



Kaija Saariaho, Finnish composer, b. October 14, 1952, d. June 2, 2023.

PHOTO: MAARIT KYTOHARJU

# Finnish, French, or Cosmopolitan?

**KAIJA SAARIAHO BROKE MANY GLASS  
CEILINGS DURING HER LONG CAREER  
AS A COMPOSING WOMAN**

by **Liisamaija Hautsalo**

**A**ugust 24, 2023, Helsinki Music Centre, Finland. In the concert hall, the last sounds of the orchestra gradually fade away, and only the fragile, almost unheard echoes of music linger through several minutes of silence. Then – long standing ovations. At the same time, however, many of the audience members in the full house of 1600 seats are openly crying. The audience had just heard *HUSH* (2023), a concerto for trumpet and orchestra, the last work of the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho. She had passed away at the age of 70 only a couple of weeks before this performance. *HUSH*

was premiered at the Helsinki Festival by the trumpeter Verner Pohjola with the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Susanna Mälkki.

*HUSH* was completed in the home city of Saariaho's later life, Paris, during her last days, when the composer's terminal illness, brain cancer, had advanced so far that the loss of motor skills made the physical act of writing impossible. The composer dictated the final notes to her long-time friend, the cellist Anssi Karttunen, who helped her to finish the score. Saariaho was able to hear one of the

rehearsals of *HUSH* over the Internet but was not able to attend the premiere in Helsinki, her native city. With this concerto, Saariaho bid her farewell to the audience and her loved ones. In the programme note for *HUSH*, she writes that the concerto “is dedicated to the family I leave behind on my own journey into silence”.<sup>1</sup>

Although in this concerto Saariaho tragically composed herself musically into a final non-existence, her legacy lives on. As a contemporary composer, Saariaho’s extensive output of more than 130 works, written in an immediately recognizable and unique musical language, included pieces from tiny solo works to six full-length operas. Her music was constantly being commissioned by and is performed at the most prestigious venues of the international classical music scene as well as at the spaces for experimental contemporary arts.<sup>2</sup> However, her music has also been included in the repertoires of smaller classrooms, master classes, and competitions. This multi-faceted legacy sets her apart, not only as a great composer and open-minded teacher but also as a source of inspiration for younger generations of composers in general – and for younger generations of composing women in particular.

## On behalf of women

In addition to her musical output, Saariaho’s moral legacy is also far-reaching, and her example places an obligation on those of us left behind. She strongly defended classical music against the global entertainment industry, and especially championed the rights of children and young people to have access to the arts and arts education. However, more importantly, after decades of silence Saariaho had begun to speak out strongly in favor of women’s place in the world of music. She never declared herself a feminist, but when she received her honorary doctorate from McGill University in Canada in 2013, according to her own account she was forced to open her mouth on behalf of women in music. She stated:

As a Finnish, left-handed, woman composer, I represent several minorities, a subject that I would like to briefly discuss here. After having gone through many battles during my early professional years I felt that the equality of women in music was advancing. Therefore, I have not spoken about this publicly for many years. Recently, however, there have been polemics generated by statements coming from public persons and even the head of the highest music education institution in France, arguing that there are several natural reasons to explain why women are not suitable for conducting. This made me understand that today, 30 years after my own battles, young women still have to experience much the same everyday discrimination I went through. I have understood that the situation is not

slowly getting better, but that the improvements seem to have stopped a while ago.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Saariaho mentions here her left-handedness was a little joke, and by the epithet “Finnish” she just referred here to her origins as a person who came geographically from the faraway periphery, but there was indeed nothing to joke about in the third epithet, “woman”. In this essay I will briefly discuss the epithet “Finnish” but concentrate on the epithet “woman”, which Saariaho uses in her speech to refer to the word “composer”. This epithet is an essential, though complex, aspect when considering Saariaho, especially since it also led to broader, intersectional questions, namely on gender and identity. This essay will show how a shy and introverted woman from the northern part of Europe fought her way to being one of the most significant contemporary composers of our time.

**THE ESSAY IS BASED** on several interviews with the composer, and on reviews of her works that I have made while working as a music journalist and critic between 1997 and 2003. After my transition to an academic career in musicology, I continued working with Saariaho’s music but in the scientific context. In 2008, I wrote my doctoral thesis on her first opera, *Lamour de loin* (Love from Afar, 2000). Since then, I have continued to explore Saariaho’s music, and above anything else focused on her operas; for

instance, I have written the program book texts of her works for the Finnish National Opera.<sup>4</sup> That is why this essay, after introducing Saariaho’s early years and development towards a full career as an opera composer, concentrates on her operatic works.

Saariaho wanted to be considered as a composer without any prefix that referred to her gender. In this essay,

when it is necessary to indicate the gender, I will use the term *composing woman*. I had interviewed Saariaho in various contexts for nearly three decades, but she was not willing to discuss her femininity, her family, or her status as a woman composer. I respected her wishes and never wrote about these issues in relation to her. After the McGill speech, however, she said what she had to say. This is why I dare in this essay also to discuss Saariaho’s life and works as gendered. I give only very little space, for instance, to technical questions of composing as they have been studied thoroughly in musicology.

## The shy girl who lived in music

Saariaho, born in the year of the Helsinki Olympic Games, 1952, did not come from a musical background, and had no model for how to be a musician. Her father was an industrial entrepreneur and her mother stayed at home with their three children. The parents were interested in the visual arts, but not so much in music. Nevertheless, even though the young Saariaho was free to choose her hobbies – she loved to draw, as well as read and write poetry – she wanted to turn to music. In her youth, she

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played a variety of instruments – guitar, violin, piano, and even organ – took private lessons, and studied at a music institute. Her relationship to music was profound, comprehensive, and self-evident already at a young age. There is an illustrative example of an early experience of music in her childhood. As she was falling asleep, she would hear melodies which she thought were coming from her pillow. To be able to sleep, she asked her mother to “turn off the pillow”.<sup>5</sup>

**THE YOUNG SAARIAHO** loved music, but the very thought of becoming a performing musician terrified her; she was a very timid and private person. After having listened to Mozart’s music she became depressed, as her role model’s mastery of composing seemed so thorough that it felt crushing to her own ambitions. After graduating in 1972 from the Helsinki Rudolf Steiner School, she studied graphic design at the Institute of Industrial Arts and musicology at the University of Helsinki. However, it was not enough: she still wanted to become a musician – and a composer.

Yet to be a professional composer was something extraordinary in her context, as becoming a composer as a woman was not even imaginable at the time. In Finland, there were no role models for a full-time composing woman.

No position, no appreciation, no secure livelihood – this is what it seemed she could look forward to. It was thus no wonder that Saariaho’s father did not approve of his daughter’s choice. A period of three years of silence between father and daughter ensued. This was one of her first battles in her career as a composer. Saariaho has described earlier on several occasions the numerous discriminatory situations that she encountered at the beginning of her career. Patriarchy prevailed at her childhood home, her place of study, and in the other institutions of the music industry, such as the music media, concert system, research, and even in broadcasting. These were her fields of battle.

### The only female student in composition

Despite many uncertainties, Saariaho had the courage apply to the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki: first to the music education department and then to the church music program but was unable to gain admittance. On the third time she applied to the music theory department, the move paid off, and this also made it possible to finally begin composition studies. The next challenge was to become a student of the most important teacher at the time, Professor Paavo Heininen (1938–2022), a leading post-serial composer in Finland – whose class was already full. This required tenacity and patience: in their first, exploratory meeting, Saariaho refused to leave the room until Heininen agreed to accept her as his student.<sup>6</sup>

Looking at the situation from today’s perspective, there is one particularly shameful detail related to the young Saariaho’s choice of teacher. She first wanted another significant Finnish composer and teacher, Einojuhani Rautavaara (1928–2016), as her teacher, but he did not accept the young composing woman as his student because of her gender!



Rehearsals for Kaija Saariaho’s first publicly presented composition, *Bruden*, in 1978.



Kaija Saariaho with professor Paavo Heininen, her teacher at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki.

PHOTO: MAARIT KYTOHARJU

Saariaho was the only female student in composition at the Sibelius Academy in the 1970s. In general, the attitude of the environment was degrading. On the one hand, her first compositions were viewed condescendingly in the media and were not considered equal to those of her male colleagues. On the other hand, it was said that she achieved success based on her gender and good looks. In any case, this reflected the unfair and deeply misogynistic attitudes towards her and meant more battles and identity crises for the young composer.

**IN HER STUDENT YEARS**, however, a remarkable source of support was found in a group of young fellow composer students at the Sibelius Academy, among others Esa-Pekka Salonen and Magnus Lindberg, who trumpeted modernist ideas and openness towards European musical ideals. In 1977, they founded an

ideologically loose association called “Open your Ears!” that organized seminars, public lectures, and concerts. Her friendship with her two fellow composers became lifelong, and Salonen, after studying to be a conductor, collaborated with Saariaho in several performances and productions.

As a young woman among male fellow students, Saariaho’s path towards seeking a composer’s identity sometimes resulted in unusual features in her appearance: she dressed like a man and even learned to smoke cigars, since it was something that the big guys, such as the great Finnish composer archetype Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), did.

## Towards Paris

Finnish culture was relatively homogeneous in the 1970s, and the mainstream of contemporary music at that time was neotonal and easily assimilable opera. The “Open Your Ears!” group felt that this “folkish” operatic style stood out and deviated from what was considered trendy at the time. For Saariaho personally, however, it was not only this musical obsolescence but also the lack of role models that made her professionally lonely and created a feeling of being in a dead end.

Thus, she moved abroad, and continued her studies in Freiburg, Germany, with Brian Ferneyhough (b. in 1943) and Klaus Huber (1924–2017). However, the post-serial complexity of Ferneyhough’s music did not convince her, and neither did Huber’s style. During this time, she visited the summer courses in Darmstadt, the Mecca of modernism. Perhaps she was not too pleased with the musical offerings there in general. However, she met there the French spectralists, Gérard Grisey (1946–98) and Tristan Murail (b. 1947) whose musical thinking began to tempt her. She also found the American flutist Camilla Hoitenga, who became one of her most important confidants and collaborators in technical questions related to the possibilities of the flute as an instrument, and for whom she later wrote and dedicated several works. In her career, it was typical of Saariaho that she composed many of her works with specific musicians in mind, with whom she considered the possibilities and suitability of certain new techniques for different instruments or voices. Just to list some others: Anssi Karttunen and Esa-Pekka Salonen; sopranos Dawn Upshaw and Anu Komsi, clarinetist Kari Kriikku, conductor Clément Mao-Takacs.

In 1982 Saariaho arrived in Paris, where she found her artistic home at IRCAM (The Institute for Research and Coordination in Acoustics/Music). At IRCAM it was possible for Saariaho to, for instance, use computers, study sound with microscopic precision, and make electroacoustic experiments. IRCAM also offered her the possibility to familiarize herself with psychoacoustics, the phenomenological study of sound from the listener’s point of view. All in all, her work at IRCAM had a major influence on her music, and since the early 1980s the sounds produced by computers and electronics have been an important part of her musical landscape. However, as she has several times pointed

out, she understood the computer as an aid and extension for composing, not a purpose as such.

At IRCAM, Saariaho met her future husband, fellow composer, and researcher Jean-Baptiste Barrière (b. in 1958), with whom her artistic collaboration continued to the very end of her life. The couple has two children, a son, Aleksi Barrière (b. 1989), who is a writer, director, and dramaturg, and a daughter, Aliisa Neige Barrière (b. 1995), who is a conductor and violinist.

## Finnish, French, or cosmopolitan?

Saariaho enjoyed herself in Paris. As she has described, no-one knew her in the streets of the metropolis, and she was accepted in French professional circles more easily than in Finnish ones. In France, a woman working as a composer was not such a freak as in Finland. Yet even in France, composing women were not treated as equals to men, and they were more easily accepted as teachers than as composers of concert music. IRCAM was also a male dominated organization. However, she enjoyed herself more in Paris than elsewhere. Later, in the 2010s, she saw New York as a place of joy and freedom as Paris had been earlier.

Saariaho’s identity as a private person was that of a Finn. She spoke French very well, but with a strong Finnish accent. In addition, she had a Finnish passport, and never for instance applied for dual citizenship. In terms of the reception of her music, however, there was a paradox: in France, Saariaho’s music was interpreted as Finnish, and in Finland as French. This approach is indeed extra-musical, even clichéd, but in many ways understandable. In France, her Finnishness made her music exotic,

arctic, and northern. In Finland, in turn, her work was interpreted as French, and the French composers Debussy and Ravel were heard in her music. In her native country, she was seen as if not French, at least a cosmopolitan who had rejected her roots. In addition, one of the key male music critics of the time considered Saariaho’s shyness and

ethereality to be snobbism which was not at all the case. Had she been a man, would these accusations have been made?

## Nature and light

For Saariaho, nature was an important place of personal empowerment as well as a source of creativity. For her, Finland was a country of forests, but firstly it was a country of light. In an interview with French conductor Clément Mao-Takacs in 2013, Saariaho explains that her relationship to light was related to the cycle of the year, since the four Nordic seasons are very different from each other.<sup>7</sup>

As a natural phenomenon, for instance, the northern lights were a starting point for one of Saariaho’s early orchestral works *Lichtbogen* (Arches of Light, 1986). As Saariaho has explained in a programme note for the piece: “The name [Lichtbogen] stems from the Northern Lights that I saw in the Arctic sky when I was starting to work on this piece. When looking at the movements of these immense, silent lights that run all over the black sky,

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With Magnus Lindberg in Centre Pompidou, Paris.

PHOTO: JEAN-LOUIS FERNANDEZ



With 2E2M musicians for *Lichtbogen*'s premiere, Centre Pompidou, 1986.



Working on *Verblendungen* in her studio, Rue de la Verriere, Paris, 1983.



Kaija Saariaho in her studio, Rue Bernard de Clairvaux, Paris, 1987.



Working with her husband Jean-Baptiste Barrière.



KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA

Kaija Saariaho's first opera *L'amour de loin* had its premiere at the Salzburg festival in 2000. In 2016, *L'amour de loin* was performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. It was the second opera ever composed by a woman for this opera house. The first was Ethel Smyth's (1858–1944) *Der Wald* in 1903. Left, Eric Owens and Susanna Phillips. Right, Tamara Mumford and Eric Owens.

the first ideas concerning the form and language for the piece started to move in my mind.”<sup>8</sup>

**IN GENERAL**, Saariaho's experiences with nature in the Finnish context can be seen as an impetus for many of her works. Her titles include references to nature such as birds, snow, flowers, shadows, wind, light, butterflies, and clouds.

It was not only the natural phenomena of planet Earth that inspired her; she also extended the horizon towards the unknown cosmos, in such titles as *Io* (1987), *Solar* (1993), *Orion* (2002), and *Asteroid 4179: Toutatis* (2005). These titles seem to refer to the composer's need to explore infinity and transcendence. As the Finnish musicologist Susanna Välimäki has stated, works featuring a celestial body “can be interpreted as a metaphysical and existential reflection of the cosmos”.<sup>9</sup>

### Voice, subject, and melody

According to Saariaho, the human voice in general “is the richest form of expression, because the instrument is inside a human being, and there are many things that cannot be falsified when using your voice.”<sup>10</sup> Yet the female voice was the dearest to her, since it was her own voice as a woman. It is illustrative that her first publicly performed work, *Bruden* (Bride, 1977), based on the Finnish-Swedish writer Edith Södergran's (1892–1923) poem, is a song cycle for percussion and soprano. In addition to the female voice, *Bruden* also refers to another important aspect of Saariaho's music: her profound way of using literature both as a starting point for her works and as lyrics for her songs.

Until the mid-1990s, Saariaho was understood as a composer of chamber or orchestral music as well as electronic music. At the end of the 1990s, however, news began to trickle out that Saariaho was composing an opera. This came as a surprise to many, since

Saariaho had earlier been known as a composer with a modernist idiom, and as someone who was not very sympathetic to the opera-like symphony, also the opera was to her something hopelessly old-fashioned. Specifically, in an interview in 1984 she had stated that, “Opera, like the symphony, is an art form of the past”.<sup>11</sup> At the time, her complex musical style, often organized

and extended by a computer, did not point in the direction of opera either.

However, Saariaho was not as strict as most of her colleagues in the “Open your Ears!” group were, who rejected opera entirely. In the same 1984 interview, Saariaho speculated that “in my case, [the opera] would perhaps mean some kind of multimedia...”. She had already tried multimedia in her early, experimental stage work, *Study for life* (1980) for soprano, lights and electron-

ics. The next time Saariaho used multimedia was ten years later, when she had access to a modern opera stage. Her full-scale ballet *Maa* (Earth/countryside, 1991),<sup>12</sup> commissioned by the Finnish National Opera and choreographed by the American dancer Carolyn Carlson, was an abstract, non-narrative chain of scenes. The ballet was a prelude for her operas in terms of how the machinery of an opera house worked.

**IN ADDITION TO** familiarizing herself with working for the stage, there were two other, intertwined background factors in Saariaho's movement towards opera: creating a narrative subject and adopting melody into her music. These two elements can already be found in Saariaho's first solo concerto *Graal théâtre* (1994) for violin and orchestra, based on the myth of the Holy Grail. In the concerto the violin presents itself as a narrative character, a knight with a tragic quest, and to be a character in music a melody is necessary.<sup>13</sup> When adopting and developing a melodic dimension in the mid-1990s, Saariaho's musical style in vocal writing gradually changed. She started to write larger scale

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vocal works compared with her previous, mainly individual songs. The result was three vocal works: *Château de l'âme* (1995) for soprano, eight female voices, and the orchestra; *Lonh* (1996) for soprano and electronics; and *Oltra mar. "Seven Preludes for the New Millenium"* (1999) for the orchestra and mixed choir. These works served as exercises, or even provided material for Saariaho's first opera, *L'amour de loin*.

### **L'amour de loin – roots in the western operatic tradition**

The five-act *L'amour de loin* describes a Tristan-like quest for love between a man and woman, based on the libretto by French writer Amin Maalouf. The story is drawn from the 12<sup>th</sup> century troubadour poem, written by the prince Jaufré Rudel. The plot of the opera is simple: Jaufré Rudel hears about a beautiful lady across the sea and falls in love with her, even though he has never met her. During his crossing, he gets sick and dies in the harbor in the arms of the unknown lady. In *L'amour de loin*, there is no feminist trace, but it is about love as the drama of the possibilities of communication beyond differences which was an important theme for Saariaho even from her early works.

After its first performance at the Salzburg Music Festival in August 2000, *L'amour de loin*<sup>14</sup> went on tour and was performed on the stages of the commissioning institutions. It became surprisingly popular among critics as well as audiences, which is exceptional for contemporary opera. A statistic illustrates this: by 2022, *L'amour de loin* has been performed 124 times in 28 cities all over the world.<sup>15</sup>

**IN GENERAL**, if the fact that Saariaho was composing an opera was not expected, *L'amour de loin* contained even more surprises. Yes, the subject matter of the opera is traditional. Nevertheless, as I have analyzed in my previous research, not only the story but also the music is firmly attached to the conventions of western art music.<sup>16</sup> Namely, despite the seemingly modernist idiom of *L'amour de loin*, a listener with sharp hearing can perceive certain regularities. For instance, when the libretto deals with death, the music is directed downwards, and when talking about heaven and the after-life it is directed upwards. According to today's semantic theory of music, these gestures can be interpreted as musical topics that were already applied in the operas in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century – naturally translated into her own musical language.

In *L'amour de loin*, there also occurs an important detail: a tiny rhythmic motif called "the heart motif", imitating the beating heart. This motif, implemented with timpani and a tam-tam, follows the main lead, Jaufré Rudel, until his passing in his death scene. In the context of this opera, the heart motif refers unambiguously to death.<sup>17</sup>

### **Motherhood as an artistic resource – Adriana Mater**

If the heart motif refers to dying in the lyrical *L'amour de loin*, in *Adriana Mater* (Mother Adriana; 2005), Saariaho's second opera, the beating heart refers to the opposite, a new life. Saariaho had

started to develop the musical idea of beating heart already in 1989 when she was with child and writing the orchestral work *Du cristal* (1990). In *Adriana Mater*, the composer started to musicalize the situation where two hearts, the woman's and her unborn baby's, are beating together. The heart motif, which is a key motif of the whole opera, is heard for the first time in the third tableau when the young Adriana, the female lead, asks: "Who is this stranger who lives in my body?"<sup>18</sup>

Even though Saariaho still did not accept the title of "woman composer", she used her femininity and the memories of her body in *Adriana Mater*. As she has told us: "As a mother, I have access to many things that men could never experience. Before having children, I really was up in the air most of the time. The earthly aspect became more present with children. Has my music changed with motherhood? Of course."<sup>19</sup>

There are some happy moments in *Adriana Mater*, but as a whole, it is a dark and violent opera. Its context is a contemporary war, and the subject matter is a rape and its consequences. In the opera, Tsargo, a soldier who is supposed to protect the people of his village, rapes Adriana, who becomes pregnant.

Musically, the second tableau of the opera (Darkness), in which the rape takes place, is determined by the aggressive and loud soundscape. Yet the rape also gets its concrete musical expression. The rhythmically pounding, fortissimo-ringed, and ostensibly chaotic texture refer to the extreme violence of the moment. The choir's cry of distress culminates in a repeated ban of "Non!"<sup>20</sup>

However, *Adriana Mater* is also an opera of atonement and forgiveness. The consequence of the rape, a young man called Yonas, who wants revenge, eventually finds himself unable to kill his father, who has lost his sight in the war and returns home a broken man.

### **An operatic passion play**

At the same time as *Adriana Mater*, Saariaho composed *La Passion de Simone* (2006) which was also based on an Amin Maalouf libretto and directed by Peter Sellars. It was written for the Ju-



Kaija Saariaho with Esa-Pekka Salonen and Peter Sellars at Opéra Bastille for *Adriana Mater*.

PHOTO: E. MAHOUEAU

gendstil Theatre in Vienna in connection with the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of Mozart's birth in 2006. Even though there is the word "passion" in the title, Saariaho herself considered this work as an opera, thus her third opera.

*La Passion de Simone* is based on the French philosopher, mystic, and political activist Simone Weil's (1909–43) life and sufferings. Saariaho never described herself as being religious, but she felt deeply the destiny of this young contradictory ascetic who starved to death after a hunger strike out of sympathy for Jews suffering in concentration camps.

There are no acts or scenes in *Passion de Simone*, but fifteen stations which refer to the passion play. *La Passion de Simone* is written for a soprano narrator and an orchestra, and a choir has a central role in it. Saariaho herself saw this opera as her musical testament and perhaps the most important of her works for the stage. She dedicated this opera to her children.

### Emilie – a self-portrait?

In her fourth opera, *Emilie* (2008), Saariaho tested a form not so familiar in opera, namely, a *monodrama* for one soprano soloist.<sup>21</sup> *Emilie* focuses on a long-forgotten French female scientist, Émilie du Châtelet (1706–1749). As her societal position demanded, du Châtelet, the daughter of a Baron, married a high-ranking officer and a Marquis, with whom she had three children. After the children had grown up, the Marquise, against all norms and expectations, chose her own way of living and started to study privately: she learned mathematics, physics, astronomy, and languages. Her greatest achievement was a translation from Latin and critical commentary on Isaac Newton's groundbreaking *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), which was used in France up to 2015.

SAARIAHO HAS DESCRIBED *Emilie* musically as "fundamentally private music", in which "everything is happening in this woman's mind during one night when she's working."<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of the opera, the Marquise is writing a letter to her current lover, Jean François de Saint-Lambert (1716–1803), by whom she is pregnant. In general, writing has several functions in this opera. The Marquise's tool of writing is a quill, and the act of letter writing has been embedded into the libretto as a letter style passage as well as into the dramaturgy of the opera: she sits and writes on the stage. Yet, in terms of this opera, writing is not only a decorative detail or structural device, but an existential issue. The actual Marquise du Châtelet existed through her writing in a world where most people did not read or write. Moreover, she did research and wrote scientific texts in the world where science only belonged to men.

In *Emilie*, the writing has also been musicalized since the quill has been orchestrated into the score alongside the ordi-

nary instruments and amplified. The quill and the harpsichord which creates the refined atmosphere of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and which is amplified, are the audible symbols of this opera. In addition to the simple amplification, electronics has another task in this opera. Saariaho uses it to make the other persons, mentioned in the libretto, momentarily audible even though they are not present on stage. During a fleeting moment, they are "singing" together with the Marquise. During this night, the forty-two-year-old Marquise already misses her loved ones: she has a premonition that she will die in childbirth – as she did.

*Emilie* draws a picture of a creative and intelligent woman, someone who has been forced to fight to attain her goals. In this sense, *Emilie* can be interpreted as a self-portrait of the composer. With *Emilie*, Saariaho also makes a feminist statement, yet unspoken, and defends women's right to be themselves and to study.<sup>23</sup>

### Only the sound remains – moving beyond gender?

Echoes, noises, whispers, silences, translucent textures, shimmering percussion, and acousmatic sounds – sounds we hear without seeing their cause or source – are all elements typical of Saariaho's music, and are equally characteristic of Saariaho's fifth opera, a double bill: *Only the Sound Remains* (2015).<sup>24</sup> It was director Peter Sellars who suggested a libretto comprising two Nôh plays, *Always Strong* and *Feather Mantle*. The libretto is based on the English translations of these plays by Ezra Pound

and Ernest Fenollosa. Interestingly, all the singers of *Only the Sound Remains* are men. However, this opera is not about gender, it is about the human meeting the supernatural.

In *Always Strong* a young lute player returns to the court as a spirit but cannot find any happiness in his playing. A monk performs a ritual, and the spirit vanishes. In *Feather Mantle* a fisherman finds a beautiful robe, but it belongs to an air spirit. To get the robe back the spirit dances to the fisherman and disappears.

In *Only the Sound Remains*, there are two audible symbols of the opera: the kantele, a traditional Finnish stringed folk instrument, and a voice of a countertenor. The kantele – whose sound is similar to the sound of a Japanese *koto* – is a silent instrument, and therefore it is amplified in the performance. The fragile sound of the kantele, referring to the spirit's lute, creates an atmosphere of a mystery.<sup>25</sup>

The voice of a countertenor in *Only the Sound Remains* could, mean moving beyond gender. Sung by a male using special techniques in an extremely high vocal register, the countertenor's voice is not clearly masculine or feminine but it creates a sense of "non-gender" or androgyny. At the same time, it could also be seen referring to the aspect of the unworldly.

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In her last opera *Innocence*, Kaija Saariaho worked with Aleksis Barrière and Sofi Oksanen. Photo from Helsinki, 2021. PHOTO: TONI HÄRKÖNEN

## Innocence – are we all responsible?

In *Innocence* (2018), Saariaho's last opera, the composer no longer sets the focus on love, gender or mystery.<sup>26</sup> Instead, perhaps surprisingly, the primary theme of this opera is an urgent societal issue that has come to characterize the Western world and its way of life: school shootings.

*Innocence*, with the Finn Sofi Oksanen as its storyteller and Aleksis Barrière as its librettist, can be compared with a piece of thread that needs to be completely unwound to be understood. The opera's narrative structure could be seen as an opera of reversed dramaturgy. The setting of *Innocence* is an international, multilingual school in our time in Helsinki. When the curtain rises, we see the celebration of a wedding. Flashbacks gradually unfold the course of events. A sweet girl, who was also killed in the shooting, turns out to be a school bully; she pushed the boy to the limit by mocking him, until he couldn't take it anymore. He grabs the gun and shoots.

If specific instruments or voices were featured as the audible symbols in the previous operas, in *Innocence* the audible symbol is the voice of the teenage folksinger belonging to the girl who is bullying. Her voice is extremely high and raw, and in her vocal texture, there are reminiscences of the Finnish cow herding calls of the past. The opera makes us ask questions we do not want to ask: How is this possible? What went wrong? Does it have something to do with me, with us? Aren't we all responsible?

## The final legacy and a posthumous downgrading

January 1, 2024, Music Centre, Helsinki, Finland – again. In the concert hall, Anssi Karttunen and Olivier Latry have finished the performance of Kaija Saariaho's *Offrande* (2014) for violoncello and organ. Standing ovations – again. And yes, there still are a lot of tears on the faces of the full house audience. However, now it is not so much a matter of sadness as of gratitude: *Offrande* has



With trumpeter Verner Pohjola preparing her last work *HUSH*, a concerto for trumpet and orchestra. It was premiered at the Helsinki Festival in August of 2023, two months after the death of Kaija Saariaho.

opened the inaugural concert of the Helsinki Music Centre's new organ for which the composer took the initiative and donated one million euros. Saariaho's investment encouraged other founders to join the project, bringing together the required 4.4 million euros, a sum that was used to acquire one of the largest modern concert hall organs in the world.

Soon after the inaugural concert a spontaneous and concrete idea emerged in many different quarters to pay tribute to the composer and her remarkable legacy: Let us name the Helsinki Music Centre concert hall the Saariaho Hall. "No", wrote two Finnish male emeritus professors in the Letters to the Editor section of the leading newspaper of the country, "the hall must be named after the great male symphonist Einojuhani Rautavaara"<sup>27</sup> – who did not accept Saariaho as his student because she was a woman!

This was shocking: Even after Saariaho's death, posthumously, an attempt was made to annul her and replace her with a male composer.

Women who want to become classical music professionals still have countless battles ahead of them. The path pointed out by Kaija Saariaho must not be allowed to become overgrown. ✖

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## references

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- 2 During her career, Saariaho received several international prizes, honorary doctorates, and state honors. Her most recent honor was the title of Academician of Art, awarded by the President of the Republic of Finland in the spring of 2023. Music journalists have also expressed their appreciation. In 2019, she was voted the greatest living composer in BBC Music Magazine, and in 2021, the *New York Times* named her as the composer of the year. In 2013, Saariaho was awarded the Polar Music Prize which is called the Nobel Prize of Music. Saariaho's complete biography, see Kaija Saariaho's homepage. Available at: <https://saariaho.org/about>. Accessed June 24, 20224.
- 3 Kaija Saariaho. Kaija Saariaho's speech at the McGill University. Available at: <https://slippedisc.com/2013/11/the-composer-kaija-saariaho-on-sexism-in-classical-music/>. Accessed May 31, 2024.
- 4 However, Aleksis Barrière wrote the programme book text of Saariaho's last opera, *Innocence*.
- 5 See e.g., Pekka Hako, *Kristallista savuksi. Kaija Saariahon maailma* [From crystal to smoke. Kaija Saariaho's world], (Helsinki: Otava, 2022).
- 6 Hako, *Kristallista savuksi*, 39.
- 7 Clément Mao-Takacs, "A Conversation with Kaija Saariaho," *Music and Literature*, No 5 (2014). Available at: <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2014/9/22/a-conversation-with-kaija-saariaho>. Accessed March 12, 2024.
- 8 Kaija Saariaho, *Lichtbogen*. Programme note. Kaija Saariaho's homepage. Available at: <https://saariaho.org/works/lichtbogen/>. Accessed March 14, 2024.
- 9 Susanna Välimäki, "Matka on tärkeä, ei päämäärä. Kaija Saariahon mytopoetiikasta ja *Notes on Light* -sellokonsertosta" [The journey is important, not destination. Kaija Saariaho's mytopoetics and *Notes on Light* cello concerto], *Mustekala* (May 25, 2007). Available at: <https://mustekala.info/teemanumerot/tulkinta-ja-kritiikki-3-07/matka-on-tarkea-ei-paamaara-kaija-saariahon-mytopoetiikasta-ja-notes-on-light-sellokonsertosta/>. Accessed March 14, 2024.
- 10 "Kaija Saariaho," Guest Composer 2021–2022. Press Guide. Palau de la Musica, Barcelona (September 11, 2021). (*Wise Music Classical*). Available at: [https://www.palaumusica.cat/kit-kaija-saariaho\\_956736.pdf](https://www.palaumusica.cat/kit-kaija-saariaho_956736.pdf). Accessed March 14, 2024.
- 11 Tiina-Maija Lehtonen, "Kaija Saariaho: Värien säveltäjä" [Kaija Saariaho: A composer of colours], *Synkooppi* 2 (1984): 40–42.
- 12 *Maa* was commissioned by the Finnish National Ballet. The world premier was on October 31, 1991, in Helsinki.
- 13 Välimäki, "Matka on tärkeä." The author has also explored using a solo instrument as a subject in the cello concerto *Notes on Light* (2006). According to her, "a solo cello is the protagonist of the work and the only person in general: it is a monologue. The cello subject makes heavy trekking through parts of the work."
- 14 *Lamour de loin* was a joint commission for the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, the Santa Fe Opera in the United States, and the Salzburg Music Festival, Austria.
- 15 Hako, *Kristallista savuksi*, 269.
- 16 The theory of musical topics has been introduced in length in my doctoral thesis: Liisamaija Hautsalo, "Kaukainen rakkaus – Saavuttamattomuuden semantiikka Kaija Saariahon oopperassa" [*L'amour de loin* – Semantics of the Unattainable in Kaija Saariaho's Opera] (PhD diss.) (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 2008), 119–120. Also available at: <https://helda.helsinki.fi/items/8473d414-420f-4db9-a95f-0a54a0c6ffe1>. Accessed March 14, 2024. There are several other applications of this theory but basically in those studies music analyzed is from the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- 17 Hautsalo, "Kaukainen rakkaus", 121–122; In the score: Saariaho, *Lamour de loin*. Orchestra score, part II, version 2 (London: Chester, 2000), 338–378 (Act V, scene 2).
- 18 Original in French: "Qui est cet étranger qui m'habite?" . Amin Maalouf, *Adriana Mater*. Libretto (Paris: Grasset, 2006), 55.
- 19 Saariaho, "My Library, from Words to Music," trans. Jeffrey Zuckerman. *Music and Literature*, No. 5 (2014).
- 20 Saariaho, *Adriana Mater*. Orchestra score, part I (London: Chester, 2005), 111–115, bars 372–411. See also: Hautsalo, Liisamaija. "Adriana Mater". Programme book text for the Finnish National Opera (Helsinki: FNO, 2008).
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- 22 Hautsalo, Liisamaija. "Emilie". Programme book text for the Finnish National Opera (Helsinki: FNO, 2015).
- 23 This opera can naturally be interpreted differently, see Juha T. Koskinen, "Émilie par Kaija Saariaho", *Theorema – Re:view for Critique & Crisis*, July 26, 2023. Available at: <https://theorem-a.org/2023/07/26/emilie-par-kaija-saariaho/> Accessed June 24, 2024.
- 24 *Only the Sound Remains* was premiered on March 15, 2016, at the Dutch National Opera, Amsterdam, Netherlands. It was commissioned by the Dutch National Opera, the Finnish National Opera, the Opera de Paris, the Teatro Real Madrid, and the Canadian Opera Company.
- 25 Hautsalo, Liisamaija. "Only the Sound Remains". Programme book text for the Finnish National Opera (Helsinki: FNO, 2017).
- 26 *Innocence* was premiered in 2021 at the Festival International d'Art Lyrique d'Aix-en-Provence, France. Commissioned by the same festival as well as the Dutch National Opera, the Finnish National Opera, the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, and the San Francisco Opera, the opera has since then been seen at several other opera houses in Europe. In addition, it will be performed at The Metropolitan Opera, New York, in the season 2025–26.
- 27 "Saariaho-urut voisivat soida Ej. Rautavaara-salissa" [The Saariaho organ could be played in the Ej. Rautavaara hall] September 17, 2023. *Helsingin Sanomat*. Available at: <https://www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000009850254.html>. Accessed May 31, 2024.