

TABULA RASA: Reinterpreting Sound, Space, and the Senses

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Abstract

"Tabula Rasa," the theme of the event, takes its name from an album by Estonian composer Arvo Pärt. It is conceived as a secondary creative reinterpretation—creating new artistic expressions inspired by existing music—inviting participants to move beyond conventional performance and engage in re-creation shaped by the musical work's style and their own interpretation. The event aims to dismantle traditional barriers in music performance and encourages participants to reimagine the piece as musicians, creators, and performers in the post-COVID era. Challenging the notion that music albums are solely to be appreciated by ear, "Tabula Rasa" introduces additional performance conditions that encourage secondary creative reinterpretation and draw inspiration from each participant. Beyond auditory experience, audiences are invited to engage through visual, tactile, and environmental elements. By expanding the scope of musical performance and redefining its boundaries, "Tabula Rasa" promotes artistic interaction and cultural exchange between participants and audiences. This guided, collaborative creative approach enhances the on-site experience, extends the music's influence into the physical space, and engages both performers and participants.

Keywords: Tabula Rasa; Secondary creative reinterpretation; Music engagement

Introduction

The interpretation and re-creation of musical works have long constituted a central concern in performance studies. Traditionally, performance has been understood as a form of secondary creation—the process through which performers interpret and bring to life a composer’s written score (Small, 1998). However, in the post-COVID era, conventional modes of musical performance have been challenged by the disruption of concert traditions, audience restrictions, and an increased awareness of social isolation and psychological well-being (Chmiel et al., 2022; Kiernan et al., 2021). These conditions have prompted artists and scholars alike to reconsider the relationship between performer, audience, and the sensory dimensions of musical experience.

Within this context, the project *Tabula Rasa* was conceived as an exploration of secondary creative reinterpretation through the reimagining of Arvo Pärt’s 1977 album *Tabula Rasa*. Although composed decades prior, Pärt’s minimalist idiom is characterized by its purity, silence, and introspective spirituality. This concept resonates profoundly with the post-pandemic desire for renewal, emotional clarity, and the reconstruction of communal and artistic bonds. By recontextualizing Pärt’s work within a contemporary framework, the project sought to bridge the temporal and conceptual distance between its historical origin and the lived realities of the post-COVID era.

Implemented between September and October 2024 at the College of Music, Seoul National University, under the guidance of Professor Sngkn Kim, *Tabula Rasa* invited musicians, students, and audiences to engage in participatory reinterpretation extending beyond the auditory domain. Through the integration of visual, tactile, and spatial elements, the project transformed performance into a multi-sensory and collaborative experience. This paper examines the initiative as a case study in the practice of secondary creative reinterpretation, arguing that *Tabula Rasa* exemplifies how an existing musical work can be reimagined as a vehicle for cultural exchange, collective reflection, and aesthetic renewal in the post-COVID era.

Literature Review

Music performance can be understood as an act of secondary creation, where written compositions are reinterpreted into lived sound and meaning (Cook, 2018). Rather than transmitting a fixed score, performance constitutes a transformative event that emerges through the interaction of performers, audiences, and space (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). This perspective foregrounds the creative agency of performers and highlights the inherently relational nature of performance as an event.

Arvo Pärt's *Tabula Rasa* (1977), one of his earliest tintinnabuli works, provides a fertile basis for such reinterpretation. Originally composed for two solo violins, prepared piano, and string orchestra, the work consists of two contrasting movements—"Ludus" (Game) and "Silentium" (Silence). The first movement unfolds as a dialogue between the two solo violins, marked by repetitive rhythmic cells and gradual harmonic transformation, while *Silentium* explores extreme stillness and sustained resonance, dissolving the boundaries between sound and silence. Premiered in 1977 by violinists Gidon Kremer and Tatiana Grindenko with Alfred Schnittke on prepared piano, the work exemplifies Pärt's minimalist idiom and his pursuit of spiritual clarity through reduction and restraint.

The composition later became the title piece of Pärt's breakthrough ECM album *Tabula Rasa* (1984), produced by Manfred Eicher. The album marked Pärt's international emergence and introduced his tintinnabuli style to a wider audience. It features four works—*Fratres*, *Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten*, *Tabula Rasa*, and *Fratres* (for violin and piano)—performed by the ECM New Series ensemble under the artistic direction of Eicher. The album's sonic design, characterised by transparency, resonance, and contemplative pacing, reflects ECM's aesthetic of "the most beautiful sound next to silence." Beyond its musical contents, *Tabula Rasa* functions as a conceptual statement of renewal and purification, presenting Pärt's postmodern spirituality as a response to the crises of meaning in late twentieth-century modernism (Hillier, 1997; Nichols, 2010).

Its structural austerity and emotional economy embody both simplicity and transcendence, inviting performers and audiences alike into a shared experience of silence and renewal (Hillier, 1997; Shenton, 2012). The openness of Pärt's musical language resonates strongly with theories that conceive of performance as socially constructed. Within this framework, Small's (1998) concept of musicking underscores how performance extends beyond the sonic to encompass social relationships, emphasising the ritual and relational aspects of making music together. Turino (2008) builds on this by distinguishing between presentational and participatory performance, noting that participatory contexts dissolve traditional hierarchies between performer and listener, thereby producing social cohesion and a sense of belonging. When applied to reinterpretations of canonical works such as *Tabula Rasa*, these ideas suggest that the value of performance lies not only in fidelity to the score but also in the creation of new forms of shared meaning and collective experience.

In the context of the post-COVID era, these theoretical perspectives acquire renewed urgency. Traditional concert practices, reliant on fixed venues and passive audiences, were profoundly disrupted, forcing both institutions and

practitioners to experiment with alternative modes of engagement (Comunian & England, 2020). Scholars of cultural policy have observed how the pandemic underscored the precariousness of cultural labour but also catalysed innovation, with new emphasis placed on participatory, therapeutic, and multi-sensory practices (Banks, 2020). These shifts align with the broader recognition of culture's role in supporting resilience, well-being, and social cohesion during times of crisis.

The Tabula Rasa project at Seoul National University can therefore be read as a synthesis of these perspectives. It reinterprets Pärt's work not as a fixed artefact but as a living practice, extending performance into a collective, multi-sensory, and socially sustaining event. By engaging performers, audiences, and designers in acts of reinterpretation that involved sound, movement, space, and tactile elements, the project exemplifies how canonical works can be revitalised through participatory engagement. In doing so, it demonstrates the relevance of secondary creation, the ethos of *tintinnabuli*, and theories of musicking to the challenges and opportunities of the post-pandemic cultural landscape.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative case study approach (Yin, 2014). The data were derived from participant observation, in which the author joined as a performer in the "Fratres" section and documented the creative process; documentation analysis, through which programmes, photographs, video recordings, and exhibition pamphlets were reviewed; and autoethnographic reflection, in which the author reflected on personal experience as both performer and researcher. The analysis is informed by theories of secondary creation (Cook, 2018), participatory music (Small, 1998), and post-COVID cultural participation (Comunian & England, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

Synopsis

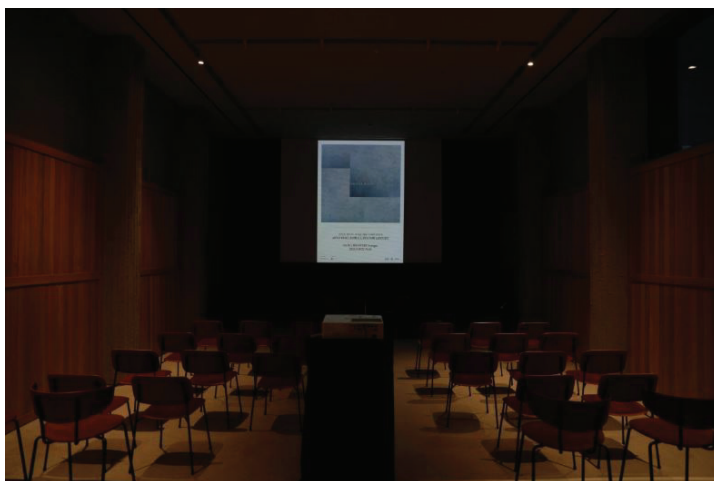
This series of activities focuses on the reinterpretation and creative expansion of Arvo Pärt's album *Tabula Rasa*. Developed collaboratively by participants from diverse disciplinary backgrounds—including students, professors, and designers—the project invites multiple cognitive and aesthetic approaches to a single musical source. Each creative group reinterprets the work through its distinct perspective, producing a multifaceted artistic dialogue. Details are summarized in Table 1.

Reinterpreting Records: From Silence to Sound

The first layer of reinterpretation centred on Pärt’s *Tabula Rasa* album. Performances such as *Fratres* and *Silentium* drew directly on the record’s tracks but extended their meanings through unconventional staging. As Henry Wood noted, “Music is written down lifeless notes that need to be given life through performance.” In this project, vitality was expressed not only through sound but also through candlelight, shattered mirrors, and silence enacted through embodied gestures.

Activities and Performances

To enhance the participants’ comprehension of the event’s central theme, Professor Kim organized a preliminary documentary screening. This activity was designed to provide a contextual understanding of the composer and his stylistic characteristics, thereby facilitating the systematic and coherent progression of the subsequent program.



*Figure 1: Documentary Screening of Arvo Pärt
Source: Professor Sngkn Kim*

The project unfolded across four key performances:

Fratres: Students employed electronic improvisation, percussion, and ritual gestures (e.g., bell ringing, mirror shattering) to symbolise liberation from cognitive boundaries.

The performance began with the students extinguishing all lights in the venue, relying solely on candlelight to evoke a contemplative and enigmatic atmosphere. A bell suspended at the center of the space—symbolizing tintinnabuli—served as the connective motif between the four sections. The performer rang the bell at the opening and closing of each section to delineate transitions and establish a ritual sense of continuity.

The second and third sections reinterpreted original works from Pärt’s *Tabula Rasa* album, while the first and fourth sections drew upon improvisational electronic performance. In the concluding section, following the interplay of electronic and percussive textures, the performer shattered a fragment of a mirror—an act signifying the release from self-imposed cognitive boundaries and the transcendence of conventional performance constraints.



*Figure 2: Final performance of Fratres, titled “Break the Shadow”
Source: Professor Sngkn Kim*

Silentium: Performers enacted silence through movement rather than sound, depicting architectural forms such as walls and windows.

The performance titled *Silentium* derives its name from the album *Tabula Rasa*. Embodying the notion of silence inherent in its title, the performance required all participants to remain completely silent throughout its duration. Instead of producing sound, the performers engaged in a form of physical description, using bodily gestures to interpret the spatial elements of the venue—such as the walls, windows, and mirrors—through actions they personally deemed appropriate. Each section was governed by specific performative constraints: in the first, participants were allowed free movement, whereas in the second, movement was intentionally minimized to accentuate stillness and introspection.



Figure 5: Photo of the Exhibition “Tabula Rasa”
Source: Professor Sngkn Kim

Cantus: A concluding gathering blended performance with social interaction, echoing Renaissance models of music salons.

Cantus served as the concluding performance and tea reception of the Tabula Rasa series, held in Gwacheon, southern Seoul. Conceived as both a reflective gathering and a closing ceremony, the event brought together music enthusiasts, scholars, and practitioners from related disciplines to experience a program primarily devoted to the works of Arvo Pärt. One of the *Silentium* performances was re-presented as the final act, functioning as a symbolic gesture to mark the completion of the project.



Figure 6: Photo of the Performance “Cantus”
Source: Professor Sngkn Kim

Table 1. Overview of Tabula Rasa Performances and Exhibitions

Event	Content	Innovation
Fratres	Student co-creation with bell and candles	Improvisation, mirror ritual
Silentium	Silent movement-based performance	Soundless embodiment
Exhibition	Immersive design installation	Multi-sensory interpretation
Cantus	Final concert and tea gathering	Social-musical integration

Participant Experience and Multi-Sensory Engagement

Participants in the Tabula Rasa series acted not merely as performers but as co-creators, translating Arvo Pärt's works into diverse artistic forms through movement, design, sound, and spatial interaction. Building upon the compositions from Pärt's Tabula Rasa album, the creators reinterpreted the music through a synthesis of musical styles, bodily movement, and visual installation within enclosed environments. These reinterpretations offered audiences immersive, multi-sensory experiences that blurred the distinction between performance and participation. Rather than receiving fixed meanings, audiences were encouraged to construct their own interpretations through interaction with space, sound, and gesture, effectively becoming part of the work itself.

This multilayered engagement exemplifies Fischer-Lichte's (2008) notion of performance as transformation, where aesthetic experience arises from the fluid interplay between performers, audiences, and environment. By collapsing the boundaries between creation and reception, the project fostered a collective, embodied form of musicking (Small, 1998), in which meaning was co-constructed through sensory, social, and emotional exchange. Within the post-COVID context, such reconfigurations of performance underscore the potential of music to generate new forms of connection, presence, and shared renewal beyond the auditory domain.

Cultural Exchange and Post-COVID Well-being

By redefining performance as collaborative reinterpretation, Tabula Rasa fostered intercultural dialogue and supported participants' well-being in the lingering post-pandemic context. The project resonates with Chmiel et al. (2022), who demonstrate how creative activities enhance mental health during periods of restriction.

Conclusion

The Tabula Rasa project illustrates how secondary creative reinterpretation can expand the boundaries of music performance beyond auditory perception, creating multi-sensory and participatory practices. By reimagining Arvo Pärt's compositions, the project fostered artistic interaction, cultural exchange, and collective well-being.

The findings contribute to performance studies by presenting a case where post-COVID practices dismantled traditional performance hierarchies and fostered new forms of musicking. Nonetheless, challenges remain: reaching conservative audiences, ensuring accessibility, and sustaining resources. In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled the music industry to undergo a forced 'revolution.' While it entailed profound suffering and substantial losses, it also brought about enduring transformations in the modes of music production, dissemination, and consumption. Moreover, it reaffirmed the fundamental role of music as a medium of emotional connection and social cohesion. The repercussions of these changes are likely to continue unfolding for many years to come. Future research should explore how reinterpretations of canonical works like Tabula Rasa influence audience reception, cultural policy, and music education.

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Biography

Guo Lixin is a Chinese musician who obtained a bachelor’s degree in Recording Arts and a master’s degree in Conducting in China. He is currently pursuing a doctoral degree at Seoul National University in South Korea. He serves as a guest conductor for the Folk Orchestra of the Xi’an University of Electronic Science and Technology Art Troupe and as a permanent conductor for the Chang’an University Folk Orchestra. He has participated in more than 20 large-scale performances, held seven concerts, and received numerous scholarships.

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