

The Flute Music of Kaija Saariaho – A Personal History

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In 1982, Kaija Saariaho and I were each a participant at the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt, Germany. We met in the first week while we were waiting in line for lunch at the canteen. I don't remember what we spoke of, though Kaija remembers I spoke to her first. I remember she was a striking figure in a long black dress and long, flat, black shoes. (The rest of us were in shirts, jeans and sandals....). Be that as it may, I learned that she was a composer and she learned that I was a flutist. The composer-teachers of that first week were what we called the "French Contingency", notably Gerard Grisey, Tristan Murail, and Michael Levinas, and we enjoyed visiting their courses and concerts and socializing with them afterwards. Kaija had just moved to Paris to study at IRCAM and I was also a big fan of Paris, so already we had our interest in this city and French culture in common.

At this time she gave me the flute solo *Laconisme de l'aile*, a piece she had just written in Freiburg, for a Finnish flutist friend of hers, Anne Raitio (presently Eirola). To me, who had just been working intensively with Karlheinz Stockhausen on a piece he had revised for me (*Amour for flute*), her score looked vague and I remember asking her lots of questions about what this and that meant and how much time I should take here and there. Eventually, however, I not only played her piece: it became one of the most-performed solos of my repertoire. And I became her "muse" for all subsequent flute pieces!

But this happened gradually. After Darmstadt, we remained friends and in close contact, but it wasn't until 1992 that she surprised me with a new piece. One day she phoned me in Cologne and said something like "I am afraid I must write you a piece"—almost as if it were bad news! For her, in a way, it *was* "bad news", since contemporary repertoire was already crowded with music for solo flute and she was hesitant about adding to it. On the other hand, she had these gestures of ascending scales "flying around in her head, haunting her" and she wanted to get rid of them, as it were, in order to be able to move into something else. Happily, her frustration with "solo flute" led her to move into new territory already with this piece, as she determined to create a polyphony not only with extended techniques and added voice but also by using electronics in various ways. The result was *Noa Noa*, which also became a "classic" in the genre flute/electronics.

The premiere in Darmstadt that year was definitely not a success. The signals from the flute to the computer didn't work (we were working with NEXT and pitch-following), so what the audience heard was less "complex polyphony" and more "melody-with-reverberation"—not exactly in keeping with the prevalent "Darmstadt aesthetic." Although I had played my part well, we were shocked that NO ONE came backstage to greet us after the concert. Later a journalist friend took me aside and advised me to maybe think twice about continuing to work with this composer. Saariaho had had a great start with *Verblendungen* and other works, but now that she'd had a baby, she was perhaps becoming too "soft", losing her "cutting edge" aesthetic—not good for the career of an avant-garde flutist!

I not only did not listen to that advice; a few years later I decided to include Saariaho's music in my doctoral project "20th C. Classic and Exotic Music for Solo Flute", dedicating one recital exclusively to her music and that of Karlheinz Stockhausen.

The next flute solo was *Couleurs du Vent* (1998) for alto flute. Because it was written for the birthday of our flutist friend Mikael Helasvuo, I had to wait forever to perform it. Mikael kept putting off the premiere and finally performed it in Finland—but on the C flute instead of on the alto. I then went ahead and premiered the original version for alto flute in Wisconsin in February of

1999 and in Paris later that year. The piece was long and difficult, however, and was never programmed by either of us much after that. Until one day....

One day I played *Couleurs du vent* and it was much shorter than usual. As I was nearing the end, I wondered what had happened to certain of my favorite passages. It turns out that at some point I had turned two pages instead of one, thereby making a cut, apparently one which had been organic enough that I hadn't noticed it right then. Nor had Kaija, who was listening in the audience, although she wondered at how short the piece seemed. Since it actually "worked" in that version, she set out to revise the piece officially, and this is the edition that is published—and in the meantime programmed a lot more often as well!

Later in 1998, Kaija wrote a flute solo as another birthday present, this time for her flute-playing godchild Liisa, who was turning 10. The Finnish title, chosen by Kaija's then 9-year-old son, is *Liisan taikahuilu, or Liisa's Magic Flute*. Twenty-six measures long and limited to 4 or 5 pitches hardly extending beyond the first octave, this "simple" piece nevertheless employs some of Kaija's favorite flute techniques such as air sounds, trills and glissandi (and has proven to be a challenge even for some conservatory players!).

Eventually I also received a solo as a birthday present: the little piccolo piece, *Dolce Tormento* (2004). About a month before my birthday I had been asked to introduce her orchestral piece *Orion* at the Beethovenfest in Bonn. Since the piccolo is quite prominent in one of the movements, I brought mine along and played excerpts for the audience. Certain of these gestures, especially the poignant "falling" pattern of the third octave Eb – D – B from the second movement "Winter Sky" then found their way into the piccolo solo.

Of course (!) Kaija added a text (Petrarch's Sonnet 132 from his *Il Canzoniere*), thereby presenting me with two new challenges: how to speak/whisper Petrarch's Italian, and how to somehow integrate the vocal sounds into the music without the help of a resonant flute. The inside story of why she chose that particular text for me, well, that would be another story. In any case, I enjoyed premiering the piece at my "birthday concert" in the Finnish Institute in Paris and continue to play it often.

Kaija Saariaho's major work for flute, however, is her flute concerto, *Aile du songe* (2001). As with *NoaNoa*, this was also a surprise for me, but this time she built up the suspense about some "news" and waited for one of my visits to her family in Paris. Then she announced it with a flourish and we promptly celebrated with champagne. A concerto with strings, harp, celeste and percussion, *Aile du songe* was a joint commission by the orchestras of the Flanders Festival, London Philharmonic, and the Finnish Radio, so the first performances were already set.

An interesting note: one of the original commissioners was to be a major American orchestra, but since the contract with their solo flutist didn't permit guest flutists, Kaija refused. In fact, most of the top American orchestras had (and still have) similar contracts with their wind soloists, making the scheduling of guest performers rather challenging. Apparently I was finally allowed to make the U.S. premiere with the Chicago Symphony because it was "only" during their summer season at Ravinia, and they made special compensations for their own flutist as well. Hmm....if only I played piano, violin or cello...it would be a different story!

But no—I'm quite content playing the flute, I love this concerto, and, happily for me, I continue to be invited by dozens of orchestras to play it with them!