



Seductive Solitary. Julian Anderson Introduces the Work of Kaija Saariaho

Julian Anderson; Kaija Saariaho

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SEDUCTIVE SOLITARY

Julian Anderson surveys the work of Kaija Saariaho, a composer pursuing a ‘lonely but seductive search for music at once directly expressive and genuinely new’

Together with her compatriot and near-contemporary Magnus Lindberg (on whose music I wrote last month), Kaija Saariaho is the only Finnish composer since the death of Sibelius to have achieved widespread international acclaim. The comparison between her output and Lindberg’s is instructive from several points of view, not least because the stylistic gap dividing them is itself enough to destroy any preconceptions of ‘Nordic identity’ in music which still seems to be alive and kicking (if billings such as ‘Tender is the north’ are anything to go by). These differences are all the more intriguing given the similarity of their training: like Lindberg, Saariaho (who is six years his senior) studied at the Sibelius Academy with Paavo Heininen and has been living in Paris since 1982 where she, too, has enjoyed a long standing association with IRCAM. In between Helsinki and Paris, however, Saariaho chose to spend a couple of years in Freiburg studying with Brian Ferneyhough and his own teacher Klaus Huber. Although Saariaho has never come as close to the notational complexity of Ferneyhough’s music as did Lindberg in the early 80s, she did inherit her teachers’ adherence to a rigorous, almost puritanically modernist approach to music and one doubts that she would entertain even as tentative a resuscitation of common chords and consonances as is found in Lindberg’s recent music. She herself has commented that ‘I don’t believe in austerity, but I do in purity’.

With hindsight, one can discern this quest for ever-increasing stylistic unity and purity throughout her output. The works she composed before arriving in Paris, such as *...sah den Vögel...* (1981), for soprano and ensemble, and *Jing* (1979), for soprano and cello, already exhibit a distinctive sense of scoring and a preference for tendril-like flowing lyricism which have remained hallmarks of her sound-world. On the other hand, the harmony is rather less focused and somewhat vague – there’s a clear feeling of a composer not yet fully sure of her harmonic language. Her encounters with IRCAM and the Parisian musical scene in general seem to have provided the necessary catalysts for her self-discovery. At IRCAM, she quickly became acquainted not only with the large number of computer-assisted composition environments developed there, but with the substantial body of research into psychoacoustics being carried out by such people as Steve MacAdams, whose work on auditory streaming and perception had a big impact



KAIJA SAARIAHO Photo Chester Music

on Saariaho. And indeed her first Parisian work was a radical attempt to probe the limits of human perception. *Vers le blanc* (1982) consists of a fifteen-minute glide from one three-part chord to another, together with a process of timbral transformation involving voice-like sounds and rich, non-harmonic ones. By dint of its formal simplicity, *Vers le blanc* annuls the distinction between form and material – the form of the piece is simply the

evolution of its material. This is pure music, certainly, but unlike minimalist composers whose work this passingly resembles, Saariaho was not content with such an exclusive, limiting solution to her quest for unity.

Her next work, *Verblendungen* (1984) for orchestra and quadrophonic tape, has a similarly radical formal design, realised with far greater richness and freedom of detail. The work 'begins' at its climax (it sounds as though it might have been going on for some time before) and thence fades steadily to its conclusion, with tape and orchestra pursuing complementary paths: the tape opens with dense, noisy bands of sound and thins out to pure, consonant spectra, whilst the orchestra moves in the reverse direction, providing the harmonic material at the start and drifting over towards a dense noise-texture (toneless blowing through brass and woodwind, scraping on the strings). As in *Vers le blanc*, there is a congruence of form and material, but with an emphasis on connections between harmony and timbre. Consonant sounds both on tape and in the orchestra are associated with clear, bright harmonies. *Verblendungen* also has an expressive vehemence quite unlike any of Saariaho's previous music, a claustrophobic, somewhat doom-laden atmosphere reminiscent (probably coincidentally) of some later Sibelius works, such as *Tapiola* or the Prelude to *The tempest*, and this is reflected in Saariaho's notes on the ideas behind the piece, where she writes of 'dazzling brightness, textural surfaces, the interpenetration of complementary worlds, shadows, encroaching blindness, death'.

After such extremes of formal directness and simplicity, Saariaho attempted in her next works to develop a freer, more subtle and elusive musical language whilst continuing her exploration of the links between harmony and timbre. In the short tape study, *Jardin secret I* (1984), she devised a complex method of splitting the octave into different subdivisions (using the same formula for the calculation of the formant regions of the timbres employed), whilst rhythmically the work is based upon transformations between regularity and irregularity, a feature which was to become central to all her later music. The result in this piece is a freely-floating, at first apparently directionless, soundscape in which everything seems to be unstable: slowly, Saariaho introduces more percussive timbres and stronger rhythmic definition which make the formal outlines of the music progressively easier to discern. Nonetheless, Saariaho's subsequent music has tended to avoid clear, unambiguous structures and immediately apparent forms, in sharp contrast to the single-minded, obsessive processes of her earlier works.

Saariaho's desire to fuse the harmonic and timbral facets of her music was doubtless helped by her encounter with the so-called 'spectral music' of Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail, both of

whom were working at IRCAM throughout the 80s. She was particularly influenced by works such as Grisey's *Modulations* (1977) and Murail's *Désintégrations* (composed at IRCAM in 1983), in which large stretches of music are derived from the simulation of instrumental sound-spectra (whose components have been determined through computer analysis). This technique of 'instrumental synthesis' – treating each instrument in an ensemble as if it were a sine-tone in an additive synthesis computer programme – forms an important element in all Saariaho's subsequent music, although she has deployed it to very different stylistic and expressive ends to her French colleagues, whose influence would be hard to detect by the casual listener. The first work of Saariaho's to deploy these new techniques was *Lichtbogen* (1986), for small ensemble and live electronics. The generative sources for its harmonies were two sound-spectra from the cello: the first a complex, multiphonic sound obtained by playing a natural harmonic with gradually increased bowing-pressure; the second a glissando between two natural harmonics resulting in a complex, irregularly oscillating series of pitches. Each phase of these sounds was analysed on a computer program at IRCAM and the main frequencies transcribed to the nearest quarter-tone. Just as in *Verblendungen*, the harmonic progressions were derived from a single chord and its inversions (there it was an all-interval chord), so the aforementioned spectra are subjected in *Lichtbogen* to all manner of distortions and transformations. The evolution of the spectra through time also provided models for the large-scale forms of the work's different sections.

A further and very significant element is the writing for flute and strings: in both cases the complete range of timbres from the purest to the noisiest are deployed, in direct correspondence to the degree of consonance or dissonance of the music's harmony. In her music since *Lichtbogen*, Saariaho has employed the Griseyan notion of 'sound axis' to control the harmony and the timbre along parallel lines, with the sine-tone at one extreme and white noise at the other: any sound can be placed along this axis, or may move from one area to the other. The following illustration shows such an axis and the placing of a variety of sounds within it (see fig.1). In the case of *Lichtbogen*, Saariaho makes a special feature of the noisy timbres on the flute – breath-tones and, towards the end, a whispered French translation of a famous line from Henry Vaughan: 'J'ai vu l'éternité l'autre nuit...' ('I saw eternity the other night...') – an appropriate commentary on the dreamlike, almost mystical atmosphere of her work in general.

The work in which Saariaho has said 'I found all the pieces of my musical jigsaw' was *Io*, a work for ensemble, live electronics and computer-generated tape commissioned for the tenth anniversary celebrations of IRCAM in 1987. The ensemble is that of a standard

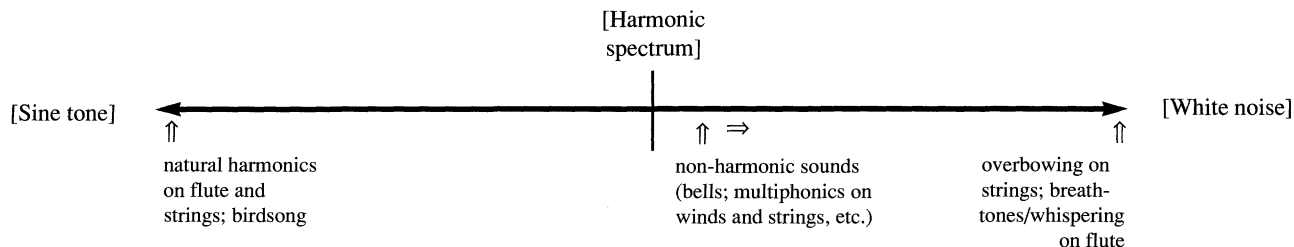


Fig.1

15-piece new music band, with the important addition of three flautists playing the entire range of their family from piccolo to bass. Here the generative sound material was a wide variety of spectra on bass flute and double bass analysed on a specially designed computer program at IRCAM devised by Gérard Assayag, which can transform a spectrum directly into musical notation and select from the mass of partials present in any sound the loudest and most perceptually important – an ideal tool for Saariaho's working methods. Breath-tones on the bass flute and multiphonics on the double bass (produced by varying finger and bowing pressure) were especially important: the latter can be seen in action in the following passage from early on in the work, just after the first of the work's two substantial passages for tape alone. The harmony is drawn from a double bass multiphonic, whose spectrum is first played on the tape and then on the ensemble – the fundamental is played by the double bass in the ensemble, the second partial by the cello, and so on up the ensemble, producing an instrumental double of the frequencies played on the tape (see ex.1). This spectrum is, however, only used as a springboard for the instrumental music, which quickly develops a life of its own. Sometimes there is a close dialogue between instruments and tape, the one imitating the other's material, whilst at other times Saariaho superimposes different, complementary sound-images on one another; in many instances, the tape sows the seeds of instrumental material heard several minutes later, generating a complex network of long-range cross-referencing throughout the work. At the very end of the work, for example, a huge, resonant chord played by the entire ensemble is 'frozen' on digital delay, re-creating a timbre corresponding to the spectrum which dominated the long second tape solo of several minutes before. As in *Lichtbogen*, one is immediately struck by the fluency with which instrumental sound, its live electronic manipulation (digital delay and reverberation) and computer-sounds on tape are blended into an indissoluble sound-world with a very personal poetic atmosphere. In this connection, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the long sec-

ond tape solo just referred to, in which a single timbre drifts obsessively around the hall in a variety of filterings, was conceived by Saariaho as a homage to the Russian film-director Andrei Tarkovski, who had died earlier the same year and whose static, non-realist films such as *Stalker* and *Nostalgia* Saariaho acknowledges as a decisive influence on her own work.

Having distilled all the elements of her style into a balance that satisfied her in *Io*, Saariaho has acquired a new-found fluency and self-assurance which has allowed her to compose as much music in the last five years as she had previously composed since the beginning of her career. This fluency has coincided with an increasing international eminence, with commissions from the Kronos Quartet for *Nymphaea* (1987–8) for quartet and live-electronics, and from the Los Angeles Philharmonic for her orchestral work *Du Cristal* (1990). There has also been a substantial venture into ballet in collaboration with the choreographer Carolyn Carlson for *Maa* (1991), her longest work to date; and a new work for IRCAM, *Amers*, to be premiered this month in London. There has been little overall change in technique or style: rather, these works continue to develop and refine the uniquely poetic sound-world which Saariaho has made her own. If anything, her recent music has developed slightly rougher edges than before: *Du Cristal* and its companion orchestral work *...à la fumée* (1990, with alto flute and cello solos) both contain explosive passages of greater violence than previous works, and in both the rhythmic elements of her musical language – again featuring interpolations between regularity and irregularity, synchronicity and asynchronicity – are more obviously to the fore; both, too, have a grander structural and expressive sweep, which is also the case with *Amers*. But these features merely emphasise the distance separating Saariaho's musical manners from those of much new music: interested neither in bland dilutions of Darmstadt serialism, nor in wistful yearnings for a non-existent past, Saariaho continues to pursue her lonely but highly seductive search for music unfettered by mundanities or expressionist outbursts, at once directly expressive and genuinely new.

Selected Worklist

Jing (1979)
...sah den Vögeln (1981)
Laconisme de l'aîle (1982)
...Verblendungen (1982–84)
Jardin secret II (1984)
Lichtbogen (1985–86)
Io (1986–87)
Nymphaea (1987)
Stilleben (1987–88)
Grammaire des rêves (1988)
Du Cristal (1989–90)
...a la fumée (1990)
Aer (1991)
...de la terre (1991)
Nuits, adieux (1991)
Maa (1991)
Fall (1991)
Gates (1991)
Amers (1992)

Discography

...a la fumée; Du Cristal; Nymphaea Ondine ODE 804–2
Io; Stilleben; Verblendungen; Lichtbogen Finlandia FACD 374
Jardin secret I; Laconisme de l'aîle; ...sah den Vögeln; Verblendungen Bis LP 307
Lichtbogen; Ummus UMM 102
Im Traume Jaselp 0010
Jardin secret I Wergo WER 2025-2
Jardin secret II Finlandia FACD 357
Lichtbogen Finlandia FACD 361
Maa Ondine ODE 791-2
Petals Neuma 450-73

Further Reading

Kaija Saariaho: 'Timbre et Harmonie', pp.412–453 in *Le timbre, métaphore pour la composition*, ed. J. B. Barrière (IRCAM/Collection Musique/Passé/Présent, 1991).

sempre dolce, espressivo (S.T.)

VL1 *poco f* 3 7 *mf* 6 *tr.* *S.P. gliss dolce* *tr.* *subito f* 9 12 9 9 *mf* 12 10 10

VL2 *mp (sempre)*

VA *mp (sempre)* *S.P. dolce* *S.P.*

VC *mp (sempre)* *N* *(mp)* *S.P.*

CB *mp (sempre)* *S.T.* *S.P.* *S.P.* *(mp)*

TAPE *3/30''* *DMP7:8 (PCM: v11)*

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