

A black and white portrait of Arvo Pärt, a man with a full beard and a receding hairline, looking down with a thoughtful expression. His hand is raised near his chin. The background is dark, and a bright yellow vertical bar is on the left side of the image.

CHANDOS

ARVO PÄRT

COMPLETE
SYMPHONIES

ICELAND SYMPHONY
ORCHESTRA

EVA OLLIKAINEN



Photograph by Chris Christodoulou / ArenaPAL

Arvo Pärt, left, with the conductor Esa-Pekka Salonen at the Royal Albert Hall after the British première, at the BBC Proms, of Pärt's Fourth Symphony with the Philharmonia Orchestra, 20 August 2010

Arvo Pärt (b. 1935)

Complete Symphonies

Symphony No. 1, Op. 9 'Polyphonic' (1963) **16:29**

for Orchestra

Heino Eller gewidmet / Dedicated to Heino Eller

- | | | | |
|---|----|--|------|
| 1 | I | Kanon. ♩ = 84 - Più lento ♩ = 60 -
Con gran tensione - ♩ = 120 -
Tempo I ♩ = 84 | 9:08 |
| 2 | II | Preludio e fuga. ♩ = 56 - Più mosso ♩ = 88 -
Tempo I - ♩ = 116 - 120 - ♩ = 120 -
Più mosso ♩ = 126 - Con forza | 7:20 |

	Symphony No. 2 (1966)	12:30
	for Orchestra	
3	I ♩ = 104 - 120	4:48
4	II ♩ = 112 -	2:36
5	III ♩ = 48 - 60 - Più lento e cantabile - Largo	5:05
	Symphony No. 3 (1971)	20:05
	for Orchestra	
6	I ♩ = 66 - Meno - ♩ = 116 (♩ = 58) - ♩ = 104 - Meno - ♩ = 54 -	6:15
7	II ♩ = 54 - 56 - Più mosso - ♩ = 60 - ♩ = 54 - ♩ = 60 - ♩ = 66 -	5:44
8	III ♩ = 60 - ♩ = 72 - Meno ♩ = 84 - ♩ = 60 - ♩ = 60 - Più mosso	8:07

Symphony No. 4 'Los Angeles' (2007 - 08) **27:42**

for String Orchestra, Harp, Timpani, and Percussion
Dedicated to Mikhail Khodorkovsky

- 9 I Con sublimità ♩ = c. 66 -
Marcando con maestà ♩ = c. 69 -
Pacato ♩ = c. 63 - **9:24**
- 10 II Affannoso ♩ = c. 69 - ♩ = c. 76 - Più lento - A tempo ♩ = c. 80 -
Un poco più affannato ♩ = c. 69 - ♩ = c. 88 -
♩ = c. 76 - ♩ = c. 100 - ♩ = c. 46 - Più lento - **10:44**
- 11 ♩ = c. 76 - Insistentemente ♩ = 63 - 66 -
Con intimo sentimento ♩ = c. 54, rubato -
A tempo (non rubato) - Più lento -
Coda. Deciso ♩ = c. 102 - Lento **7:34**
TT 76:48

Iceland Symphony Orchestra

Sigrún Eðvaldsdóttir leader

Eva Ollikainen

Pärt: Complete Symphonies

The four symphonies of Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) are too unlike to form a sequence or a set. Yet perhaps their very strangeness, one from another, is something they have in common, and something we might perceive as developing from stark severity in No. 1 to angelic radiance in No. 4.

At the same time, they are unlike anything else in the symphonic repertoire, excepting, in the case of the first two, a certain anticipation of Galina Ustvolskaya's trenchant later symphonies (Nos 2–5, composed between 1979 and 1990).

Symphony No. 1 'Polyphonic'

Pärt composed his First Symphony late in 1963 and dedicated it to Heino Eller, the doyen of Estonian composers, in whose composition class he had lately completed his time at the Tallinn Conservatory. The symphony is not, however, a graduation exercise, for a lot had happened since the summer. The newly qualified composer had visited the Warsaw Autumn festival, met Luigi Nono, and heard music by Krzysztof Penderecki and Mauricio Kagel. Nono's bold application of twelve-note serialism evidently appealed to him, for in his

symphony the series is all over the place, most often in smaller subsets. Yet it is also, in a way, nowhere, because the frequent recurrences of the same intervals (five minor seconds within the twelve-note row) lead to a great deal of self-similarity on the smaller scale, as when answering five-note groups start to spin by early in the first movement, our attention drawn to *them* and not to twelve-note successions. The series can also be crushed into a twelve-note cluster (or a cluster of three adjacent notes to produce the blaring fanfare that sets the work in motion); at other times, the twelve notes jitter from solo strings in free rhythm, in the way of Penderecki and other Polish composers, or stride in block chords that hint at Messiaen. Most often, though, the music is presenting canons, as promised, whether of short groups or longer lines, and we may feel the canonic principle to be an almost ubiquitous rule of the game, generating playfulness and exuberance, or else a monster of control, which would not be an irrelevant image in the Soviet Union of the time.

When it was new, the symphony was quite widely played, and it introduced his name to new-music circles across Europe a decade

before Pärt composed his first 'tintinnabuli' pieces. In terms of harmonic colour, of course, this symphony is in a different world, but not so in its quasi-geometrical structures and its corresponding expressive ambiguity. The canons in the first movement, often placed forward in the texture by small groupings of instruments, reach their apogee in the four-part double canon towards the end of that movement, voiced for once by the full orchestra, from double-basses to piccolo.

After the solid charge of minims, crotchets, and quavers in the first movement, the second starts with a solo violin and welcome rhythmic fluidity. This initiates the short prelude, out from which the fugue is traced at first by solo woodwinds.

Symphony No. 2

Pärt's Second Symphony, of 1966, again combines serialism with Polish-style texture music, now in three short movements. First comes unmeasured music for strings, a *pizzicato* cluster struck loudly once and reiterated many times quietly. This sort of music continues through much of the movement as a basis for other sounds (a squeaky toy at first, followed by creaking cellophane) and serial samples, as melody or texture. These proceed towards a line, shared between trombone and horn, that culminates

on an unashamed B major triad. A barrier has been breached, and the music goes wild.

The middle movement does the mix of texture music and serial elements a different way before it explodes into separated notes, emanating from sources right across the orchestra and then congealing, from the brass outwards, into sustained chords.

Following without a break, the finale tells the same story as the previous movements, of construction by way of segments followed by breakout. Now, though, the latter takes us all the way to Tchaikovsky: 'Sweet Dreams' from his *Children's Album*, Op. 39. Is this another gambit in a comedy of oddities? Once again the meaning is uncertain, but not for the composer, who sees the quotation as 'a ray of sunshine that brings in another world, other values, the pure soul of a child'.

Symphony No. 3

How to get there for real, though? After *Credo* (1968), which brought his earlier style to an endpoint, three years passed before Pärt was able to achieve his Third Symphony. Meanwhile, apart from maintaining himself as a composer by writing film scores, he was studying chant and mediaeval music, which became the immediate sources for the symphony. There are no direct quotations, he has said; rather, the melodic characteristics

and cadential formulae of chant and mediaeval polyphony are placed in the context of an alien medium: the symphony orchestra. They are also, of course, drained of their words. We may be reminded – at the start, for example – of Russian Orthodox chant as it appears in orchestral works by Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Borodin, but this symphony's complete saturation in mediaeval types is without precedent. Chant-like melodies may be doubled at one or more octaves but are generally not harmonised, though the cadences very often are. And though we have come a long way from the first two symphonies (into the past, we may wonder, or into the future?), Pärt still puts his music together in short sections for particular combinations. The occasional *tutti* is brought in for emphasis, as at the work's end.

The three movements are not only marked to follow one another *attacca* but also materially linked, the first ending with an anticipation of the second, the second with an acceleration on timpani that powerfully necessitates the third. Melodies are often combined and yet normally kept distinct, whether by speed or scoring. The music hits high points – for example, with the entry of the celesta in the second movement – but mostly it goes on in search. Pärt seems to be intimating this in his conclusion:

I had succeeded in building a bridge within myself between yesterday and today – a yesterday that was several centuries old – and this encouraged me to go on exploring.

Symphony No. 4 'Los Angeles'

The Third Symphony had not only no precedent but no parallel. It was followed again by silence (except, as before, for film scores) before Pärt found his way forward in February 1976 with *Für Alina*. Here at last, not in a Tchaikovsky quote and not in imitations of old sacred music, was 'the pure soul of a child'.

Another symphony took much longer to arrive: three more decades, until 2007–08. Once again, it came by way of sacred music, but now directly, for Pärt took as his models two great litanies of the Orthodox church: the Canon of Repentance as he had set it in 1997 (*Kanon pokajanen*) and the Canon to the Holy Guardian Angel, addressed to the guide and protector who is assigned to each believer at baptism and called to the composer's mind inevitably by the circumstances of the commission, from the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Pärt tells us that 'the character and the specific detail of the Church Slavonic poetry strongly influenced the musical design'. The words themselves may be silenced, but the singing goes on in the voices



Eva Ollikainen



Iceland Symphony Orchestra, at Harpa Concert Hall, Reykjavik

of the string orchestra. The music is saturated with chant: in its modality, in its phrasing, in its repetitions and alternations, in how groups answer one another, in how – more as in the western church than the eastern – percussion instruments are used to issue ritual signals. The orchestra seems to be straining to enunciate a liturgy, the strings stretched to sound as if from the throats of angels.

There are three movements, each made of distinct sequences, beginning with a long descent that slowly revolves around the poles of two chords differing by only a semitone: E major (E – G sharp – B) and an augmented triad on C (C – E – G sharp). A harp doubles entries or adds bell-like chimes, often in combination with *pizzicato* cellos and basses, and there is ringing, too, from crotales. Everything is tonal, determined by the scale of A minor, and everything is still. Even the drift down is only a settling in the same place – a falling in slow motion, or a folding of wings.

A few strokes from the timpani prepare the shift to a new music: an imprecation heard in three minor keys which, being on the points, or notes, of another augmented triad (A – C sharp – F), create a circle (another major third brings us to A again) that could continue indefinitely, engine of torture or prayer wheel. Then once again timpani strokes conduct

a path to another place, where the broken chant-like phrases sound like efforts to remember a forgotten prayer. Yet this is still the same realm, for we are back in A minor and can glimpse both the force of the middle section and the light of the first. 'Grant me a garment of light', sings the Canon to the Holy Guardian Angel.

What closed the first movement is the domain also of the second, this desolation of A minor and unfinished utterances, here under the marking *affannoso*, implying the breathlessness of exhaustion. A marimba leads *pizzicato* strings in a versicle that introduces and punctuates the great elegy, which moves from a rich weave into more straitened territory, where percussion comes forward. Then, about three quarters of the way through, a dramatic transition to G sharp minor brings in a new chant, directly recalling that from the first movement's ending. The light, however, is different now.

At the start of the finale comes another transition, in just a pair of chords, from G sharp minor to E minor, followed shortly by a similar glide, in parallel, from C sharp minor into the work's habitual A minor. From here everything is build-up: the persistent A drone, *non vibrato*, from second violins, the massive mounting gestures, even the violin solo and the further phrases of chant finishing in

the lowest register. What then arrives, as the work's Coda, *Deciso*, is a sacred march. Double-basses in two parts begin, followed by the other sections in ascending order to create a ten-part texture. This marching music is correspondingly dismantled layer by layer from the bottom, and at the same time gradually abbreviated and dissolved, so rising ever higher and becoming ever thinner, as if moving off somewhere else.

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The national orchestra of Iceland and a cornerstone of the country's cultural landscape, the **Iceland Symphony Orchestra** (Sinfóníuhljómsveit Íslands) makes its home in the award-winning concert hall Harpa, in Reykjavík. It is widely praised for its performances and recordings and each year presents a full season of subscription concerts, school and family concerts, and concerts devoted to new music. Eva Ollikainen is its Chief Conductor and Artistic Director, a position previously held by such distinguished conductors as Osmo Vänskä, Petri Sakari, Jean-Pierre Jacquillat, Ilan Volkov, and Yan Pascal Tortelier. Artists in Association with the orchestra are the composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir and the composer and conductor Daniel Bjarnason. At the beginning

of the 2026/27 season, Barbara Hannigan will assume the role of Chief Conductor and Artistic Director. The Orchestra offers a variety of programmes, spanning everything from well-known classics to world première performances of new works by Icelandic and foreign composers. A commitment to performing new Icelandic music has been widely praised and recordings on a variety of international labels have received accolades such as MIDEM awards and Grammy Award nominations for Best Orchestral Performance. The majority of the Orchestra's concerts are broadcast live on radio by RÚV, the National Broadcasting Service, and selected concerts are televised on national TV. The Iceland Symphony Orchestra has appeared widely throughout Europe and beyond, giving performances at the BBC Proms, Wiener Musikverein, Carnegie Hall, New York, and Kennedy Center, Washington, DC, among others. www.en.sinfonia.is

With her elegant, expressive body language, natural stage presence, and infectious musicality, **Eva Ollikainen** is one of the leading conductors of our time. This former student of Leif Segerstam and Jorma Panula, at the Sibelius Academy, won the Jorma Panula Conducting Competition at the age of twenty-one, and since 2020, having previously served

as Chief Conductor of the Nordic Chamber Orchestra, has been Chief Conductor and Artistic Director of the Iceland Symphony Orchestra. During the 2025/26 season she will make her début with the Münchner Philharmoniker, WDR Sinfonieorchester Köln, Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin, Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, Nederlands Philharmonisch, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and NHK Symphony Orchestra, at the NHK Music Festival, among others. She will also return to the BBC Symphony Orchestra, at the BBC Proms, and to the Helsinki Philharmonic Orchestra, Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Orchestre national de Belgique, and SWR Sinfonieorchester. In March, she will lead the Iceland Symphony Orchestra on a European tour. In recent seasons she has made appearances with the Orchestre national de France, Tonhalle-Orchester Zürich, Wiener Symphoniker, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, and BBC Philharmonic Orchestra.

In the operatic world, she has conducted at Staatsoper Berlin, Semperoper Dresden,

Den Kongelige Opera, Copenhagen, Kungliga Operan, Stockholm, Finnish National Opera, and GöteborgsOperan. She is well known as a champion of contemporary music, notably the work of the Icelandic composer Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, with whom she has a close artistic partnership. In 2023, she and the Iceland Symphony Orchestra released a recording of the composer's *ARCHORA* and *AIÓN* to critical acclaim; the album was named among the Best Classical Music Albums of 2023 by *The New York Times* and the 10 Best Classical Albums of the Year by *The Boston Globe*. She had given the world première of *ARCHORA* during her BBC Proms début in 2022 with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, deemed one of the Classical Highlights of 2022 by *The Guardian*. The support of young musicians being close to her heart, she teaches regularly at the Sibelius Academy and leads master-classes at the Fiskars Summer Festival, in Raseborg, Finland, Nordisk Dirigentforum, in Norway, and institutions such as the Peabody Institute, in Baltimore, and Kongelige Danske Musikkonservatorium, in Copenhagen. Eva Ollikainen founded the Iceland Symphony Orchestra's Conducting Academy in 2021.

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Eva Ollikainen, conducting the Iceland Symphony Orchestra

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ARVO PÄRT

(B. 1935)

COMPLETE SYMPHONIES

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Iceland Symphony Orchestra / Gamba

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