

Kaija Saariaho

Colour, timbre and harmony

By Anders Beyer, from *The Voice of Music. Conversations with composers of our time*, published in 2001 by Ashgate Publishing, London.

I'd like to paint a portrait which describes your background as a composer, and traces some threads running through your output, characterising the style and development. So let's begin with a question about the initial starting-point. Do you come from a musical family?

No, not at all. But I have always imagined music, and been very sensitive to sounds. It has been an important element for me as long as I can remember. My parents are not musicians, and so I didn't take up an instrument until I started school. I started to play the violin when I was six, and when I was eight I also started to play the piano. I have many scattered memories, but I'm not sure when I really started to compose. I had music in my mind when I was very young. I heard music which I thought came from below the bed, so at night I used to ask my mother if she could switch it off. Of course she didn't understand what I was talking about. I tried to compose, to write some things down, but they didn't really work. When I got to the age of about ten or eleven, I had a real crisis, because I read Mozart's biography; it was very painful for me to read that he had already written a lot of music at my age. So I concluded that I was not very gifted as a musician, because I hadn't yet composed any major works. Of course in my child's mind I couldn't see that it was because nobody was teaching me composition or anything like that. I was very, very shy, so I didn't like playing for other people at all. That was another problem: my parents were of course glad that I played these instruments and when we had guests round they would have liked me to play for them, but I hated it. Later at the conservatoire, of all the dozens of times that I had to play publicly, there were maybe only three times when I was happy with my own playing. So that was cut out also. I adored music, and it was the most important thing for me, but I felt that I wasn't worthy to serve the great cause, or something like that.

It sounds like quite a psychological problem.

Yes.

Did you then unconsciously choose the composer's role instead of the more extrovert musician's, because you could hide better?

I don't think so, because I really wanted to be a musician quite early. But I was discouraged because I was not a great interpreter by my own standards, and so I concluded that I couldn't become a very interesting composer either. And what I hated was the idea of being some kind of average composer. I decided very early on that I didn't want to join that crowd.

Did you discuss this with your parents or your teachers?

I discussed it with my parents. Sometimes I hinted in the direction that I was dreaming about being a composer, and they thought I was absolutely crazy. They really didn't see why it would make any sense, so I kept it like a secret dream. I continued playing these instruments, and I studied music theory later, but I didn't think it would lead to anything.

Were you at the Sibelius Academy at that stage?

No, I was at the Helsinki Conservatoire. When I finished school, I went to art school, and after that I went to university, to study musicology. I was between all these different things, feeling all the time that I wasn't a good enough musician. Meanwhile, I

had started playing the organ, also, so I imagined that I could become an organist in a church, looking for the meaning of life and serving music in a small village somewhere in Finland. Until I found out about the boring realities of this job, which were very far from my romantic dream. At some point I had a new crisis and I started to feel that I was wasting my life. I became obsessed with the fear that I was living every day for nothing, and I realised that I had to try to compose. It was the only thing that had any meaning. I don't know how much it had to do with music. It's really to do with my personality. So I entered the Sibelius Academy, and started to study composition with Paavo Heininen.

Did reading about Mozart and this world of composers mainly of the opposite sex increase your self-criticism?

Yes, I'm sure it affected me; it didn't even seem to be possible for me to become a composer.

It was a man's world.

Yes. When I was searching for my identity, many women writers were important: Edith Södergran, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, Anais Nin. I was interested in how women writers and painters had been able to do this creative work, for which I didn't find any satisfying examples in music.

When you went to the Sibelius Academy, did you already have your own aesthetic viewpoints? You had been studying musicology, and been used to thinking about music; did your teacher, Paavo Heininen, open your mind to a special way of your own?

It was very painful. Again, it was completely psychological. I had heard an enormous amount of music, and I had many capabilities, but for some reason which I don't understand I was locked into writing vocal music all the time. In my visual expression I always needed to have people, I couldn't break into abstraction. Somebody knowledgeable about these things could maybe tell me one day what it all was about. Paavo restricted me from writing vocal music, and I started analysing many different kinds of music. Paavo has a course which all his students go through; I think I did those exercises extremely badly, but somehow his treatment gave me the tools to write abstract music and get away from the handicap of always needing a text. I don't know what that all was about, because when I got back to the colours of instrumental music, I returned to the initial music of my childhood. The ten years in between had been absolutely horrible.

Now we're in the late 1970s. How did the environment affect you in general? You were a generation that seemed to be working together towards a common goal. You travelled abroad with Magnus Lindberg, Jukka Tiensuu, and others to the same institution in Paris, and shared some common ideas about the potentials of the new electronic equipment.

I didn't know Jukka so well, and I still don't, even though we are in regular contact. I got to know Magnus and Esa-Pekka very quickly when I was studying, and they became very important colleagues for me. The Korvat Auki Society was also very important. We had a very serious level of activity, presenting lectures and analyses for one another; it was more important to us to prepare and present those things well for each other, than to do it at the Sibelius Academy. It was very inspiring to have people like these around.

Is it reasonable to talk about a new generation suddenly taking the stage, not only composers, but also conductors such as Esa-Pekka Salonen?

Historically speaking, there had been the avant-garde movement—sawing pianos, and so on—and as a reaction to that there was a nationalist wave in Finland. The only members of that generation who were not part of that nationalism were Paavo and Erik Bergman. It was Paavo who then opened up other possible musics for us, which were non-existent in Finland, and when we heard all that there was a reaction, that's true.

Did Paavo Heininen and Erik Bergman also seem non-existent within Finnish music, compared with the wave of nationalism?

Paavo was very badly treated in those days. He was regarded as an enfant terrible who wrote all this unplayable music. Erik Bergman was played a lot, but he was still on the outside; he was the first modernist.

When I talked with Magnus Linberg in 1989 in Helsinki, he said that his original point of departure was the modernist aesthetic, possibly influenced in his first pieces by Paavo's way of thinking. Was that also the case with you?

I don't know. I cannot be very analytical about my aesthetics, because I don't feel that I choose them. It always seems to me that I have the only possible aesthetic for my music, and that my music can exist only in one way, which is the synthesis of so many things that I cannot analyse it.

Why did you come to Paris?

After leaving Finland, I went to Freiburg first, and from there I started to visit Paris for concerts. Ensemble Itinéraire had great concerts, and I had met some of this type of music in Darmstadt. I had used amplification in a limited way, and was becoming interested in the idea of musical interpolation when I heard Tristan and Gérard speak in Darmstadt and learned about these courses at IRCAM (Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique).

What is musical interpolation?

It's musical metamorphosis; a certain kind of development based on ideas from many different sources, including minimalism, in the sense that there is no dynamic development, but rather a gradual change from one state to another. These things interested me very much in the early 1980s, especially Gérard Grisey's lectures.

You made one of your early pieces at that time: *Vers le Blanc*.

That's an extreme explosion of the idea of interpolation. For fifteen minutes, all that's going on pitch-wise is these extremely slow glissandi from one pitch to another; the change of pitch is so slow that you can't hear it, but since there are three pitches sliding in different directions, you do perceive that the harmonic structure is changing, gradually.

Who was your teacher in Freiburg—Klaus Huber?

It was Ferneyhough officially, and I also studied orchestration with Klaus Huber. I cannot say so much about those studies, because the most important thing for me at that time was to get away from Finland. I had been working very closely with Paavo, and I planned to go back to continue studying with him, but I wanted to get away for a year or so. Finland seemed so small. I had written a couple of pieces and the newspapers and audiences started to get interested in this young woman who was composing; it was somehow irritating, because I was just a student and I felt that the interest was ungrounded.

You were put into the spotlight...?

Because I was a young woman. I needed some distance from that attention. I also needed some distance from Paavo, because he was giving me so many new things all the time that I felt my studies would be never-ending. It was rather stressful, because I wasn't able to write my own music; he doesn't like his students to compose while they're studying with him, so every piece that I wrote because of inner necessity went against his agenda.

Did Grisey's Darmstadt lectures on harmony and the spectral way of thinking take you forward in a particular direction?

It was the first time I had heard about spectral music, and it was fantastic compared to

the post-serial aesthetics that were dominant everywhere, and which didn't really suit my ideas. When all my fellow students in Freiburg saw fantastically complicated systems on the blackboard, I didn't see any of that or hear anything in the music, so I didn't like this approach at all. I wanted to make music for the ears, and when I first heard Gérard's and Tristan's music it seemed so fresh.

How did that resound with your own ideas? People write about the colour, timbre and harmony in your music.

Those things were there already. On my application form for IRCAM, I wrote that I wanted to learn more about sound, and how to analyse it. And so I did gain some structures for analysing sound and for using these analyses to create harmony. Those skills came step by step, a little at a time, and that's why was so painful. Maybe learning is painful for everybody anyway, but in my case it's that I need to rediscover a way of doing things. It doesn't help me to know that the way exists already. I needed to discover all these things for my own purposes, so that took some years.

How did you actually spend those years doing computerised spectral analysis?

First I learnt the sound synthesis programme, Chant. Unlike other sound-synthesis programmes, Chant doesn't work with oscillators. I never understood oscillators; it's so far from my reality to make sound that way. With Chant you deal with musical and physical parameters directly; this I found extremely interesting, because I just wanted to know more about sound itself. I started building sounds by computer, and the next step was of course to ask myself how I could organise them by computer. That turned into a rather long period in which I was trying to understand how I compose, and some parts of that process I tried to programme into the computer. The results of that were very mediocre, as I don't have any special talent for programming, and I often needed help with it, but what was interesting was that I was trying to understand how I work, and through the parts of that working process which I did programme, I understood that in fact even when you think you are creating certain rules for yourself, the process is in fact very rudimentary. You are constantly moderating the issues intuitively, and it's that intuition which makes the music interesting, not the basic rules, which are in fact quite boring. It's not interesting if the computer gives you back music consisting of nothing but the rules which you programmed yourself. So after realising that, I wanted to come back to instrumental work, and I started to analyse instrumental sounds, especially cello sounds with Anssi Karttunen who happened to be living here at that time. I worked little by little, from the creation of compositional material to ways of finding harmonic structures, and then I had my basic tools. Lichtbogen is the first piece where I used these harmonic ideas, exploring them through the cello.

Are your pieces from the mid-80s a result of your interest in harmonic and spectral analyses?

Yes, certainly. Lichtbogen, Io, Nymphéa. Du cristal ...à la fumée is from the end of that period, but it still comes from the same source.

Could you talk about the transition from that period to the 90s where your music takes a new departure?

When I started to plan Du cristal, I felt that it would be the last piece of that period. That's why I forced myself to write another piece with the same musical material, using it completely differently. That piece became ...à la fumée.

After all this harmonic and spectral analysis, the crucial point is of course transferring it into real sound. Could you talk about how you approach instrumentation?

That's completely intuitive. I have no rules on instrumentation, although I do have very clear ideas about the kinds of textures, degrees of luminosity in various instruments, and degrees of pigment. I use all these parameters to organise instruments. It's important for me when building a musical form to create contrasting textures: for example, contrast-

ing dark rough-surfaced textures with smooth textures full of bright pigments. I use such general ideas when instrumentating, but as for the actual instruments themselves, I use them very intuitively.

Do you think in terms of colours, or of paintings, or other kinds of visual images?

When I think about colours, it's more about degrees of luminosity than about reds and greens. It's very much combined with a certain atmosphere, which I can't quite define with reference to music, but which is connected with a certain tempo or character. That's why it's important for me to write dolce or con violenza or whatever, because the character of the music exists from the beginning; it's not something I invent afterwards.

You give the listener a kind of hint with your titles, which often describe an atmosphere.

To start with, the titles are for my own sake. When I feel that I have the right title, I can focus my material.

So you come up with the title first?

Sometimes. At least very much before the end of the piece, always. It's very important for feeding my imagination. Maybe afterwards I could even remove it, or change it, but it belongs to the music in some way.

You sometimes re-use material from earlier works...

Even if I were to use similar structural solutions in several pieces, I would need to find them again each time. I can never look at something I did in an earlier piece, and say, well, I could do the same thing here, it would do just fine. Even if I end up doing something similar, I need to feel the necessity again. I am struggling with this problem right now: in my opera I'm re-using some music from *Oltra mar*, because that was actually my initial plan. That material has a direct connection to certain parts of the opera.

Musical structures?

Yes. Certain parts of the music, and harmonies and so on. I know that I don't need to re-invent this music, it's my own music, so I'm free to use it if I want to, but still it's very painful.

Why?

I find it so boring, somehow, to take pre-existing music. That's often the issue in post-modernism where people make collages. I just don't understand the idea.

Are you caught up in the idea that everything should be absolutely new?

No, I don't care if it's new or not. But it must be new for me.

But still you do it too; you have re-used material from *Oltra mar*.

It would have been stupid not to take them, because that's why I wrote them that way. They were really written for this purpose, but I still have a hard time copying.

Is *Oltra mar* a study for your opera?

No.

But you had already started your opera when you wrote it?

I was waiting for my libretto. There is a direct link; the musical material is partly the same. But actually everything I've written since 1993 is directly connected to my opera, so this

is a really long project.

So you already knew many years ago that you would write an opera?

Yes. I found the subject, and a story which I liked very much, but it took many years before I finally found a writer to make a libretto out of it. The writer's name is Amin Maalouf, a French-Libanese writer, who has written many books about that period in history, and is a very well-known writer in France.

The importance of your titles is also demonstrated by the title *L'amour de loin*. It caused confusion, because suddenly the title changed.

This is a separate matter, because there are many people working on this project, so there are many opinions concerning the title.

So what is it called now?

Now it's back to *L'amour de loin* again. At some point it was *Clémence*, and there have been other proposals too. I'm not sure that *L'amour de loin* will be the final title, because it points so much to the history and to the period, which are not actually the most important aspects of the opera.

Could you tell me about the subject, and about how you discovered the text?

It's a story which was written at the beginning of the 12th century, about one of the first troubadours, *Jaufré Rudel*, and his distant love. He took to sea to go to see his love, who was a countess living in Tripoli, but he fell ill on the boat, and finally died in the arms of this lady. I wondered myself for many years why this story interested me so much. I knew I wanted to write an opera about love and death, because they are the great mysteries remaining to us. We are living in the year 2000 and we have achieved so many things, but advanced so little with these two subjects which concern all of us in that they are the basics of our life. I like the way these things are handled in this story. Later, I understood that the story concerns me personally. There are these two main characters—the troubadour who wants to express his love through writing music, and the lady who was sent to a foreign continent; I realised that they are like the two parts of myself. When I heard about this troubadour's life-story, I wanted to see some of his texts. I got permission to go and see some of them in the national library in Paris, and I especially liked this text, which then became *Lonh*. I have a photo of that page of the manuscript. Coming from a young culture, and being able to hold a book which was written by hand in the 12th century, was very impressive to me. I couldn't exactly read the music, because it's written in four-line staves, so I just interpreted it my own way. Since then, I've seen more accurate transcriptions of it, but it was just a starting-point for me. I didn't want to use his music, but my interpretation served as a basic material. I also wanted to write the opera for Dawn, with whom I had already been working on *Chateau de l'âme*.

After working on this opera for so many years, would you describe the final work as constituting an end to that period, or would you be able to go further with the same ideas?

I hope it's the end of something! It has been such a long process. I feel that I've been preparing this opera since 1992, with all the vocal music I've been writing, so I hope that after producing all that paper something else will appear out of it!

And has something appeared?

Not yet! Because I'm still composing this piece, my mind is completely absorbed in it. I find it difficult to think about anything else.

You didn't have a commission for the opera at the beginning of the '90s. When did you actually get the commission?

It was in fact Walton Grönroos at The Finnish Opera who first wanted to commission an opera from me, and that's when I started thinking seriously about writing it. I had had many problems approaching the text, and I really didn't know how I would do it. Later Walton left The Finnish Opera and it became rather complicated, because I had this French subject. At that point I was already in contact with Salzburg; they had commissioned *Chateau de l'âme*. I was starting to look into where my opera could be produced, and there was a lot of interest. And some people said to me, why don't you try Salzburg, if they like your music there? I thought it was a crazy idea, to start at the top with my first opera, but anyway I sent the project to Gérard Mortier, and he was immediately enthusiastic, and took on the whole production. It was an enormous stroke of luck.

Why?

Because he offered me such good conditions. He offered me a commission, which means I can write without having any financial problems. He offered me the possibility of working with all these fantastic musicians and the director Peter Sellars, whom I admired a lot. In fact it was Sellars' production of Messiaen's *Saint Francois d'Assis* finally convinced me that I could write my own opera. I was always worried that I should have more dramatic turns, something going on on the stage, and when I saw that in Peter's direction, I felt I could write opera too. So Salzburg has very much been a gift in this respect.

Taking a bird's-eye view of what you have been saying, it looks like one long string of successes, and yet at the same time you have this attitude toward yourself as not being successful enough. Have you gained any self-confidence during these years, which might indicate to you that you have had a rather mistaken view of your own creativity?

I don't know. One can always develop.

But isn't it difficult to retain a dark view of your abilities?

Well, I don't have such a black view of myself, but I'm rather surprised. I don't listen to my music very often, but sometimes when I hear it nicely interpreted, I find myself thinking: this is beautiful music; how was I able to write it? I don't understand. I think I have had a lot of luck; so many good things happened to my music that of course it makes me feel good.

Looking back on your output, would you identify some uncertain pieces where you would say, this is where I was trying to do something, and other more successful pieces where you would say, this is where I did it.

I think it goes in phases; I'm not happy with much of my music.

Just a couple of pieces?

The first piece that I feel is entirely mine is the flute piece *Laconisme de l'aile* and I still recognise it as being completely my own music. *Lichtbogen* can be badly performed, but when it's well performed I think it's really mine too. So is *Du cristal; ... à la fumée* much less. *Amers* (1992) for solo cello and ensemble really has something to do with me. And maybe some parts of *Chateau de l'âme* and *Oltra mar* as well.

And, I guess, the opera?

Yes, I hope so!

You will receive the Nordic Music Council Prize in March 2000 for your work *Lonh* for soprano and electronics. What does it mean for you to receive the Nordic Music Council Prize? Do you feel an affinity with Nordicism? Having achieved so much attention already, it may mean nothing for you, but on the other hand it's a kind of recognition which might affect you.

I'm Nordic. I don't feel that I became French just because I live in Paris. I feel a very strong Finnish and Nordic identity in the way I have decided to live my life and the way

I want to raise my children and so on. Nordic culture is strong, and sometimes very different from French culture for example. I want to keep up the positive aspects of it in my everyday life. My music has had a lot of recognition, but in fact not so much from the Nordic countries, so for that reason I'm really very happy about this prize. And another reason I'm happy about it is that it's for this chamber music piece which uses technology, and not my opera or my orchestral Diptych, or something like that. Even just the decision to award the prize for a chamber piece is a very healthy idea. Everything is going in the direction of mega-concerts. If you really think about important musical experiences, they don't happen—for me, at least, in these mega-concerts. Those big events don't have so much to do with music; they have more to do with feeling a connection with 3000 other people. But when we think about important musical experiences, they are more often found in very small venues with one or two musicians, and those are the really important musical exchanges. For some years now I've been dreaming about home concerts, reacting against this mega-thinking. We are small people, and I am less and less able to tolerate this mega-thinking which comes from United States, where most things are measured in terms of money. What has it got to do with our music? For this reason, I was so happy that it was decided to award this prize for a chamber work. When I heard that Lonh was one of the pieces, I thought it would have no chance, so I was very glad that it was chosen.

What do you take from Nordic culture? What have we to offer here in France?

A certain healthy straightforward way of dealing with things. Of course what we Nordic people think of as healthy doesn't have so much to do with the French way of thinking, but I like things to be clear, I like to express myself clearly, and I would like my children to do so too. I like to have a very straightforward relation to my body, also. It's part of this totality which is me, and I would like to keep things simple, not complicate them. I would like to keep things profound, not superficial, and this is what I try to pass on in my music, and in bringing up my children, and in my communication with people. These are typically Nordic features, some of the good sides of our culture. Of course, the culture of where I'm living, here in Paris, has different virtues, which I'm trying to learn, and which have been good for me; for example, not to be so Protestant and strict with myself, to be a little more tender, and to accept oneself as one is.

What has been most difficult to achieve or accept in French culture?

Verbal communication, which is very complicated. In French, you hint at things, you don't say things directly. You have to understand many things between the lines, which I often just don't understand.

Entering an institution like IRCAM, with these guys who are so expert at handling all the technological equipment, you might feel a bit lost to begin with. Was that the case for you, entering a man's world with such an extremely advanced way of thinking and of handling machines?

That's true. It was a crazy thing to do. First to go into this man's profession, and then to stick my head into that place, where at that time, ten to fifteen years ago, there were really no women at all, except for the secretaries. So it was completely hopeless, particularly combined with the language and everything. But it also made me understand how over-estimated rational logical thinking is. It's such a small part of our lives, and of course that's the type of thinking that computers understand, but computers are also very limited, and when we speak about art, it's such a small part of it. There are other much more complex ways of thinking and feeling. This kind of apparently quick intelligence, which works with computers, doesn't work always so well with people.

You talked about taking care of your body as much as your mind and inner life. You seem to be expressing a kind of holistic view of living, without being in any way religious. Is that right?

I'm sure that if I didn't have children, and didn't live in this very concrete day-to-day

world of small children, I would certainly be radically pursuing a much more ascetic direction, but in this period of my life I appreciate the importance of the totality of each of us as whole beings.

So you might perhaps turn to a more ascetic way of life later on?

Maybe, we'll see. You never know. Maybe I feel this way now precisely because I cannot do otherwise.

Have you considered going back to your home country, as Magnus has done, back to the church in the village, or is that impossible now?

I went with my family a year and a half ago. I was Visiting Professor at the Sibelius Academy, and I taught with Paavo as my colleague—it was great. So we stayed there one winter, nearly a whole year.

What did your husband say to that kind of move?

It was much easier for him than for me, I think. I found the same uniformity, which can be both good and bad, and which is so opposite to the diversity we have in this city, for example. I don't know how life will be when I'm older, it might be very different. Right now, I'm very happy here. My children liked Finland very much.

Can they speak Finnish?

Yes. I speak only Finnish with them. But I was happy to come back to Paris; there's one practical aspect, and that is that I'm too well recognised in Finland as a person.

It's difficult to live a normal life?

Yes, it sounds funny. When I say this to colleagues in America, they think it's fantastic that there is a country where contemporary composers can be esteemed public personalities. In a way it is fantastic, it's true, but that doesn't suit my personality at all. There are people who take it well and handle it wonderfully, like Esa-Pekka; he's not disturbed by being the centre of attention—he seems to love it—but I'm not that kind of person.

Do you enjoy walking through the streets here in Paris, where nobody knows you?

Yes, it's very nice. I often feel as if I'm in a jungle, or a forest. I'm free, in that sense.

