Composers leave interpretative freedom to performers and require the audience to extend their imagination and sensitivity. *Strung Out* (1967) and *Spiegel im Spiegel* (1978) encourage performers and listeners to appreciate the simplicity of the music, enjoy the tranquil of the space and the reflection of the life. This is the most exciting part of executing experimental music and performing music in a new manner.

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