

Performing *The Deer's Cry*

Arvo Pärt's ecology of spiritual enchantment

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Abstract

In his choral work *The Deer's Cry* Estonian composer Arvo Pärt explores contemporary resonances of an ancient existential practice for the protection of the self and the promotion of social cohesion. Through a series of incantations based on a Loric attributed to the fifth century Irish saint St Patrick, the poetic text explores the human need for protection in the face of danger, and the place of both self- and sacrificial love in the ecology of everyday life. The formal and textural structure of the music hides a performative technique that spreads an enchantment over both performer and listener.

When standing in front of an audience performers give of themselves. In choosing to attend a performance, members of an audience commit to giving of their time and attention. At its best this creates a mutual environment of love: performers sharing their art, and an audience longing to be enchanted, enraptured, encircled, engaged, and entertained. But how do performers prepare themselves to take part in such events? Over the past few years I have become increasingly interested in this process of preparation, while I have been looking for a way in which performers can be inwardly moved by today's metacrisis.^[1] I want to know how to create inner contexts for the musical stories I choose to tell, ways of feeling that are grounded in the state of the world around me. Literary scholar C. S. Lewis spoke with customary clarity about this in September 1939, just after the Second World War had broken out:

The war creates no absolutely new situation: it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it. Human life has always been lived on the edge of a precipice [...] We are mistaken when we compare war with "normal life". Life has never been normal.^[2]

This suggests that living and performing can more profitably be rooted in a deeper acceptance of our common human predicament than in attempts to illuminate specific societal problems.

The question I address in this essay will therefore be: how can performers use the state of crisis all around them to sharpen their awareness of the human condition such that it will influence what they perform, how they perform and, in particular, how they prepare, as artists, to engage with their audiences. I begin by considering myself and my own practice.

The training I received as a classical musician has often left me feeling stuck in inherited performing traditions. I have not been used to establishing threads of connection between my music-making and what is going on around me. Somewhat paradoxically it was being kept at home and cut off from live audiences by the restrictions of the recent pandemic that forced me to come to terms with living on “the edge of [the] precipice”. It therefore seemed appropriate to begin challenging my musical practice by placing it in relationship with the natural world, and so I spent some of the extra time I had at my disposal in exploring local woods.

On 3 January 2021 I started a daily walk around Ekebysjö, a small lake in the middle of a woodland nature reserve ten minutes away from my home just north of Stockholm. Ekeby is an area of land that has been in use for over two thousand years, and is the site of several ancient graveyards from the Iron Age. Before that time, when sea levels were higher, the lake was connected to the sea. I wondered what the effects of the coming climate crisis would be on this local nature reserve. I also wondered whether as a non-native Swede I would ever sense that I belonged here; in other words, could I develop an empathy with the land and its creatures. I wanted to feel at home here in the same way that I had done as a child in the the shires of the English Midlands, whose woodland landscape was so evocatively described by Tolkien in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Maybe I could even learn how to integrate insights from my walks into my performances. At the very least, I hoped I would develop a daily walking practice that would deepen my connection with nature.

ECSTASY AT EKEBY

About the same time as I started my daily walking routine I was introduced to a short choral piece by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935): *The Deer's Cry*.^[3] It sets to music part of an ancient prayer of protection, known as St Patrick's Breastplate, attributed to the fifth-century saint of the same name. One day, so the story goes, St Patrick refused to obey an order given by a local Irish king, Loegaire, that all fires should be extinguished. As a result, the king sent his soldiers to ambush and capture St Patrick and his companions while they were walking through the forest. At the moment of the expected encounter, St Patrick let out a desperate, but silent, cry for help. Miraculously the soldiers saw nothing more than a herd of deer making their way peacefully through the woodland. And that was how St Patrick and his companions escaped unharmed. Later he penned the Breastplate, formulating his forest ordeal as a prayer of protection, or Lorica, which became known as *The Deer's Cry*.^[4]

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

Walking around Ekebysjö listening to Arvo Pärt's *The Deer's Cry*, 2023.

As I continued regularly walking in the woods around Ekebysjö it seemed natural for me to reflect on St Patrick's narrow escape. It was difficult to equate the peaceful woodland of Ekeby with the mortal danger he experienced. But contemporary reports from war-torn lands, as well as many works of fiction, remind us that forests are not always tranquil and safe havens. It is interesting that the Lorica, paired with Arvo Pärt's music, draws forth a powerful inner stillness in the hearts of those singing or hearing it, whatever their surrounding circumstances. I sensed that there was more going on in Pärt's *The Deer's Cry* than word-setting.

A year later, on 4 January 2022, I had an unusual experience. It was too icy to take the path around the lake, and so I walked instead towards an area of woodland that lies on the crest of a small hill. Straight ahead the ground

falls away steeply; I stopped and looked into the distance. Half blinded by the bright early morning sun, I turned towards the wood on my left. Suddenly I saw two small balls of light, bouncing up and down playfully in the sunbeams. I thought they were children playing with torches, having fun on their way to school. But slowly it dawned on me that they were two roe deer, their small white rumps creating the illusion of torches. Time stood still, and so did I. Camouflaged by shadows formed by the light-scattering rays of the sun, the deer moved gracefully and noiselessly through the trees, lingering only to cast a brief glance in my direction before departing as mysteriously as they had arrived. I had just enough presence of mind to take out my iPhone and document their exit:



Ekebyparken, Danderyd. 4 January 2022.

As the deer vanished I realised that this woodland performance was a perfect illustration of the protection St Patrick and his companions enjoyed. As a woodland walker, I unwittingly played the role of a soldier, and saw two deer experiencing nothing unusual, just continuing to live as normal. I was disarmed, removed from the present, and for one long, liminal, mystical moment, I entered the timelessness of ecstasy. Like St Patrick's ambushers I had been halted by a deer's silent cry. I can only imagine the effect on the original soldiers, as they returned to their senses, gradually realising that they had been tricked by some kind of illusion.

The experience of being mesmerised by the deer that morning gradually changed my attitude to the time I spent in the woods. Instead of me walking through them, the woods somehow began to walk through me. Instead of me concentrating on improving my powers of observation, the woods demanded nothing less than my entire attention. What had started as a morning walk, became an exercise in seeing, touching, being touched, and listening; an exercise that began to create the delicate empathy with everything around me that I had longed for. The woodland was alive, the lake was alive, and those like me who walked the paths were thus encouraged to do so with respect, whatever or whomsoever they might meet.

As I continued to study *The Deer's Cry* and its context, the text emerged as a deeply courageous response to an experience of immediate danger. Listening to Pärt's music, I became convinced that embedded in the setting of the words there is a kind of embodied practice for personal protection, to use by those in any kind of danger, whether physical or otherwise. And even if St Patrick did not write the prayer in the poetic form of its sources, it was he who was constrained to initiate its practice all those centuries ago, in woodland probably not all that

unlike Ekeby.

SPIRITUAL ENCHANTMENT

Some readers may be concerned by the avowedly Christocentric language of the text, and later in this essay I will offer an alternative interpretation. For now I ask you to leave your reservations on one side. Although a devout, proselytising Christian, St Patrick chose to refer to Christ non-exclusively. Christ is presented not as a tribal deity, but as a loving and sustaining life-force. In the words of theologian John V. Taylor, St Patrick “ [...] invoked in one prayer *all the presences* that met him with grace in the world of sense and of spirit.”^[5] Cast in the form of a spell, this poetic prayer, imagined by a medieval Irish mystic, connects with earlier animist traditions, in which nature itself was considered to be spiritually alive. Taylor continues: The prayer “sums up and contains the spiritual awareness of the primal vision, and lifts it into the fulness of Christ”:^[6]

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,

Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,

Christ on my right, Christ on my left,

Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,

Christ in me, Christ when I arise,

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

Christ in the eye that sees me,

Christ in the ear that hears me,

Christ with me.

Just as the details of St Patrick’s experience are dissolved in the general applicability of his text, the specifics of Pärt’s experience (whatever those may have been) are dissolved in the broad approachability of his composition. Both words and music spring from individual lived experiences, which are not revealed. But in this way both words and music acquire the potential to become more widely relevant. Individual readers, singers, or listeners choose how to appropriate them in their own lives.

On 28 September 2023, I was walking round Ekebysjö as usual when something else unexpected happened. At two points on the path around the lake there are small jetties that enable walkers to stand, as it were, on the edge of the water, and view the lake as a whole. As I paused at the first jetty for a few moments, a lone swan started slowly floating towards me from the far side of the lake. There was no-one else around, and I had a strong feeling that I should be patient, and watch. The swan swam in an almost straight line, eventually coming right up close to the jetty, where she lingered for a few moments in my company, before leaving. I understood

this too as a kind of woodland (or lakeland) performance. Like the deer, the swan had approached, lingered, and then departed. Once again, the effect on me was one of profound stillness:

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

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LAULASMAA

A month later I spent a few days researching *The Deer's Cry* at the Arvo Pärt Centre in Laulasmaa, a small village on the Estonian coast, about 40 km west of Tallinn. Laulasmaa, which means “the singing country”, is an apt location for a centre dedicated to a composer such as Pärt, whose music is so deeply indebted to the human voice. The Centre is situated in the middle of a blueberry forest, and normally accessed on foot:



Arvo Pärt Centre, Laulasmaa. 22 September 2021.

Hidden at the heart of the Centre is a small Orthodox chapel, with a door that is never locked. I asked myself whether music too has an open door, one that never forces anyone to enter... While I walked through the forest, I also reflected on the idea that the way to the music is through the trees, through nature. And I wondered whether a necessary prelude to making music that touches its listeners is to journey through the world, fully aware of its predicament, and dreaming of how things might be tomorrow. Might such a process of purposeful wayfaring, literal or metaphorical, be part of what equips artists and performers to meet their audiences, and audiences to return to the fray?

A similar idea is developed in more general terms by Andrey Tarkovsky in the concluding section of his 1985 book *Sculpting in Time*. Writing in the past tense, as he looked back on nearly two thousand years of art-making in the shadow of Christianity, he suggested that

Art embodied an ideal; it was an example of perfect balance between moral and material principles [...]
Art expressed man's need of harmony and his readiness to do battle with himself, within his own

personality, for the sake of achieving the equilibrium for which he longed...^[7]

The point he makes here is that the battles surrounding us are a reflection of the battles within us, and that art can put us in touch with the harmony that doesn't yet exist, but which we are searching for. In a film made in 2020, *Arvo Pärt 85 Diaries*, the composer re-reads words he had written many years earlier, which are complementary to Tarkovsky's:

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

Excerpt from *Arvo Pärt 85 Diaries*, 2020.

Bettering the world does not begin from the opposite end of the world,

but from within yourself.

Millimetre by millimetre.

What does a millimetre mean on music paper?

What kind of weapon is it when measured out correctly?

This needs to be not merely a school of composition, but of shaping the soul.

The eye is not pure that is why you see nothing.

The heart is not pure that is why you hear nothing.^[8]

As well as the Chapel, the Arvo Pärt Centre houses a concert hall and a rich archive that contains many of the composer's original notebooks. The material relating to *The Deer's Cry* shows how Pärt worked, as he structured the moment-by-moment progression of musical harmonies and silences. Like Tarkovsky's film-making, a form of "sculpting in time", Pärt's drafts illustrate how his initial ideas acquire depth through a process of refinement, a form of "shaping the soul".



Library at the Arvo Pärt Centre, Laulasmaa. 24 September 2021.

In Pärt's setting, the affirmation that Christ is *with* the one praying is sung twelve times at the beginning, and twice at the end; in the central section the affirmation that Christ is *in* the one praying is sung eight times. And as well as embodying the two dimensions of space (*wherever*) and time (*whenever*), Pärt's music underlines the three basic human postures (*however*) and the four kinds of human encounter (*whomever*) referred to in the text. A subtle counterpoint of word and music:

Christ with me (x 4),

Christ before me, Christ with me (x 4),

Christ behind me, Christ with me (x 4),

Christ beneath me, Christ in me (x 2), Christ on my right,

Christ above me, Christ in me (x 2), Christ on my left,

Christ when I lie down, Christ in me (x 2), Christ when I arise,

Christ when I sit down, Christ in me (x 2), Christ when I arise,

Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,

Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, who speaks of me,

Christ in every eye that sees me,

Christ in every ear that hears me,

Christ with me(x 2).

In the following short film I demonstrate how the music, spell-like, performs the text, creating a sphere of protection.^[9]

Videos can not be displayed in PDF documents. Follow the link to see the source.

[Link to source](#)

Arvo Pärt, *The Deer's Cry*. Sound recording by Voces8, 2019.

The difference between the two affirmations, “Christ *with* me” and “Christ *in* me”, is significant: “with” coming only in the first and last lines of the text as Pärt set it. At first, when Christ is only “with” me, the musical phrases are punctuated by periods of silence, suggesting that the sphere of protection is not yet fully in place. Once Christ is “in me”, however, the silences disappear, and the music becomes continuous. Pärt also uses the peculiar property of polyphonic music (in which more than one text can be sung at the same time) to further illustrate this process. The four kinds of human encounter (those who *think* of me, *speak* of me, *see* me and *hear* me) are imagined as meetings between wayfaring companions. Those who think of me and speak of me are outside the sphere (because the encounters happen at a distance), whereas those who see and hear me are within the sphere (because they happen at close quarters). In each and every encounter, the *other* is *similar* to and not *different* from me. This implies that I must behave in a way that both *accepts* and *is acceptable* to the other.

In Christian theology it is common to equate God with Love, and Christ as the incarnation of Love. So what if the word Christ is replaced by the word Love? It does no damage to the text as a whole, and removes the difficulty of its Christocentric expression, filling it with a content that can be appreciated by those of any faith or none. This is perhaps a key to understanding the underlying power of *The Deer's Cry*:

Love with me, Love before me, Love behind me,

Love in me, Love beneath me, Love above me,

Love on my right, Love on my left,

Love when I lie down, Love when I sit down,

Love in me, Love when I arise,

Love in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,

Love in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,

Love in the eye that sees me,

Love in the ear that hears me,

Love with me.

There is a further interesting linguistic ambiguity in the text: it can be read not only as a prayer, as in “[May] Love [be] with me...” but as a statement “Love [is] with me...” Perhaps, in the end, it is both/and, rather than either/or.

After I had returned from the Arvo Pärt Centre I discovered that the notion of a sphere of protection was not as speculative as I thought. I already knew that in the Eastern Orthodox Church, to which Pärt has belonged since 1972, there is a tradition of the protecting veil (or shroud) of the *Theotokos*, the mother of God. However it was only after my visit, when I was able to consult archival material unavailable while there, that I learnt of an unpublished interview with Pärt in which he specifically mentions his engagement with this aspect of the *Lorica* text:

It is like a little Credo, like an affirmation of faith. [...] This text comprehends everything, and its reduced structure inspired me to compose this kind of music. [...] The text is so deep and powerful that my music can only partially touch it.^[10]

Further, and even more significantly:

In this text, you feel protected from every side, as literally expressed in these words. [...] I cannot understand it, but I can feel it: how it eventually grows together into a great force.^[11]

A DAILY PRACTICE

Performing *The Deer's Cry* is a way of preparing myself as a musician to meet the day ahead, and it has increasingly become my daily practice. I have walked with St Patrick in Ekebysjö, in the woods surrounding the Arvo Pärt Centre, and in the ancient tree-gardens of Cambridge, as well as in my own home, in hotel rooms, and while on the streets, riding my bike, driving the car, travelling on buses and trains or in the air. Sometimes I have listened to Arvo Pärt's music while doing so, sometimes I have merely imagined it or inwardly recited the words. But always with the physical movements of spiritual enchantment in my somatic memory.



Ekebyparken, Danderyd. 23 January 2021.



Lohusalu Tee, Laulasmaa. 19 October 2023.



Emmanuel College, Cambridge. 6 November 2021.

The question at the heart of this essay is how we as performers can prepare ourselves inwardly to meet our audience. Living into Pärt's bold re-imagining of St Patrick's *Lorica* is one way to do this. The music links those who sing and those who listen with the spirit of the ancient, almost mythical deer's cry, while at the same time seriously challenging how we live when surrounded by escalating conflicts. *The Deer's Cry* is a set of musical harmonies that, when sung (or imagined) performatively, presents an aural vision of a world in which hegemonic hierarchies, the root of so many of today's crises, cannot exist. Performing *The Deer's Cry* offers both perpetrators and victims an opportunity to develop a sense of responsibility for taking action. As Tarkovsky put it: "I am convinced that any attempt to restore harmony in the world can only rest on the renewal of personal responsibility".^[12] This includes learning to embody the resilience to do so, as suggested on several occasions at the PARSE conference.

Music performed in the spirit of *The Deer's Cry* casts a spell around each performer and each member of an audience. It encourages them to *approach* each other with love, to *linger* together with love as they experience the music, and to *depart* with love, enriched, ennobled, and enabled to meet others with the same accepting love. To live like this would be to move towards creating a world where love disperses disaffection and connects all of us in a sounding ecology of spiritual enchantment.

Footnotes

1. Jonathan Rowson and Perspectiva. "Prefixing the world. Why the polycrisis is a permacrisis, which is actually a metacrisis, which is not really a crisis at all." See <https://perspecteeva.substack.com/p/prefixing-the-world> (accessed 28 March 2024). ↑
2. C. S. Lewis. "Learning in war-time." A sermon preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Oxford on 22 October, 1939. See <https://www.christendom.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Learning-In-Wartime-C.S.-Lewis-1939.pdf> (accessed 28 March 2024). The sermon was first published in *The Weight*

of Glory and Other Addresses, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1949; revised edition, London: Macmillan Publishers, 1980. [↑]

3. *The Deer's Cry*, written in 2006, was commissioned by the Louth Contemporary Music Society in the Republic of Ireland. The première took place in Drogheda in 2008. [↑]
4. The story can be read in full in Vol II of J. H. Bernard and R. Atkinson (eds.), *The Irish Liber Hymnorum*, edited from the MSS with translations, notes and glossary. London: Harrison and Sons, 1898, pp.208–212. See <https://ia800402.us.archive.org/18/items/IrishLiberHymnorumV2/IrishLiberHymnorumV2.pdf> (accessed 29 March 2024). [↑]
5. John V. Taylor. *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion*. London: SCM, 1963, p.205. My italics. [↑]
6. *Ibid.* [↑]
7. Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time. Reflections on the Cinema*, translated from the Russian by Kitty Hunter-Blair, London: The Bodley Head Ltd, 1986; revised edition, London: Faber and Faber, 1989, p.238. [↑]
8. <https://vimeo.com/490133956> at 10'32" (accessed 17 April 2024). Used with permission. [↑]
9. *The Deer's Cry* is sung by Voces8, and can be listened to online here: <https://open.spotify.com/track/5LSR4VRV3rzOxh8tpa02ao?si=980ee03641e24b50> (accessed 29 March 2024). The recording is used in this video by permission. [↑]
10. Interview with Arvo Pärt, 2 February, 2021: Arvo Pärt Centre, APK 4–1.53. I am grateful to Kristina Körver, researcher and archivist at the Centre, for bringing my attention to this unpublished interview, and for its English translation, and to the Arvo Pärt Centre for authorising me to reproduce excerpts from it in this essay. [↑]
11. *Ibid.* [↑]
12. Tarkovsky, loc. cit., p.235. [↑]