

# Miller Theatre Program Notes

Composer Portraits: Kaija Saariaho  
Sunday, November 22, 2009 at 8:00PM

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 all studied at the Sibelius Academy in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they soon went their own ways. For Saariaho, the path led to Paris and to 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: a second opera (*Adriana Mater*), an oratorio on the subject of Simone Weil, and *Emilie*, a monodrama that Karita Mattila will perform for the first time in Amsterdam next March. 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*).

## **Terrestre (2002)** for solo flute with percussion, harp, violin, and cello

The flute has run a trail through Saariaho's music since her student days, an instrument she likes, she has said, because when it plays "breathing is ever present" and because of its timbral possibilities, going from "grinding textures colored with phonemes whispered by the flutist" to "pure and smooth sounds." In 2001 she wrote a concerto for flute with harp, percussion, and strings, *L'Aile du songe* (The Dream's Wing), stimulated by Saint-John Perse's poems about birds and their flight. That work is in two parts, "Aérienne" and "Terrestre," and the following year she made this chamber version of the latter for a portrait concert at Weill Hall.

Itself in two segments, the roughly ten-minute movement begins with a dance based on an Australian aboriginal tale about a dancing bird that taught the people of a village to imitate its moves. There is the option of a solo cadenza, soon after which the music comes to a standstill leading into the slow finale, where a scale figure trickles upward almost all through. Now the bird is "an infinitesimal satellite" of the human planet, and at the end it rises away.

## **Solar (1993)** for twelve players

This work takes us back to Saariaho as spectral composer. Textures are already being built up here from repeating patterns, as much as in her more recent music, but the emphasis is on agglomerations, and especially on the dazzling chord with which the piece bursts into existence, as the composer has explained in her own note:

"*Solar* is based on the idea of an ever present harmonic structure, which radiates an image around it and forces the harmony over and over again back to its original form, as if following the laws of gravity. The piece is named after this idea. This 'solar' harmony is then contrasted with a very different kind of harmonic principle, based more on polarities. The musical material is deliberately limited. The same ideas reappear, orchestrated in different manners, and above all in different tempi; this is another important aspect of *Solar*. Towards the end of the piece musical elements—registers, harmony, rhythm, tempo, orchestration—are presented in rapidly changing extremes."

The "sun" chord is defined not only by its notes (from the D-sharp above the treble staff down to a bass D by way of one or more pitches tuned to quarter-tones) but also by its constant internal movement, which enables it gradually to shift, absorb new elements or thin down, even just to one note (a middle-register F-sharp around 10 minutes in). It can transform itself, too, in color, thanks to the variegated

ensemble of three woodwinds, trumpet, three strings, harp, and two players each on percussion and keyboards, among which the composer suggests the winds and strings be lightly amplified in the interests of balance.

At first confronting the chord as a blaze, the music moves further away in various directions, but the quality of the chord remains apparent, even when the sun is no more than a distant star and the music, feeling its gravitational mass less, begins to unfold in melodies. The piece plays for about seventeen minutes.

### **Lichtbogen (1986)** for nine players and electronics

Similar to *Solar* in length, *Lichtbogen* (Lightbow) turns from day to night, and to the image of the Northern Lights. As the composer has recalled: "When looking at the movements of these immense, silent lights which run over the black sky, the first ideas concerning the form and language for the piece started to move in my mind." The sound is accordingly colder, the ensemble airier and lighter, comprising flute (doubling alto flute and piccolo) and string quintet with harp, piano and mostly pitched percussion. However, textures can be roughened by irregular techniques (making vowel sounds into the instrument for the flute in the last stage of the piece, playing close to the bridge or the fingerboard for the strings, or increasing the bow pressure), and the whole sound can be lifted into another kind of space by the electronic setup, for which Saariaho used programs developed at IRCAM.

Though the music is very different from *Solar* in character, it similarly moves as one continuously evolving substance, this time taking off from the F-sharp *Solar* reached just after its midpoint—though the note hardly sounds the same in this icy, rarified atmosphere.

### **Graal théâtre (1997)** for violin and chamber orchestra

Asked to write a violin concerto for Gidon Kremer, Saariaho has said she was, as a former violinist herself, nervous about entering a field with so many existing masterpieces. She found comfort and encouragement in a book by Jacques Roubaud, *Graal théâtre*, in which stories from medieval romances are retold in the modern author's own way; her concerto would similarly be a retelling of ancient tales, involving violin and orchestra.

There is indeed a narrative quality to the solo part, especially in the first movement, a sense in the generally relaxed, speaking pace that the violin is telling its story from out of its past, its physical nature (particularly as regards the tuning of its strings), and its performance technique. In its prevailingly lyrical character, with harmonic spectra immediately giving rise to melodies, as had happened eventually in *Solar*, the piece also resembles the Roubaud book in touching on medieval resonances, in this case of the old modes. Furthermore, Saariaho was happy to take over Roubaud's title, which appealed to her in combining the idea of creative search (the grail) with that of virtuoso performance (theatre). She composed the piece in 1994 with a full symphony orchestra in mind, and then made this version with reduced scoring three years later.

The half-hour piece has two movements, of which the first is almost twice as long as the second. Beginning alone, the violin finds reverberations within a widening orchestra, the percussion and harp entering first, followed by the piano and lower strings, the woodwinds and upper strings, and finally the brass. In passing from the state of chord to that of melodic line and back again, the music often revolves in ostinatos, while always flowing onward as ideas—chords, lines, or ostinatos—echo between soloist and orchestra, or between orchestral groups. As the composer has put it: "The violin is going through different landscapes, leaving footsteps behind, which sometimes the orchestra takes up."

"The second half," she goes on to say, "is conflict." However, the difference is not absolute. There are moments in the first movement where the interplay has more tension, and in the second where it is calmer. Conflict, after all, is exhausting. Soon after a short cadenza-like passage for the soloist alone, the orchestra repeats a gesture from late in the first movement—a long stepwise descent—and discord abates, until the violin is left by itself again, returning into silence and memory.

A lot of Saariaho's music has been recorded, including her first opera on DVD (Deutsche Grammophon). Of tonight's pieces, three make up the repertoire for a CD featuring the ensemble *Avanti!* (Ondine), with John Storgårds performing as soloist in *Graal théâtre*. There is no recording of *Terrestre* as a chamber piece, but the full concerto *L'Aile du songe* is available in a performance by Camilla Hoitenga (Montaigne), coupled with an earlier flute piece and with readings of Saint-John Perse having electronic environments by the composer. Her website is [www.saariaho.org](http://www.saariaho.org).