

DA PACEM DOMINE BY ARVO PÄRT. THE STYLISTIC AND INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS – CONDUCTOR’S GUIDE

DRAGOȘ-MIHAI COHAL¹ 

SUMMARY. The piece “Da pacem Domine” (Give us peace, O Lord), by Arvo Pärt was inspired by a Gregorian antiphon from the 9th century. Written in the original *tintinnabuli* style, the piece uses numerous compositional techniques belonging to the early Renaissance period called *Cantus firmus*, parallel *organum*, *faux bourdon*, *Landini cadence* or anticipations, but also and even a modern way of vocal scoring: the “pointillistic polyphony”. The work is divided into four sections, corresponding to the four verses of the prayer and the gravitational centre of the music is **D**. To impart expressive meaning to the musical performance, the interpreters, both the conductor or singers can consider the following elements: homogeneity in individual voices and ensemble performance, different singing modalities (legato/non-legato) alternating between moments of cadence and the rest of the piece, the technique of attack and sound placement, finding and maintaining an appropriate inner state reflecting the ideas of the text and the general character of the piece.

Keywords: *Da pacem Domine*, Arvo Pärt, style, interpretation, analyse, conductor, guide

General Information

The piece “Da pacem Domine” (Give us peace, O Lord), inspired by a Gregorian antiphon from the 9th century, was commissioned by Jordi Savall² and dedicated to the memory of the victims of the terrorist attacks in Spain in

¹ *PhD Lecturer of choral conducting and choral ensemble, Transylvania University, Faculty of Music, dragos.cohal@unitbv.ro.*

² Jordi Savall i Bernadet, born in 1942, is a musician of Spanish (Catalan) origin, a virtuoso performer of the viola da gamba, conductor, and composer.



2004. Composed just two days after the tragic events, the piece was performed for the first time in June of the same year, as part of the commemorative events at the Forum of Cultures in Barcelona. Arranged in its original version for choir and orchestra³, the composition remained over the years a symbol to remember the victims of the attacks but also an invocation for peace and the hope of a better world⁴. It is noteworthy that in 2007, a recording of the work (belonging to the Harmonia Mundi record label and performed by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir conducted by Paul Hillier⁵) won the Grammy Award for Best Choral Performance. The text of the piece is a Christian prayer (often interspersed as a refrain between verses of Psalm 122) which appears in the works of several composers⁶ from the medieval and Renaissance periods to the present day: *Da pacem, Domine, in diebus nostris* (Give us peace, O Lord, in our time)/*Quia non est alius* (*For there is no one else*)/ *Qui pugnet pro nobis* (*Who will fight for us,*)/ *Nisi tu Deus noster.* (*if not You, our God.*)

The piece is written for a four-part choir, in 4/4-time signature, and the tempo indication (M.M.=40) should generate a duration of approximately 5 minutes. The gravitational centre of the piece is **D**, and the harmonic organization alternates between **D** Dorian, **D** minor - harmonic version, and **D** natural minor. Kimberly Cargile⁷ observes that the piece “*Da pacem Domine*”⁸ is composed in a very style similar to the work⁹ “*Solfeggio*”¹⁰.

³ Hillier, Paul. Notes from the CD booklet “*Da pacem*”, Harmonia Mundi, HMU907401, 2006, p. 4.

⁴ The work was also performed in 2008, four years after the attacks, in a commemorative concert under the interpretation of two united ensembles: *La Capella Reial de Madrid* and *La Capella Reial de Catalunya*, conducted by Jordi Savall.

⁵ Paul Hillier (1949) is a renowned British conductor, singer, and musicologist, particularly known for his work in early music, contemporary classical music, and choral music.

⁶ *Da pacem domine*: Antoine Brumel (1483-1512), Arnold von Bruck (1500-1554), Orlando di Lasso (1532-1594), Jakob Paix (1556-1623), Melchior Franck (1579-1639), Alfredo Teixeira (1965-).

⁷ Cargile, Kimberly Anne. *An analytical Conductor's Guide to the SATB a Cappella Works of Arvo Pärt*, Phd diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 2008, p. 133.

⁸ Pärt, Arvo. *Da pacem Domine*, ©2004 by Universal Edition, Wien/UE 32941.

⁹ Written during the early stages of his compositional career (the serial-dodecaphonic period), the piece *Solfeggio* “actually consists of a series of major scales; it resembles an exercise, but the manner in which the scales are distributed among the voices transforms the composition into a pleasant and accessible piece” - Schenbeck, Lyn. “Discovering the Music of Estonian Composer Arvo Pärt” In *Choral Journal*, August 1993, p. 23.

¹⁰ Pärt, Arvo. *Solfeggio*, ©1997 by Universal Edition, Wien/UE 30455.

E.g. 1

largo

S
do _____ so _____ re _____

A
mi _____ do _____ so _____

T
fa _____ si _____ fa _____

B
re _____ la _____ mi _____

Arvo Pärt, *Solfeggio*, mm. 1-6

A Pacato ♩ = 40 ca
(*mf-mp*) non dim. *sim.*

Soprano
Da _____ pa - - - cem _____ Do - - - mi -

Alto
Da _____ pa - - - cem _____ Do - - - mi - - -

Tenore
Da _____ pa - - - cem _____ Do - - - mi -

Basso
Da _____ pa - - - cem _____ Do - - -

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 1-5

Each vocal part intones the syllables of the text in a predetermined order throughout the entire piece: first the altos, then the sopranos, the tenors, and finally the basses (E.g. 2, m. 1-5).

A **Pacato** ♩ = 40 ca
(*mf-mp*) non dim. *sim.*

Soprano
Da pa - - - cem Do - - - mi -

Alto
Da pa - - - cem Do - - - mi - - -

Tenore
Da pa - - - cem Do - - - mi -

Basso
Da pa - - - cem Do - - -

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 1-5

The melody of the soprano serves as the *Tintinnabuli Voice (T Voice)*¹¹, to which the tenor joins, but only for the first twelve measures of the piece. The alto and bass (to which the tenor is added from measure 13) all function as *Melodic Voices (M Voices)*, and perform a stepwise motion, “with one note on each syllable”¹². An exception to this pattern is made with one measure before each cadence, where the lower voices of the soprano intone a sequence of chords in the first inversion (identified by Paul Hillier as a technique belonging to the early Renaissance period called *faux bourdon* or *faburden*), which resolves into a *Landini cadence*¹³ (a composition technique named after the organist Francesco Landini, 1325-1397 – E.g. 3, m. 14)."

¹¹ “Tintinnabuli” is a compositional style created by Arvo Pärt which explores a minimalist approach characterized by the interplay between two voices: one voice moving in a stepwise motion, representing the tintinnabulation (bell-like sounds), and another (melodic) voice moving in arpeggios, outlining the triad harmony.

¹² Kimberly, op. cit. p. 133.

¹³ Hillier, Paul. Notes from the CD booklet “Da pacem”, Harmonia Mundi, HMU907401, 2006, p. 4.

E.g. 3

11

(us) nos - - - tris

(us) (us) nos - - - tris

(us) nos - - - tris

bus (us) nos - - - tris

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 11-14

Within the *fauxbourdon*, we also encounter *anticipation*¹⁴ - another technique belonging to the early Renaissance (E.g. 4, m. 26 - see the alto line, the second eighth note of the triple time being the anticipated note, which actually belongs to the successive chord).

E.g. 4

26

us qui pu - - - gnet pro

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 26-31

Reinier Maliepaard¹⁵ identifies in the piece *Da pacem Domine*, along with the *faux bourdon* technique, three other medieval procedures: the use of *Cantus firmus*, the *organum* technique, and the *hocket* technique.

¹⁴ Kimberly, op. cit. p. 134.

¹⁵ Maliepaard, Reinier, "Da pacem Domine of Arvo Part based on a few medieval ideas", 2000, p. 2. (http://www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/maliepaard_arvo_part_da_pacem_domine.pdf)

The *Cantus firmus*¹⁶ is present in the work in the alto voice, with slight variations, two measures before the cadence (E.g. 5, m. 1 - 14).

E.g. 5

Alto

(*mf-mp*) non dim. sim.

Da pa - - - cem Do - - - mi - - -

ne in di - - - e - - - bus

(us) (us) nos - - - tris

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 1-14 (the Alto line)

The parallel *organum* technique emerged in music with the first experiments in two-voice polyphonic compositions and has two defining features: parallel motion and equal note values. The intervals initially used (9th century) were fourth, fifth, or octave, and by the 12th century, there were already superimpositions of thirds. Arvo Pärt employs this technique through a parallelism of tenths between the alto and bass, maintained throughout the piece, with only one exception (m. 37). Reinier Maliepaard terms the two voices in medieval language as *vox principalis* (alto) and *vox organalis* (bass).

The *hocket* technique, identified by Dan Voiculescu with the term “pointillistic polyphony”¹⁷, although it seems to be used for all four voices, is actually strictly applied only to the soprano and the tenor. Reinier Maliepaard states that “The interplay between soprano and tenor can be described as heterophony: different forms of the same melody sung simultaneously, in this case, by two voices”.¹⁸

¹⁶ “Cantus firmus” refers to a pre-existing melody that serves as the basis for a composition. This practice became prominent starting from the Notre-Dame School in the 13th century.

¹⁷ The punctualist polyphonic technique is “like a derivation and limit point of an ancient musical procedure - hoquetus - in which the melodic material was constantly interrupted by arranging the flow into multiple voices.” Voiculescu, Dan. *Polifonia secolului XX (The polyphony of the 20th century)* Editura Muzicală, București, 2005, p.119.

¹⁸ Maliepaard, Reinier, “*Da pacem Domine* of Arvo Part based on a few medieval ideas”, 2000, p. 3. (http://www.bestmusicteacher.com/download/maliepaard_arvo_part_da_pacem_domine.pdf)

In the realm of the *M Voice*, the steps **B natural** and **C** alternate between natural **B** and **B-flat**, respectively, and between natural **C** and **C#**. This mobility of the sixth and seventh steps of the **D** scale generates modal oscillation between the three gravitational poles: **D** melodic minor, **D** natural minor, and **D** Dorian. Despite the appearance of mobile steps, the melodic language used is eminently diatonic. Except for the two measures preceding each cadence, the note values and the order in which each voice enters remain the same throughout the work. For each syllable, the author notes in the score the indication to attack it with *mezzo forte*, a nuance maintained constantly for two beats, and then to move to *mezzo piano* without any decrease in intensity (also specified in the score: *non dim.*). In other words, the interpretation mode of these entries would be two beats of **mf** and then suddenly **mp**. The *simile* notation implies that this mode of attacking the sounds remains unchanged throughout the piece. These dynamic indications result in a sonorous plan in a stereophonic play of timbre alternations reminiscent of the sounds produced by bells.¹⁹

The work is divided into four sections, corresponding to the four verses of the prayer. This is obvious both in notation (each part ends with a double bar) and audibly, as the transition from one episode to another is made using the *faux bourdon* technique, which resolves into *Landini cadences* (with one exception within the second section where the cadence at measures 17-18 does not serve as a conclusion, but rather as a comma within the same episode emphasizing the text idea *non est* - there is NO ONE ELSE apart from God – E.g. 6).

E.g. 6

The image shows a musical score for four voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) from Arvo Pärt's 'Da pacem Domine', measures 16-20. The score is written in a complex, multi-measure rest system. Above the first staff, there is a '(2+2+2)' marking. The lyrics are 'a non est a - - - li - - -'. The score includes various rhythmic values, rests, and dynamic markings. The piece is in a unique rhythmic style characteristic of Pärt's 'tintinnabuli' technique.

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 16-20

¹⁹ Kimberly, op. cit., p.134.

The four sections are distributed as follows: the first section between measures 1-14, the second section between measures 15-27, the third section between measures 28-35, and the final section between measures 36-47. The climax of the piece is found in the second section, between measures 24-26, a passage in which the soprano attacks the high **F** three times consecutively, and at the second repetition is doubled by the tenor an octave lower (E.g. 7, m. 24-26).

E.g. 7

21

(u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) -

(u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - -

- - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - us -

(u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - - (u) - - -

26

us -

us -

us -

us -

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 21-27

Stylistic – Interpretative Aspects

The overall character of the piece, given by its *punctualistic* writing and very slow tempo (M.M.=40), is a tranquil one, with deeply meditative qualities. Hillier appreciates the work as “an eloquent example that presents Pärt in his most characteristic manner – a simple texture (four voices, throughout the entire piece), a simple and slow pattern with almost no rhythmic variation, and with a harmony that hardly moves at all, where each sound is carefully placed in its proper position, like stones in a Zen garden.”²⁰

Since in this work elements of language such as variations in intensity, tempo changes, or the conveyance of an expressive melody with a leading role are absent, the interpreter’s role in the coherent and expressive articulation of the music becomes very difficult. Additionally, there is an almost immobile harmony: apart from the five moments of cadence (m.m. 13-14, 17-18, 26-27, 34-35, 44-47) of fauxbourdon type, the rest of the work revolves with small oscillations around the gravitational pole of **D**.

To impart expressive meaning to the musical performance, we can still consider the following elements:

1. Homogeneity in individual voices and ensemble performance.
2. Different singing modalities (legato/non-legato) alternating between moments of cadence and the rest of the piece.
3. Technique of attack and sound placement. Adapting vocalization to the style of the work (sound projection into resonators and maintaining this placement, regardless of the register being sung, reminiscent of Renaissance vocalization).
4. Finding and maintaining an appropriate inner state reflecting the ideas of the text and the general character of the piece.

1. The term “**homogeneity**” is so commonly used in the art of choral music that it has been abstracted to the point where, in the interpreter’s consciousness, it sometimes becomes devoid of any meaning. In this regard, I find it necessary to describe this term in detail, as in *tintinnabuli* music, homogeneity is a fundamental condition for achieving an appropriate interpretative act. To homogenize oneself as a singer within one’s own part or within the ensemble means to bring three main elements to a common denominator: vocal colour, sound intensity, and last but not least, the inner state or emotions that animate the singing. In addition to these, however, there are

²⁰ Hillier, Paul. Notes from the CD booklet “Da pacem”, Harmonia Mundi, HMU907401, 2006, p. 3.

many other aspects that must be understood and standardized in the consciousness of vocal part members and ultimately the entire ensemble. These include: direction in leading musical phrases, the manner of sound attack, articulation and diction, closing final consonants, constant tempo pulsation or its coherence within variations of movement, highlighting important sounds or phrases in the context of harmonic-polyphonic structure. As each interpretative act brings with it specific challenges related to the musical text at hand, choral homogeneity largely depends on the conductor's ability to perceive the defining elements of the piece's interpretation and to communicate them verbally (during preparation) or through gestures (during performance), so that the singers react accordingly, thus finding that "common denominator" spoken of by Arvo Pärt himself²¹. However, in the process of homogeneity, there is an element of psycho-emotional nature that does not solely depend on the conductor's intellectual abilities or musical aptitudes. Although rarely discussed, I consider this aspect to be essential: for a part to reach a higher level of homogeneity, it is necessary for each component member to relinquish their own identity (vocal-tone) in favour of the group identity, paying more attention to listening to their singing partners and having the same interpretative intention (intensity, vocal colour, emotion, phrase direction) rather than focusing on their own tone. It involves a deep depersonalization of one's own vocal colour, with the ultimate goal (much higher in the context of choral music) of creating such a perfectly homogeneous vocal colour of the part that the audience no longer distinguishes any dispersed timbre (different in colour, intensity, or placement in resonators of the sound), yet having the opportunity to listen to a new, original, unique, and unrepeatable timbre (which I will now refer to as the part's aura), a perfect overlap of separate vibrations which, when united, give rise to an unprecedented instrument: the choral part.

If the universe has created "among instruments, the voice embodies perfection"²² – the human voice, then the choral part is perhaps an instrument with superior expressive qualities compared to the solo voice, precisely because of this social trait of human nature, with effects of exponentially increasing energy (and implicitly the intensity of artistic expression) when multiple individualities come together, vibrating in unison. Only then, when this aura of the part is born through the perfect resonance of its constituent elements (we can even say in a magical way, beyond what can be explained in words), do the composer's words come true: "one single note is enough, when beautifully sung."²³

²¹ Restagno, Enzo. *I seek a Common Denominator*, in *Musikblätter*, March-April, 2012, p.7.

²² Pärt, Arvo. Notes from the CD booklet *De profundis*. Harmonia Mundi HMU907182, 1996, p. 1.

²³ Pärt, Arvo. Notes from the CD booklet *Tabula Rasa*. ECM Records N.1275, 1984, p. 1.

In the work “Da pacem Domine” **homogeneity** becomes an extremely important factor, as the writing in the style of attack polyphony (alternating with the five moments of cadence mentioned above) creates real challenges in the coherent and fluent articulation of the musical text. The fact that the voices almost always enter in succession imperatively requires the performers to take on from each other the general characteristics of sound: intensity, vocal colour, and the manner of sound attack. If the indication at the beginning (*Pacato*, which can be translated as calm) refers to the tranquil character of the work, from the writing, we can initially perceive the simplicity and repetitive pattern of the music. This trait should be reflected in a singing style as pure as possible, in a non-vibrato character, and with a vocal colour as natural (open) as possible.

The homogeneity of the parts, meaning the synchronization relationships and the common denominator in the case of the entire vocal ensemble, can only be achieved after the homogeneity of each part has reached a stable level.

The common ideas to which all choir parts will adhere are:

- The manner of attack with a soft but direct shading on the sound, without using different pitches as leverage (usually lower pitches).
- A constant tempo, almost measured, without compulsively marking the beats, which can create agitation and discontinuity in the musical discourse.
- Natural opening of the vowels alongside simple, non-vibrato singing, regardless of the pitch register.
- Articulation synchronized with the conductor’s gestures (especially in the case of final consonants at measures 14, 27, and 35).

2. Regarding **phrasing**, we will pay special attention to the character of non-legato or legato, treating the cadential moments differently from the rest of the music. As Reinier Maliepaard asserts, these cadences serve not only a structural function (delimiting sections of the work in accordance with the text) but also that of “providing compositional variety, an ancient aesthetic principle of diversity in music.”²⁴ The different manner of interpreting cadences is highlighted by the author himself, through the placement of expression legatos above the phrases in question (E.g. 8, mm. 13-14).

²⁴ Maliepaard, *op. cit.* 2000, p. 5.

11

(us) nos tris

(us) (us) nos tris

(us) nos tris

bus (us) nos tris

*) - - - = quasi legato

Arvo Pärt, *Da pacem Domine*, mm. 11-14

Thus, the stereophonic interplay of punctualistic polyphony²⁵, achieved through the separate singing of each syllable (separated in the score by rests), is interrupted in the *quasi-legato*²⁶ moments when the voices move almost isorhythmically in parallel motion, with the exception of the soprano line, which retains the character of separate attacks, further imitating the sound of a bell (Example 7, mm. 26-27). Even though it is not specified in the score, the endings of the *Landini* cadences will always be performed in *diminuendo*, highlighting the voice that makes the specific delay (Example 7, mm. 26-27), so that the moment of resolution is in a lower intensity than the preceding one.²⁷

3. The technique of attacks and sound placement:

The text is a prayer for peace and inner tranquillity, which must be correlated with the attack of the sounds. This should be soft on a medium shade, preparing each emission from the diaphragm, pre-thinking (imagining) beforehand the pitch, shade, and high position of the sounds (in the natural

²⁵ The renowned term by Dan Voiculescu, *op. cit.* p.119.

²⁶ The author's indication in the score, footnote, p. 1 (*Da pacem Domine*. ©2004/2006 by Universal Edition, Wien/UE 32941).

²⁷ A way of interpreting cadential moments with delays (6-5, 4-3), which has also been referred to in later musical stylistics as a *lamento* phrase, where the peak of tension is on the long note preceding the resolution, so that at the moment of resolution, the sound is soft, with a feminine character.

resonators of the nasal and parietal cavities). The chest resonance, characteristic of dramatic music from modern periods such as Romanticism or Post-Romanticism, must be avoided. The required vocal quality here is one devoid of sensuality, of the evident imprint of gender (female or male) – rather seeking a neutral, angelic – androgynous state. The only technical way to achieve such sounds is to place the sound as high as possible – in other words, using the head voice (regardless of the range, avoiding the chest voice as much as possible). The conductor's instructions will be directed towards the lower parts (alto and bass). Especially these singers must mimic the timbral colour of the higher voices (soprano and tenor), even if at times they must sing notes in the extreme lower range (Example 8, mm. 13-14).

Repeated sounds pose a significant challenge in vocal interpretation because as they occur successively, the pitch tends to become increasingly imprecise, often descending in intonation. This situation is encountered at every turn in "Da pacem Domine", and therefore methods to counteract this tendency are sought. One suggestion from the conductor is that as choristers sing repeated notes of the same pitch, they should mentally *think* of the sound becoming progressively higher. From a technical and interpretative standpoint, the most appropriate solution would be for performers not to reset their respiratory-vocal apparatus at each attack but to maintain the same position (referring to the position of the ribs, shoulders, as well as the placement of the sound in the resonators behind the cheekbones and forehead), taking short breaths only as needed to sustain the duration of the next note, but giving the impression that the phrase was made in a single breath. This way, intonation, colour, and the position of the sound are more easily maintained at the same level, and ultimately, the intensity of the inner emotion behind the music is preserved. On a subtle level, this approach avoids disrupting the flow of the music, which even in this punctualistic style (using *hocket* technique) would be detrimental to the overall stylistic construction of the piece.

4. The **inner state and emotions** that animate the sonority are essential elements of the *tintinnabuli*²⁸ style. With an extremely simple choral writing and texture, with melodic lines almost incapable of remaining alive if taken out of the context in which they are formulated, with a generally slow or very slow tempo, without abrupt changes, with a harmonic and dynamic sound dominated by immobility - the role of keeping the audience's attention alive largely falls to the interpreter.

²⁸ There are other *a cappella* choral works that impress, for example, with such a spectacular melody that the music can unfold without having a clear interpretive intention or exceptional emotional charge, yet they manage to maintain the audience's attention within acceptable limits even in this case.

Being overwhelmingly music with a religious character, the atmosphere of the *tintinnabuli* style is primarily dominated by two inner states: the sacred and purity. It is easier for us to talk about purity because it is associated with ideas such as simplicity, careful sonority, naturalness, and transcendence.

The sacred in Arvo Pärt's music is closely linked to the internal transformation that occurred following the composer's conversion to Orthodoxy. In the interpretative style of *tintinnabuli*, the sacred is often associated with hesychastic prayer (they share the use of repetitive patterns) and can be associated with inner states such as humility (in the face of the greatness of God) and surrendering one's own will to the divine will (the inner attitude of "Lord, let your will be done"). The state of the sacred in the interpretation of the piece "Da pacem Domine" can be associated with the attitude of singing for divinity, with the intention of incorporating into our way of emitting sound those specific traits (virtues) that could resonate with the Creator: nobility, gentleness, self-control, faith, peace, humility. We thus appeal to that "divine spark" within each of us, or in other words, to the "grace of the Holy Spirit" breathed into us at birth according to the Christian tradition. We can suggest to the singers that the state of the sacred in *tintinnabuli* singing is that striving of humanity to be as faithful as possible to the image after which it was created.²⁹

Even though at first glance it may seem like Renaissance music in Gregorian style, we could argue that the *tintinnabuli* style manages to achieve a musical ecumenism, based on forms, structures, vocal textures, and religious texts specific to the Catholic world, overlaid with states and attitudes characterized by profound Orthodox traits, sometimes even explicitly reflected through the conveyance of melodies with a Byzantine character.

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²⁹ The Bible, Gen. 1 Verse 26: And God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness, to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, and over all the earth itself and every creature that crawls upon it." (underlined by the author).

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