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## **Biography**

The **Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir** (EPCC) is one of the best-known choirs in the world. The EPCC was founded by Tõnu Kaljuste in 1981, who was the artistic director and chief conductor for twenty years. In 2001–2007, the English musician Paul Hillier took over; between the years 2008–2013 the artistic director and chief conductor was Daniel Reuss. In the fall of 2014, Latvian Kaspars Putnins assumed the title of Artistic Director.

The repertoire of the choir extends from Gregorian chant and baroque to the music of the 21st century, with a special focus on the work of Estonian composers (Arvo Pärt, Veljo Tormis, Erkki-Sven Tüür, Galina Grigoryeva, Toivo Tulev, Tõnu Kõrvits, Helena Tulve). Each season the choir gives about 60–70 concerts in Estonia and abroad.

The EPCC has cooperated with a number of outstanding conductors and orchestras – Claudio Abbado, Helmuth Rilling, Eric Ericson, Ward Swingle, Neeme Järvi, Paavo Järvi, Nikolai Alekseyev, Olari Elts, Andrew Lawrence-King, Roland Böer, Frieder Bernius, Stephen Layton, Marc Minkowski, Christoph Poppen, Sir Colin Davis, Louis Langree, Paul McCreech; with Norwegian, Australian, Lithuanian, Prague and Stuttgart Chamber Orchestras, London Symphony Orchestra, Mahler Chamber Orchestra, Berlin Rundfunk Orchestra, Concerto Copenhagen, Concerto Palatino, Salzburg Camerata, Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble, London Symphony Orchestra, Basel Chamber Orchestra and with Estonian National Symphony Orchestra and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra.

The EPCC has been a welcome guest at numerous music festivals and outstanding venues all over the world, for instance at BBC Proms, Mozartwoche, Abu Gosh Music Festival, Hong Kong Arts Festival, Moscow Easter Festival, Musikfest Bremen, Salzburg Festspiele, Edinburgh International Festival, Festival Aix-en-Provence, International Cervantino Festival, Vale of Glamorgan, Bergen International Festival, Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, Sydney Opera House, Wiener Konzerthaus, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Lincoln Center in New York etc.

Another important aspect in the choir's life is recording music (for ECM, Virgin Classics, Carus, Harmonia Mundi, Ondine), resulting in award-winning CDs. EPCC recordings have won twice GRAMMY-Award for Best Choral Performance: in 2007 for the album *Arvo Pärt. Da Pacem* (conductor Paul Hillier, Harmonia Mundi) and in 2014 *Arvo Pärt. Adam's Lament* (conductor Tõnu Kaljuste, ECM). All in all, the choir has 14 Grammy nominations with the works by Arvo Pärt, Erkki-Sven Tüür and the music of Nordic countries. The EPCC recordings have won also the award Diapason d'or, Preis der Deutschen Schallplattenkritik, Danish Music Award etc.

# The New York Times

## An Affirmation of Faith at Carnegie Hall

### Diverse Disciples Flock to an Arvo Pärt Tribute

By CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM JUNE 3, 2014

Photo Tonu Kaljuste conducting two Estonian ensembles on Saturday evening at Carnegie Hall.  
Credit Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times



Orthodox priests in black robes and conical caps rubbed shoulders with pop stars and actors, including Björk, Antony Hegarty and Keanu Reeves, at Carnegie Hall on Saturday at a sold-out concert of music by Arvo Pärt. No other living composer has so fervent a following or such a diverse group of fans. When Mr. Pärt, bearded, frail and smiling shyly, took a bow at the end of the evening — this was his first visit to New York in 30 years — the roar that greeted him seemed unanimous.

What is it about Mr. Pärt's quiet, austere compositions that stirs such passions? It's a question at the heart of the Arvo Pärt Project at St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary in Yonkers, which painstakingly prepared a current series of concerts devoted to the composer and panel discussions on the Eastern Orthodox spiritual traditions that feed his music. The focus of Saturday's concert was the sacred choral works with which this Estonian composer, now 78, has affirmed that faith in recent years. But a meditative quality suffuses even his purely instrumental works.

The evening opened with two early examples of these from "Tabula Rasa," the 1984 ECM recording that brought Mr. Pärt international fame: the lightly pulsating "Fratres," in a version for violin, string orchestra and percussion, with Harry Traksmann ably performing the solo part, and the elegiac "Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten." The Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, conducted with authority and grace by Tonu Kaljuste, brought out the clarity of the harmonic progressions in these deceptively simple pieces, as well as the gradual buildup of sonic texture and emotional weight that makes them so riveting.

**The first-rate Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir** joined the orchestra for the remainder of the program. Their performance of "Adam's Lament" was emotionally devastating, traversing expressions of grief, bitter anger and hope. In "Salve Regina," a celesta joined the choir and string orchestra, adding a touch of radiance to what is otherwise a private, almost reticent affirmation of faith.

For the Te Deum, the choir divided into three spatially separated groups, and a wind harp and a piano lent atmospheric touches to the orchestration. Mr. Pärt's setting of the liturgy is strikingly different from the brilliant Te Deums of previous centuries, in which the glorification of God is confidently expected to reflect back on the performer and patron. Here, reverence is expressed as a gentle, devotional ritual, its methodically layered harmonies resembling the act of applying tiny flakes of gold leaf to a Madonna.

A version of this review appears in print on June 4, 2014, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: An Affirmation of Faith at Carnegie Hall.

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## Into the Sanctum With a Master of Awe and Mysticism

### Arvo Pärt's 'Kanon Pokajanen,' at the Met

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER JUNE 3, 2014



**Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir Robust sound and plaintive whispers:** The choir performing Arvo Pärt's "Kanon Pokajanen" on Monday evening in the Temple of Dendur at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Credit Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times



Arvo Pärt at the concert at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Credit Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

Composers are inspired by myriad sources, including a particular event, emotion, person or landscape. The prime inspiration of the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, however, was suppressed for a long stretch of his career. Beginning in the 1960s, Mr. Pärt, a convert to the Eastern Orthodox faith, wrote works whose religious character irked the Soviet authorities at a time when the official credo was atheism.

Religion and composition have been intertwined throughout Mr. Pärt's career, a synthesis that is being explored by the series of Arvo Pärt Project concerts. The composer attended an alluring performance of his "Kanon Pokajanen" ("Canon of Repentance") on Monday evening at the Temple of Dendur in the Metropolitan Museum, streamed live by the Met and broadcast live on WQXR.

The Kanon was commissioned to commemorate the 750th anniversary of Cologne Cathedral and received its premiere there in 1998, performed by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir

under the direction of Tonu Kaljuste, who also led the choir here. Written almost exclusively in D minor and sung in Church Slavonic, the music is set to the text of an Orthodox hymn called the "Canon of Repentance to Our Lord Jesus Christ."

The work incorporates Mr. Pärt's signature technique of tintinnabuli, named for the Latin word for bells and developed from Renaissance polyphony and Gregorian and Russian chant.

**The singers sat in a circle, rendering the work with a power and purity of tone that fully revealed its mystical, serene qualities. Throughout, the choir vividly illuminated the various choral timbres of the piece, which range from the robust, full choral sound of the opening to plaintive interludes featuring the resonant low male voices or the whisper of the upper voices alone.** During one section the sopranos soared over a rumbling bass pedal point; in another, high dissonant harmonies proved striking.

The audience responded with a standing ovation as Mr. Pärt took his bows with the musicians. A version of this review appears in print on June 4, 2014, on page C5 of the New York edition with the headline: Into the Sanctum With a Master of Awe and Mysticism.

## The New York Times



Richard Termine for The New York Times

The Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir flanking the majestic organ at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola.

Music Review | Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir

### **Folkish Sounds of Estonia, With a Dash of Rachmaninoff**

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

Published: March 21, 2006

The program was devoted largely to music of Arvo Pärt, and on the strength of it, you might have wished for more. On the other hand, the mere four numbers from Rachmaninoff's glorious Vespers whetted the appetite for the whole work. You might even have wished for more music by Cyrillus Kreek on the basis of his "Five Religious Folk Songs."

It was that kind of concert, by Paul Hillier and the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir at the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola on Sunday afternoon. **The selections and the performances were so fine that they left you feeling like an ingrate, greedily hungry for more.**

Happily, more is available on CD's from Harmonia Mundi France, or will be. Several of the Pärt pieces performed on Sunday here and others are to be released in September. Mr. Hillier's recording of the complete Rachmaninoff Vespers appeared last year.

What is always striking about Mr. Pärt's music is its originality, and that was especially apparent here in "Dopo la Vittoria" ("After the Complete Victory," 1997), to a text from Archbishop Philaret's "History of Church Singers and Chants," of 1902, which tells of the creation of hymns by St. Ambrose and St. Augustine. Straight, mundane historical narrative is presented in a joyous, jogging storytelling mode, and the quotations from the hymns themselves soar to transcendent heights.

Mr. Pärt's originality was also apparent in two older organ works, deftly played by Christopher Bowers-Broadbent. "Annum per Annum" (1980), a charming set of variations, begins with a sustained swooning — ultimately, wheezing — decrescendo and ends with a briefer opposite: a triumphant swelling statement of D major.

Remarkably, Rachmaninoff's Vespers, scarcely known in the West a few decades ago, has become almost standard repertory. Dennis Keene and the Voices of Ascension gave a superbly polished account of substantial excerpts at the Church of the Ascension less than a month ago, and the next night Stefan Parkman and the Academy Chamber Choir of Uppsala, Sweden, presented a grippingly theatrical performance of the whole work, also at St. Ignatius.

Mr. Hillier's excerpts were just what you might expect from one of the finest choral conductors of the day with **so wondrously talented a group of singers (27 strong). Whatever voices were heard individually were of soloist caliber, and Iris Oja, a mezzo-soprano, was superb in her extended solo, rendered with earth-motherly warmth.**

The folkish vein of Kreek's Estonian songs carried into an encore by Mart Saar, another Estonian: "Why Are You Weeping, Oak Tree?"

**The Washington Post**

washingtonpost.com

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

Monday, March 20, 2006; C05

### Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir

Many spent Friday night celebrating real or imagined Irish heritage, but at the University of Maryland's Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, the world-renowned Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir turned its talents toward music from its home country. Under artistic director Paul Hillier and with organist Christopher Bowers-Broadbent, **the choir's performances inspired a**

**transporting awe, hard to find no matter where you're from.**

The choir did sing some non-Estonian music, specifically excerpts from Sergei Rachmaninoff's "All-Night Vigil." Those who know Rachmaninoff as Mr. Big Tune will be surprised by this rapt devotional work of Russian Orthodox harmonies and complex vocal techniques. **The choir realized every detail of the composer's conception, with perfect blending up and down the tonal spectrum and the kind of virtuosity that makes everything sound easy.**

These same virtues shone in the native Estonian works as well: Cyrillus Kreek's imaginative, loving arrangements of five Estonian religious folk songs, and five separate choral pieces by Arvo Part, whose spare harmonies and hypnotic textures have made him Estonia's most famous composer. (Besides providing accompaniment, organist Bowers-Broadbent also soloed in two intriguing Part works.)

**The choir's flawless intonation, pure, thrilling tone, and careful attention to text and structure brought out the surprising narrative energy and ebullience of Part's "Dopo la Vittoria," the riveting dissonances in "Nunc Dimittis" and the harmonic ebb and flow of "Da Pacem Domine." At the close of the program, as each word rang out clear and urgent in the breathtakingly intense prayer "Salve Regina," earthly concerns of any kind felt trivial indeed.**

-- Andrew Lindemann Malone

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## MUSIC REVIEW

### Bringing a master's works to choral life

BY MARION LIGNANA ROSENBERG  
SPECIAL TO NEWSDAY

March 22, 2006

The works of Estonian composer Arvo Pärt reach awesome heights and depths of meaning using the simplest musical means. Like visual artist Mark Rothko, who drew primal, spiritual energy from mere colored rectangles, Pärt uses the pared-down language of music -- scales and sometimes single tones -- to construct art of mesmerizing power.

Sunday's Great Performers concert by the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir featured five of the master's choral works from the past decade. Pärt's "Salve Regina" opens with a lilting melody that wafts gracefully downward, moving from heaven to earth like the Virgin's sweet mercy. High voices intone humanity's childlike pleas to Mary; the choir's words and sound take on a rapt hush when Jesus' name is invoked.

Here and throughout the program, conductor Paul Hillier drew from the choir **music-making of sublime and self-abnegating mastery. Faultless in matters of pitch, dynamics and tonal blend, the choristers never drew attention to their own virtuosity,** instead remaining alert to the sense of wonder in Pärt's works. Just as his music both exalts and melts away into its mystical texts, so did the choir sing with soulful, humble beauty.

The audience sat in meditative silence, holding its applause between Pärt's works. The soft, voluptuous final note in "Littlemore Tractus" - evoking the "peace at the last" for which believers hope - hovered, vibrant yet immaterial, in the majestic gold and ochre interior of the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola.

Bouncy, glowing bursts of sound, almost Rossinian in jollity, gladdened the narrative portions of

Pärt's "Dopo la vittoria," a cantata written for the 1,600th anniversary in 1997 of St. Ambrose's death. In the "Anthem of St. John the Baptist," receiving its New York premiere, the choir evoked a swell of light as Jesus approached the Baptist and a crushing radiance for the Holy Spirit's manifestation. The quiet harmonies that opened "Nunc dimittis" first splayed and then folded in on themselves. A quiet "Amen" brought the canticle to an end, commingling high tones with the basses' stinging buzz.

Christopher Bowers-Broadbent shone in two solo organ works by Pärt.

"Trivium" sets a single tone (the note D) in a prism, exploring its shifting colors and implications, in sonorities ranging from whispers to crashing, grinding swoops. "Annum per annum," a set of variations, is bracketed by an ear-splitting chord that gradually fades to the faint whirr of the organ mechanism, only to make the return journey from the hiss of breath to cosmic vastness at work's end.

In the "Five Religious Folk Songs" by Estonian composer Cyrillus Kreek, the choir created an uncanny sense of homely, familiar dialogue with the divine. Selections from Rachmaninoff's "All-Night Vigil" perhaps wanted a grittier sound, but the choir **nonetheless sang with riveting eloquence, summoning tones of searing, inhuman urgency for the angels' proclamation of Jesus' resurrection and glory.**

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## The New York Times

December 16, 2005

### Surprises and Delicacies in a Year of Exciting Classical CD's

By THE NEW YORK TIMES

The classical music critics of The New York Times select the year's most notable CD's.

**James R. Oestreich**

**Rachmaninoff: 'All-Night Vigil'**  
**Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, conducted by Paul Hillier (Harmonia Mundi France).**

Otherwise known as Rachmaninoff's Vespers, for its first section. Everything Paul Hillier touches turns to choral gold (as used to be the case with Robert Shaw, who also recorded this glorious work beautifully, late in his career). The Estonian choir, complete with the requisite Slavic-style deep basses, gives Mr. Hillier its all.

## The New York Times

### Songs of a Modern Allegiance and Reverence

**Bernard Holland**

New York Times (2003-11-11)

Many countries with small military budgets arm themselves with culture. Art tells outsiders what a people think and feel; it also provides a rallying ground and common cause for those within a nation's borders. Never underestimate its power. Maybe this is why musical visitors from Eastern Europe - in this case the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir at the Angel Orensanz Foundation on Nov. 5 - seem to arrive literally brandishing their homegrown creative impulse. Despite a rainy

night and the out-of-the-way location on Norfolk Street on the Lower East Side, this shabby chic ex-synagogue was nearly full, with an audience split evenly between the young and the curious, and older people hoping for brief contact with former homelands. If the music ran from the 17th century to the present, the Orthodox Church was never out of earshot. Recent pieces like Galina Grigorjeva's "On Leaving" (mournful, stately), Arvo Pärt's Two Slavonic Psalms (pushed along by uneven phrases) and Alfred Schnittke's Three Sacred Songs (with gently subversive inner harmony and changes of key) more or less ignored the 20th-century world of sound around them.

Dmitry Bortniansky, appearing three times on the program, was a contemporary of Mozart and survived into old age as Mozart did not, dying in 1825. He created a point where Baroque choral style, the operatic tendencies of the late 18th century and the darkly colored, drone-driven modal style of the Orthodox Church had little trouble meeting. He was a musician of astonishing sophistication and one of the few forgotten composers we might think about remembering.

The Estonians, singing a cappella, were house-proud for their own Mr. Part but also embraced neighboring music from Russia and Ukraine as well as that of two 18th-century Italian transplants, Baldassare Galuppi and Giuseppe Sarti. The chorus sang richly, faithfully in tune and with the expected conviction. Under the British conductor Paul Hillier they were precise without being fanatic about it. It is a nice sound.

Allegiance to one's national music is two-edged. The underpinning that it provides is both strength-giving and reassuring. The heavy magnetic field can also immobilize the imagination. But perhaps I am too American to trust 20th-century composers so abjectly obeisant to their past. A "Gloria" by Vasily Titov, very beautiful, was also sung.

### **Geoff Chapman Toronto Star (2003-11-08)**

Twenty-seven mesmerizing voices--and music of sustained beauty that's sustenance for the soul.

The vaunted Estonia Philharmonic chamber Choir entranced some hundreds of spectators last night at Metropolitan United Church, that staunch Methodist bastion on Queen, with glorious singing that will reverberate in the memories of listeners for a long time.

The choir, conducted by English artistic director Paul Hillier (who founded the Hilliard Ensemble), was performing the first of two concerts under the auspices of Soundstreams and CBC Radio 2.

The mostly youthful choristers, whose repertoire also extends to Gregorian chant and late Baroque, delivered eight works by mostly alive composers from the Baltic region with focused attention. They sang in English and Latin, as well as their home language, and this, their third visit to Toronto, may have been their best.

The shadow of Orthodox Church liturgy was apparent, but the Baltic region has deep wellsprings of creative art on which to draw, and this choir's concerts and recordings show that Arvo Part should not be the only regional composer familiar to western ears.

Hillier's pinpoint control was evident from Estonian Cyrillus Kreek's "Three Psalms of David", which made a fine opening. Precisely layered and featuring deliciously rich resonance in the crucial low registers. It was followed by (Estonia's) Part, the eloquent simplicity of his "Two Slavic Psalms tastefully emphasized, its purity never allowed become merely plain.

Perhaps the second ranking composer from Estonia is Veljo Tormis, but his "Kullerva's Message," drawn from mythic tales of long ago and sung in English was more novelty than enlightenment.

All this serious Baltic music allows little interpretive choice and this relatively frisky, martial piece done with just 16 singers in English was often strident. It was the weakest point of the evening.

Yet that's weak compared to the truly glowing elsewhere, such as the succeeding "Alleluiah" of Lithuania's Algirdas Martinaitis with polyphony so accomplished it left this scribe in awe.

Russia's Alfred Schnittke drew on Orthodox liturgy for his "Three Sacred Songs," the first known to the West as "Ave Maria": the last as the Lord's Prayer.

Here refined sensibility was in place, neatly balancing intensity and dignity; and offering palpable beauty with the bonus of scrupulous diction.

Russian-born Galina Grigorjeva is now an Estonian, her "On Leaving" featuring a brooding soulfulness that suited this examination of the moment of death with poetry and polyphony based on prayer texts.

It was deeply spiritual, an excellent high tenor soloist most affecting and the ultra-deep basses fathoming the bleakness of it all.

Denmark's Per Norgard has found a majestic flow as well as a devilishly complex set of time signatures for his "Winter Hymn" that was dispatched with a unique fervour, but it was matched in appeal by the choir's profound reading in Latin of Estonian composer Urmas Sisask's five-part "Gloria Patri." The frequent result were passages of serene loveliness.

Tomorrow night at the same venue at 7:30, the choir, joined by Canada's Elmer Iseler Singers, will perform a mixed program that includes new Canadian works and the North American premiere of Henryk Gorecki's epic "Salve Sidus Polinarum."