

Miller Theatre Program Notes

Opening Night: *Maa*
September 22, 24, and 25, 2010

The Composer

Born in Helsinki in 1952, Kaija Saariaho belongs to a remarkable generation of Finnish musicians that also includes Esa-Pekka Salonen and Magnus Lindberg—a generation but not a group, for though they were all students at the Sibelius Academy in the late seventies and early eighties, they soon went their own ways. For Saariaho, the path led to Freiburg, where she studied with Klaus Huber and Brian Ferneyhough, and then to Paris and IRCAM, the computer music facility that was only a few years old when she arrived, in 1982, and still under the direction of Pierre Boulez.

What she discovered there in terms of timbre analysis and sound transformation, backed up by what she learned from the pioneers of spectral music, notably Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey, had a great effect on her works of the next few years, beginning with the bold and wide-ranging *Verblendungen* for chamber orchestra and tape. She also met and married a leading composer-technician at IRCAM, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, and decided to settle in Paris.

In her music she developed fluid, often dreamlike textures of great subtlety, usually created by combined instrumental-electronic means. Also important was the support of performers, and she developed longstanding relationships with the cellist Anssi Karttunen and the flutist Camilla Hoitenga.

Her vocal works were few, but that changed with *Château de l'âme*, a setting of ancient Egyptian and Indian texts she wrote for Dawn Upshaw to sing at the 1996 Salzburg Festival. Here her exquisite feeling for color found an armature in winging melody of modal character, and an opera commission for the festival was inevitable. The result was *L'Amour de loin*, which had its première in 2000, again with Upshaw.

For her libretto, Saariaho went to the Lebanese novelist Amin Maalouf, with whom she then worked on three further projects: two more operas (*Adriana Mater* and *Emilie*), and an oratorio on the subject of Simone Weil. Her large output of recent years also includes works for the Cleveland Orchestra (*Orion*) and the Berlin Philharmonic (*Laterna Magica*), and a cello concerto (*Notes on Light*).

The Composer's Introduction to *Maa*

The title means "land," or "earth." Each of the movements of *Maa* has its own instrumentation; only the last uses the whole group, comprising flute, harp, percussion, violin, viola, cello, and harpsichord, with electronic transformation. The ballet rests on the idea of changes and transitions from one state to another: openings of doors and of grids, falls, coursings of water.... These themes offer interesting possibilities for musical metamorphoses and for voyages from one material to another.

Each movement is made up of seven parts, and each of these parts emphasizes a specific aspect of the musical material that has already been treated separately in the preceding movements. The electronic part is composed of natural sounds, recorded and transformed (the wind, the sea, sighs, etc.), and instrumental sounds, amplified and also transformed. Work on the electronics was done in collaboration with Jussi Liimatainen, and the recordings were realized at the experimental studio of YLE, the Finnish national broadcasting company. —*Kaija Saariaho*

The Score

One of Saariaho's earliest compositions, dating from her student days in Helsinki, was music for soprano and tape to be performed with dance. *Maa*, her only subsequent ballet, came more than a decade later, and was commissioned by the Finnish National Opera for choreography by Carolyn Carlson, who had begun her career with the Alwin Nikolais company before basing herself in Europe. The work had its premiere on October 31, 1991, and the music was released on CD soon after, but it has not been brought back to the theater again until now.

As Saariaho points out above, the score is concerned with transition, on several levels. The electronics help create a continuum between natural and instrumental sounds, or between different instruments, or between raw and processed sounds, whether natural or instrumental. They can also shift sounds in space, adjust them in pitch (opening up the world of quarter tones), add reverberation, and create conditions under which the basic musical types of melody, harmony, and timbre flow into one another, as when the tones of a melody are sustained so that they generate a chord, or when a chord is filtered out of a timbre. Over the larger scale, the music glides among the terrestrial elements of earth, air, and water, and finds routes of connection, too, between the human elements of body (especially present when we hear footsteps or breath) and mind or spirit. There is no stability; all is drift.

The seven sections are as follows:

1. "Journey." In a movement that features only recorded sounds, there are at least two simultaneous journeys: one graphically presented as the jogging footsteps move over different terrains and through different environments (terrains and environments that will be visited again later in the work), the other conveying us from the outer world to the inner, arriving at a bell-like reverberation whose central pitch is taken over by the flute at the start of the next movement.

2. "Gates." The three instruments introduced here— flute, cello, and harpsichord — begin as if on separate tracks, the flute repeating and refining a modal gesture that might recall music from Asia or South America, the cello working away at borderline sonorities, the harpsichord running on the spot. As the piece proceeds, though, the instruments come to share their ideas, opening gates to one another. There are also the gates that are opened between late 20th-century music and ancient modality, by how melodies are derived from the notes of a harmonic spectrum. What Saariaho hears in the electronic studio is what people millennia ago heard in the wind.

3. "Door." Memories from "Journey" introduce and accompany a virtuoso violin solo. The instrument also accumulates its own memories, in revolving on short motifs and in having its sounds electronically projected through time. Again there is a continuity between simple sounds (a rising shape of three notes, a single pizzicato) and noisier effects produced by increasing the bow pressure or playing near the bridge.

4. "Forest." The running rhythm of the work's opening is resumed on percussion, harp, and harpsichord, now with transitions of sonority. It peters out (though not for good), and violin and cello join the ensemble under clangorous domes of electronic sound. When the insistent reiterations come forward again, they have a different expressive meaning.

5. "Windows." A second solo for electronics creates an atmosphere of strangeness and menace, as echoes from the second movement are almost covered by amplified whisperings and long electronic tones.

6. "Fall." The harp now returns to its own past within the piece, in "Forest," from which it steadily rises in force. Playing for five minutes or so, this is the shortest movement, and it is followed by the longest.

7. "Phoenix." Rising from the ashes of its fiery death, the legendary bird is emblematic of re-creation, which is the theme here, as dense chords, using the full ensemble, seem to fuse everything that has happened so far into a sequence of simultaneities that smash through momentary recollections. When these chords abate, it is to let through a new music that has recognizably the same genes as the old. Toward the end, more chords — bell sounds — seem to be summoning us to another transition.

So reverberative in its sound world, *Maa* was to reverberate through Saariaho's ensuing output. She excerpted or arranged all but one of the instrumental movements as concert pieces, yielding *New Gates* for flute, viola, and harp, *...de la terre* for violin and electronics, *Fall* for harp, and *Aer* for septet and electronics. She also developed the technique of *mobile ostinato* — repeating a small motif over and over with gradual change — which allowed her to connect with the modalities of distant times and places, carrying the resulting texture of supple impalpability but underlying strength into the orchestral scores, operas, and many smaller works of her creatively abundant maturity.