

KAIJA SAARIAHO'S PATH TO THE MET:  
THE MERGER OF CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL  
MUSICAL DEVICES IN *L'AMOUR DE LOIN*

by

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## ABSTRACT

On December 1, 2016, the Metropolitan Opera presented Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin*, the Met's second production of a work by a female composer, and the first since Ethyl Smyth's *Der Wald* in 1903. Although opera companies around the world regularly produce operas written within the last fifty years, new operas are a small percentage of their total productions. This document includes biographical information and educational background for the composer Kaija Saariaho. An evolution of her compositional style and artistic path to composing in the genre of opera is explored. The majority of the document examines the opera *L'Amour de loin* itself, focusing on its commissioning, libretto, compositional structure, and reception history.

This document also illustrates how much of Saariaho's success with her operas, especially *L'Amour de Loin*, lies in her incorporation of conventional operatic elements and musical devices, common in music since the seventeenth century, into her own contemporary musical language. Saariaho does not rely on functional harmony to provide forward motion within her music. Instead, in her combination of timbre, texture, and harmony (often non-diatonic and generally non-functional), she develops musical energy and direction by placing the highest priority on timbre or color for structural momentum. She also created specific motifs to signify the individual characters (similar to *leitmotifs*) and recurring musical gestures woven throughout the opera. She employs musical devices such as text painting, common to music throughout history, as well as musical genres such as the tarantella, a traditional dance. In fact, Saariaho has contributed to a resurgence of

interest in new opera around the world and rearticulated an art form she once viewed as outdated.

Her compositional style creates fields of sonorities focusing on timbre while using a combination of serial techniques, along with tonal context or pitch centers with spectral ideas. These techniques will be further discussed within the document. In essence, her work has defined a new multimedia art form recognized by major opera companies, including the Met.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its opening in 1883, the Metropolitan Opera has staged only two operas composed by a female. On December 1, 2016, the Met presented Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de loin*, the second production of a work by a female composer. The first was *Der Wald* by Ethel Smyth, a British suffragist, who personally approached the manager of the Met to persuade him to include her one-act opera in the upcoming season. It was performed in 1903.<sup>1</sup>

Although opera companies around the world regularly produce operas written within the last fifty years, new operas are still a small percentage of their total productions. According to a recent article in *The New York Times*, the Met offers far fewer contemporary operas than major European companies.<sup>2</sup> The Met's modest contemporary programming is only approximately seventeen premieres of modern operas over the last fifty years and none by female composers.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Met, however, other companies such as Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, English National Opera, Santa Fe Opera and Finnish National Opera have

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- 1 Daniel Wenger, "The Troubadour and the Lady: With 'L'Amour de Loin', Kaija Saariaho is the first female composer to have a work performed at the Metropolitan Opera for more than a century," *The New Yorker* (November 24, 2016), <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.
  - 2 Zachary Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," *The New York Times* (November 27, 2016): AR12.
  - 3 *MetOpera Database*, s.v. "Repertory Report," [www.archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frames.htm](http://www.archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frames.htm) (accessed September 29, 2016).



produced operas by female composers. So why, after waiting more than a century to offer an opera by a female composer, did the Met select Kaija Saariaho's first opera?

Saariaho's compositions have earned significant international recognition, and her three operas *L'Amour de loin*, *Adriana Mater* and *Emilie* have received international premieres; *L'Amour de loin* has enjoyed more than ten productions across Europe and America and has been hailed by *The New York Times* as being one of the most acclaimed and widely performed works of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>4</sup>

In this document I will explain how much of Saariaho's success with her operas, especially *L'Amour de loin*, lies in her incorporation of conventional operatic elements and musical devices, common in music since the seventeenth century, into her own contemporary musical language.<sup>5</sup> Saariaho does not rely on functional harmony to provide forward motion within her music. Instead, in her combination of timbre, texture, and harmony (often non-diatonic and generally non-functional), she develops musical energy and direction by placing the highest priority on timbre or color for structural momentum.

She also creates specific motifs to signify the individual characters (similar to *leitmotifs*) and recurring musical gestures woven throughout the opera. She employs musical devices such as text painting, common to music throughout history, as well as devices such as the tarantella, a traditional dance.

In addition, Saariaho embraces extra-musical sources such as literary forms, including novels and poetry, and also incorporates her synesthetic perception, seeing colors when hearing music. She creates a dramatic dimension in many of her works and is

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4 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

5 Tim Howell, Jon Hargreaves, and Michael Rofe, eds. *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*. (Great Britain: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), 107.

compelled to continually search for new orchestral timbres or colors. The composer has experimented with technology and electronics without abandoning the colors of standard orchestral instruments in her music.<sup>6</sup> Her compositional style involves fields of sonority focusing on texture and timbre. She also incorporates other media in her music and rearticulates an art form she once viewed as outdated and, therefore, has contributed to the rejuvenation of interest in contemporary opera around the world. In essence, her work has defined a new multimedia art form recognized by major opera companies, including the Met.

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6 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Kaija Saariaho was born in 1952 in Finland, the eldest of three children. She did not come from a musical family, but played a variety of instruments in her youth. Her first instrument was the violin, and she began piano lessons by age eight. Eventually the guitar took the place of the violin because she felt that the discrepancy between her facility and what she desired to hear from the violin was too great.<sup>7</sup> Although she did not notably excel at any of the instruments, she was unusually sensitive to sound.<sup>8</sup> She purportedly asked her mother to “turn off her pillow” one night when the music in her head was keeping her awake.<sup>9</sup> Even at an early age, music inexplicably filled her imagination.

Kaija Saariaho was educated at the Helsinki Rudolf Steiner School, renowned for encouraging individual creativity.<sup>10</sup> The curriculum of this educational system placed great emphases on music and art; the school’s philosophy fostered these fields important to a child’s personal development.<sup>11</sup> The school’s curriculum included form drawing and dance therapy, alongside music. In an interview, Saariaho recalled that she enjoyed form drawing exercises in school, remembering that they calmed her. Her favorite hobby after music was

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7 Pirkko Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 3.

8 Wenger, “The Troubadour and the Lady,” <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

9 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 4.

10 Ibid., 109.

11 Laurel Parsons and Brenda Ravenscroft, eds. *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music, 1960-2000*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 155.

drawing.<sup>12</sup> The appreciation of the visual arts she acquired through her education positively impacted her musical creativity. By age thirteen she had composed her first song, now a misplaced guitar solo. It was titled “Keltaista ja hermostunutta” (‘Something Yellow and Nervous’), showing that music was developing both visually and emotionally for her at such a young age.<sup>13</sup> In an interview, Saariaho said, “It’s interesting: that title has two things, the character – because I’m always looking for some character in my music – and this color perception I have always had.”<sup>14</sup>

After graduating from the Steiner School in 1972, Saariaho attended the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. Kaija’s parents were not interested in music; however they were fond of the visual arts and had a private art collection of their own.<sup>15</sup> Their appreciation of the visual arts made an impact on the young girl’s creative thought. Saariaho recalled spending Sunday afternoons at her father’s office drawing and sketching plans for houses and buildings.<sup>16</sup> So it was not surprising that her father encouraged her to study architecture.<sup>17</sup> Following his advice, she studied graphic art at the Institute of Industrial Arts and Crafts, but also continued her music studies at the Helsinki Conservatory from 1972-1976 further intertwining her aural perception of music with her visual aesthetic.<sup>18</sup>

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12 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 3 – 4.

13 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 109.

14 Ibid., 5.

15 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 4.

16 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 5.

17 Wenger, “The Troubadour and the Lady,”

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

18 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 4.

The influence of both visual arts and music persisted and enveloped her creativity during this time, although the lack of female composers as role models combined with her love for literature shifted her focus to female authors. Literary icons such as Virginia Woolf and Anaïs Nin, and poets such as Sylvia Plath and Edith Södergran imbued Saariaho with a love for literature.<sup>19</sup> These three different sources of inspiration and creativity resulted in music that bonded together three forms of media: music, visual arts, and literature, converging in a multimedia musical experience.

In 1976 Saariaho's compositional voice was irrevocably impacted as she began studying at the Sibelius Academy with the strict modernist and serialist Finnish composer Paavo Heininen. A hallmark of modernism was the search for altered forms of tonality. Initially she only composed songs and other vocal music inspired by literature and poems. Heininen insisted that she begin to explore writing for instruments because composing for voice was too simple for her.<sup>20</sup> Saariaho considered the change very frightening, but it allowed her to enter new realms of musical abstraction.<sup>21</sup> In an interview she once said, "[T]ransferring that energy to instrumental music, it actually brought me back to my childhood perception of music, which was so full of smells and colors. And that really opened up my music enormously."<sup>22</sup> Heininen successfully pushed her beyond her comfort level as a composer, and guided her on the path to writing larger orchestral works.

After completing her studies at the Sibelius Academy in 1980, Saariaho moved to Darmstadt, Germany where she met the spectralist composers Gérard Grisey and Tristan

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19 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 109.

20 Ibid., 7.

21 Wenger, "The Troubadour and the Lady," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

22 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 7.

Murail. She was introduced to their music, which used the technique involving computer analysis of the quality of timbre.<sup>23</sup> She believed it complemented her own musical ideas, explaining, "I came from post-serial aesthetics, which forbid tonal explorations, and I arrived in the land of new harmonies, distantly reminiscent of music by Maurice Ravel and Claude Debussy."<sup>24</sup> These spectral ideas greatly influenced her resulting compositional style.

While in Darmstadt Saariaho met theory professors and composers Brian Ferneyhough and Klaus Huber and continued her studies, earning a diploma in composition at Freiburg Musikoschschule in 1982. The school's emphasis on the intellect of post-serialism was not appealing to the composer; she wanted to communicate musically through aural musical forms. Spectralism combines timbre with microtonality through the use of tonal centers rather than conventional tonic-dominate tonality. Compositions written in this manner are based on the overtone spectra of sound. Spectralists developed this approach to composition as an alternative to the twelve-tone technique and serialism. This concept was scientifically studied and refined at the computer studios of *Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique* (IRCAM – Institute for Music/Acoustic Research and Coordination).

Saariaho moved to Paris in 1982 and worked at IRCAM until 1990. It was there that she found the tools she needed to explore the relationship between tone color and harmony. Also while in Paris, Saariaho attended the *Musique Concrète Acoumatique*

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23 Ronit Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and L'Amour de Loin," *New Music Box* (December 2, 2016), <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

24 Moisala, *Kajja Saariaho*, 9.

(musical studies of recorded concrete sounds).<sup>25</sup> The combination of these studies became the basis of her future compositions as she began to integrate acoustic instruments with electronics, eventually leading her to create new timbres and sonorities. She continues to reside and compose in Paris today.

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25 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 10-13.

## QUALITIES AND STYLE

Anthony Tommasini of *The New York Times* has described Saariaho's writing as "music rich with luminous sounds, astringently alluring harmonies, myriad instrumental colorings and atmospheric textures."<sup>26</sup> Alex Ross of *The New Yorker* says that the elemental idea found in much of her music "is an oceanic expanse of sound, one that shifts before one's ears and quivers with hidden life."<sup>27</sup> Another music critic from *The New Yorker* describes her music as "a rigorously scientific exploration of the inner life of sound."<sup>28</sup> She gives the sound life by allowing smaller voices to fragment or dissipate which is almost a sensual or sinuous effect of blossoming and nurturing.

Because Saariaho's compositional style has been shaped by several different techniques in both tonal and atonal music, her music cannot be described by one musical style. In fact, she avoids being associated with a single school of composition as she finds being labeled restrictive. Her compositional techniques combine spectral ideas with serial organization of her musical material.<sup>29</sup> She relies on minimalist techniques for temporal stasis, or slow harmonic rhythm, to create seamless transitions and spectral ideas for the

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26 Anthony Tommasini, "A Medieval Love Story, All About Otherness and Now Newly Relevant," *The New York Times* (December 3, 2016): C1.

27 Alex Ross, "Sound Waves: In New York, the oceanic music of Kaija Saariaho and Gérard Grisey," *The New Yorker* (October 31, 2016): 96.

28 Russell Platt, "The Sound of Love: Kaija Saariaho's compelling first opera is staged at the Met," *The New Yorker* (December 5, 2016): 11.

29 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 74.



beauty of the sound.<sup>30</sup> Her style has been described as simultaneously chaotic and precise. Saariaho's manner of combining free play and complexity bewilders performers as much as listeners.<sup>31</sup> Her compositions focus on sound quality, using both electronic and acoustic sounds to expand the music and renew musical conventions. Some refer to her works as "music for the ears."<sup>32</sup> In a recent interview the composer described her music as follows: "you don't need to know music theory to perceive it. My music is written for ears; you don't need to intellectualize it. You just need to let yourself enter."<sup>33</sup>

Saariaho defines the sounds surrounding her as either music or noise. Her music includes a creaking door, a simple breath, and even sounds of nature as a part of the sonic palette. The composer once talked about a deep affinity for nature the Finnish culture seems to embrace, which is often present in her music. "It is a part of my Finnishness, which I still carry within me."<sup>34</sup> Various aspects of nature, including the sea, the sky, the northern lights, birds, and water lilies, have been important inspirations for the musical material as well as forms of her compositions.

She describes noise as "the sound, which you cannot turn off and which disturbs you."<sup>35</sup> Saariaho's music sometimes functions on the boundary between music and noise.

Alex Ross describes how Saariaho "makes her eruptions of noise seem like natural

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30 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and L'Amour de Loin," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

31 Wenger, "The Troubadour and the Lady," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

32 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 73.

33 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone." AR12.

34 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 9.

35 Wenger, "The Troubadour and the Lady," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

phenomena, the aftermath of some seismic break. Shapes emerge from the chaos, and the shapes begin to sing. The latter sections of her pieces often being apparitions of rare, pure beauty – plain intervals that sound like harmony reborn, liminal melodies that disappear the moment they are heard.”<sup>36</sup> She considers many unusual sounds to be musical and therefore suitable to be part of her music, which vacillates between extremes of pure tone and noise, unearthing a haunting beauty in between.<sup>37</sup>

Another unique quality in Saariaho’s music is the visual aspect present throughout her work. She has been referred to as a visual composer for several reasons: many of her works are inspired by a visual idea such as nature, a painting, or a film. Visual colors, as well as tonal colors, are important to her musical experiences. During a recent rehearsal at the Mannes School of Music, Saariaho was heard telling the string players regarding her music, “if harmonics come out other than those written, it’s just enriching the texture...The idea is to have a kind of cloud of color, listen to your colors.”<sup>38</sup>

She considers form, structure, and character elements to be the same in both musical and visual art.<sup>39</sup> As a result harmony, texture, and timbre function as the central parameters of her work, referred to by Daniel Wenger as “sound color.”<sup>40</sup> One way she achieves musical color is through her perception of instrumental colors. She hears

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36 Alex Ross, “Birth: A new opera from the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho,” *The New Yorker* (April 24, 2006), <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/24/birth>.

37 Ross, “Sound Waves: In New York, the oceanic music of Kaija Saariaho and Gérard Grisey.” 96.

38 Wenger, “The Troubadour and the Lady,” <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

39 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 53-58.

40 Wenger, “The Troubadour and the Lady,” <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

trumpets and trombones as warm colors, and horns as softer red colors. For her, the woodwinds produce colder colors while the violin is yellow. Saariaho uses her sense of instrumental colors to paint a picture with her music. When she writes a composition she attempts “to work on the continuity between the experience of the ear and the eye.”<sup>41</sup>

Many of Saariaho’s works exploit the possibilities of new technology. While at IRCAM she learned about physics and acoustics through the use of many computer programs developed at the facility. Today she still uses these programs and others such as CHANT, AudioSculpt, Pathwork, Max, OpenMusic, and Modalys. These programs give her the tools she needs to express music the way she experiences it and to encompass the listener’s senses. For example, she uses electronics, tape, and computer-assisted composition in her pieces. During the 1980s, new works began to focus on timbre and harmony evolving in gradual transitions without a regular rhythmic pulse. This time period highlighted the interconnections of timbre, harmony, and musical forms.<sup>42</sup> The specific compositional technique she explored was the use of computers to map the overtones of a sound. She recorded interesting instrumental, vocal, or concrete sounds to analyze their overtone structure. The sound synthesis computer program *Chant* identified the multiple pitches within the given sound and also selected those pitches most easily perceived by listeners. She used the map as a foundation for the harmonies and form of her compositions. Similar to the works of spectral composers, Saariaho’s music focuses on texture and tonal colors as a source of harmony, as the core of the orchestra, and for the musical structure. Spectralists tend to stay within the sound spectra, while Saariaho moves

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41 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 57.

42 *Ibid.*, 27-30.

beyond the physical characteristics of the sound adding to the sound spectra through transposition or by using permutations.<sup>43</sup>

Another method of sound analyzation she used was to analyze the transitions from one sound to another. For example, she would analyze the pronunciation of a vowel going to a consonant, revealing the rich sonorities in the process. This method allowed her to create transitions between bright sounds and noise and helped further her harmonic thinking used in many of her works.<sup>44</sup> They also led her to the use of microtonal structures that allowed her to create living musical works that combine timbre and texture with harmony and pitch.<sup>45</sup>

The influence of *musique concrète* is also interspersed in Saariaho's compositions.<sup>46</sup> The sounds found in nature, whether in their purest form or electronically modified sounds such as bird songs and whispers, are audible in many of her pieces. She often combines natural, electronic, and instrumental sounds in her compositions without a hierarchical order.<sup>47</sup>

Saariaho often finds inspiration in extra-musical sources such as literature, visual and natural phenomena. She is an avid reader and many of her works have a "literary sister" in a poem or a piece of prose.<sup>48</sup> Regardless of the media source, many of the titles to her pieces reflect the literary source of inspiration even though the piece itself never aims to simply describe the original work. Her intent for these compositions is to grasp the

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43 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 61-74.

44 Wenger, "The Troubadour and the Lady," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

45 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 66.

46 Ibid., 12.

47 Ibid., 63.

48 Ibid., 53-60.

essence of the primary source as she transforms the same impulse she experienced when reading the author's work into her own writing.

Saariaho's compositional style seems to build and sustain itself by blending choral and orchestral sounds while creating tone colored fields of sonority.<sup>49</sup> The Finnish conductor Susanna Mälkki, who conducted the Met debut of *L'Amour de loin*, describes Saariaho's music as exhibiting a special voice. She said that, "[Saariaho's] language is unlike any other music language of any other composer. I don't actually know how she does it, because we are really swept on to a mysterious world of sounds."<sup>50</sup>

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49 Yayoi Uno Everett. *Reconfiguring Myth and Narrative in Contemporary Opera: Osvaldo Golijov, Kaija Saariaho, John Adams, and Tan Dun*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 87.

50 Jeff Lunden. "'Half Of Humanity Has Something To Say': Composer Kaija Saariaho On Her Met Debut." *National Public Radio* (December 3, 2016), <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/12/03/503986298/half-of-humanity-has-something-to-say-composer-kaija-saariaho-on-her-met-debut>.

## THE PATH TO COMPOSING OPERA

Saariaho's affection for the voice was evident from her early works. Her compositional output from the late 1970s includes many melodic vocal works, a compositional characteristic which appears less frequently in her later style. Her bond with literature contributed to her strong affinity for the voice. She once claimed that at the beginning of her studies she could only compose songs inspired by literature and poems. Her first publicly performed work was *Bruden* (Bride; 1977). The piece is a song cycle for soprano, two flutes, and two percussionists and is based on texts by Edith Södergran, the Finnish-Swedish modernist poet.<sup>51</sup> She then abandoned her familiar compositions for the voice in order to expand her orchestral writing. In the 1980s she eventually reconnected with the voice as she began writing vocal chamber works.

In the 1980s and 1990s Saariaho's compositions began to expand her expressions into other media for a more emotional effect. She wrote pieces that combined music, text, electronics, tape, video and dance. In the late 1980s the Finnish National Opera commissioned the ballet *Maa* that was subsequently premiered in 1991. Another example of her dramatic sense is *Study for Life* (1981) written for female voice, tape calls, theatrical lighting effects and scents that are to be discharged into the auditorium during the performance. Also, *Kollisionen* (1984) was written for percussion and live electronics.

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51 Moisala, *Kajja Saariaho*, 29.

These works with multimedia components created a path, which allowed Saariaho to open the creativity within her to develop an opera.

In the 1990s, Saariaho's style shifted in a new direction with a return of more melodically expressive gestures and heightened rhythmic activity.<sup>52</sup> Melodic and rhythmic gestures became more central to her music. She also gradually began to write extensive orchestral and vocal works. She felt that it was important to compose music that focused on melody again since her recent music had focused primarily on timbre and structure since the early 1980s. While once again embracing the melodic aspect in her music, she was able to examine the emotional emphasis vocal music evoked while maintaining the rich timbral variations in her compositions.<sup>53</sup> She wrote multiple works utilizing the voice in preparation of creating her first opera and intentionally composed three works to finesse the skills needed for its success.<sup>54</sup> These vocal compositions leading up to *L'Amour de loin* were *Château de l'Âme* (1995), *Lonh* (1996), and *Oltra Mar* (1998-99) for orchestra and mixed choir.

*Château de l'âme* (The Castle of Soul) is written for soprano, eight female voices and orchestra. It was premiered at the Salzburg Music Festival in 1995. The work consists of five songs, with the first three songs based on ancient Indian Vedic texts, while the last two are based on Egyptian magic spells. There is no electronic component to this composition because Saariaho wrote this piece as an experiment to determine how well the expressive vocal text would combine with her distinctive orchestral textures. The music Saariaho

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52 Parsons, *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers*, 156.

53 Moisala, *Kajja Saariaho*, 40.

54 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and L'Amour de Loin," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

develops in this work is created with a polyphonic dialogue between the wide-spinning soprano line and the whispering female chorus amidst her colorful orchestration.<sup>55</sup> The solo voice encompasses strong emotional expressions that are embellished by the orchestra and chorus. This composition was Saariaho's first vocal piece with orchestra.<sup>56</sup>

The successful premiere of *Château de l'âme* ensured the foundation being laid for the premiere of Saariaho's first opera. Gerard Mortier, general director of the Salzburg Festival at the time of the premiere of Saariaho's first vocal piece with orchestra, proposed the commissioning of an opera. He then introduced Saariaho to the French-Lebanese novelist Amin Maalouf which reinvigorated her dedication to the journey toward her first opera by the two of them equally encouraging ideas toward a common goal.<sup>57</sup> Saariaho subsequently dedicated this opera, *L'Amour de loin*, to Mr. Mortier.<sup>58</sup>

As Saariaho began to search for a theme for her first opera, she discovered a book about medieval legends, *La fleur inverse* by Jacques Roubaud.<sup>59</sup> This book contained a brief biography of the medieval troubadour Jaufré Rudel as well as his poem *Lanquan li jorn son lonc en mai* (When the days are long in May). She decided this poem was ideal for her next vocal piece she would write in preparation for her opera. After having successfully combined the voice with orchestration, she focused on combining the voice with her use of electronics. *Lonh (Afar)* was the resulting work for soprano solo and electronics. The creation was premiered at the Wien Modern Festival in 1996 and later was awarded the Nordic Music Prize. The composition is structured into nine parts based on the nine verses

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55 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 87.

56 Ibid., 40-41.

57 Ibid., 22.

58 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

59 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 43.



of the poem. Her focus with this piece was the setting of the vocal line against the electronic sound material. The vocal lines lament while mingled with delicate electronic sounds.<sup>60</sup> The electronic sounds consist of recorded elements and sounds processed in real time, but the voice is the center of the piece. The sensual and expressive melodic line moves through the virtual sonorous work made up of electronic sounds as well as natural sounds of wind, birds, and rain.<sup>61</sup> Music critic John Story commented on *Lonh* by saying:

The diatonic vocal line sounds medieval in the context of the glittering mobile of electronic sounds that surround the voice, but, in fact it uses all the vocal colors available to the 20<sup>th</sup> century diva from speech to full-throated operatic singing...Whatever formal device she uses to actually compose her music, the sensation of listening to it is a kind of free association in which each sound unit leads to the next by a process that can only be described as instinctual.<sup>62</sup>

The twelfth-century troubadour's song written in a pre-French Occitanian dialect spoke deeply to Saariaho. She decided that the troubadour and theme, love from afar, would be the subject of her first opera. Saariaho originally conceived of *Lonh* as a prologue for *L'Amour de loin*.

After finding the topic of her first opera and composing pieces that focused on combining the solo voice with her compositional style, Saariaho concentrated on another important aspect of opera, the chorus. *Oltra Mar: Seven Preludes for the New Millennium* (Across the Sea) was written for a large orchestra and mixed choir. It was commissioned by the New York Philharmonic in 1998-99. Saariaho later reworked ideas from this work in *L'Amour de loin*, the majority during the fourth act. The texts for the work come from an Arabic poem written by Abou Said, a death song by an African ethnic group, and a section

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60 Anthony Tommasini, "A Space With Room to Invite Immersion," *The New York Times* (October 15, 2016): C3.

61 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 87.

62 *Ibid.*, 40-45.

from a novel by Amin Maalouf.<sup>63</sup> This piece shows Saariaho's skill for creating beauty with expressions of spectralist techniques.<sup>64</sup> The composition is comprised of seas of noise that turn into songs and waves of melodic ornamentations. They follow the harmonics of repeated fundamental perfect fifths creating an ostinato, as if waves were crashing on the shore. The sixth prelude, *Mort: in memory of Gérard Grisey*, honors the richness of Grisey's style, which transformed her own writing. The stillness of her texture allows her to express death.

The completion of *L'Amour de loin* brought to fruition an approach she had been conceptualizing for years, but its inspiration continued to influence her creativity. After completing the opera, Saariaho concluded her work on the topic with *Cinq reflects de L'Amour de loin* (Five Reflections on Love from Afar; 2001).<sup>65</sup> This piece is a symphonic poem written for orchestra, soprano and baritone soloists, and choir. The composer had now formulated five songs that encased the dramatic intensity of the opera.<sup>66</sup>

Saariaho's stimulation from her first opera persisted as she moved forward with new compositions. In 2002 she wrote *Quatre instants* (Four Moments), which further developed musical ideas from her opera. She originally wrote this work for soprano and piano, but eventually wrote a second version for soprano and orchestra. Pierre Gervasoni from *Le Monde* predicted that this composition "will surely become a core work within the

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63 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 45.

64 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and *L'Amour de Loin*," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

65 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 48.

66 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and *L'Amour de Loin*," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

repertoire of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The music ceases to be subliminal and becomes the transmission of real-life.”<sup>67</sup>

Initially Saariaho anticipated *L'Amour de loin* would be her only opera, but the collaboration of Maalouf, Peter Sellars (director of the world premiere), and Saariaho proved to be extremely successful and brought new propositions. Gerard Mortier, as the newly elected director of the French National Opera, Opéra Bastille, offered Saariaho a new commission for her second opera.<sup>68</sup> As a result, in March of 2006, *Adriana Mater* was premiered at the National Opéra de Paris.

The successful collaboration continued as another commission was offered jointly by the Vienna Festival, Barbican Center in London, Lincoln Center in New York, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. This time Saariaho chose to write an oratorio based on the life of Simone Weil (1909-43), the French-Jewish philosopher and mystic. *La Passion de Simone* was written for soprano, chorus, orchestra and electronics. It premiered in Vienna in November of 2006 for the New Crowned Hope Festival to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mozart's birth.<sup>69</sup>

In 2010 her most recent opera was premiered at the Opéra de Lyon. *Emilie* is a monodrama for soprano soloist and orchestra based on the life and writings of Marquise Émilie du Châtelet. It recounts the achievements of the first woman to establish an international scientific reputation with pioneering work in the study of fire.

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67 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 48.

68 Ibid., 23.

69 Ibid., 24.

## L'AMOUR DE LOIN

Composing an opera seemed to be a natural evolution for Saariaho due to her multisensory sensations that fuel her musical creativity. Her visual dimension of music, along with the love of literature, provided a powerful combination for the creation of staged art. After conceiving a piece to further develop the use of melody within her orchestral texture, *L'Amour de loin* was jointly commissioned by the Salzburg Festival, the *Théâtre du Châtelet* in Paris, and the Santa Fe Opera. Although it took Saariaho nearly a decade to conceive the opera, she composed it in just over eighteen months in 1999 and 2000.<sup>70</sup> It was the first of her large-scale vocal works and premiered at the Salzburg Festival in 2000. The work is a spiritual journey for the main characters about love and death, but it also embodies all of the musical comprehension Saariaho had accumulated during her own expedition as well as her own spiritual journey. She once said:

In the midst of composing it, I understood that it was also my story. I was at once the troubadour and the lady, these two parts of me that I try to reconcile in my life. To write music, concentration is necessary, an interior hearing. To be a woman, to be a mother, one needs to be always available and busy. It's difficult to have, at the same time, your feet on the ground and your head in the sky.<sup>71</sup>

As mentioned previously, the opera is based on the life and writings of Jaufré Rudel, one of the first great troubadours of the twelfth century. The libretto is based on Rudel's

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70 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and L'Amour de Loin," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

71 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

poem, *Lanquan li jorn son lonc en may* (When the Days are Long in May), and his poem *Quan lo rossinhos el folhos* (When the Nightingale in the Leafy Wood).<sup>72</sup> The remainder of the opera's libretto is based on the partly fictional account of his life entitled *La Vida breve*. Jaufré Rudel has been the subject of many Romantic writers including Ludwig Uhland, Heinrich Heine, Robert Browning, Giosué Carducci, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and Sir Nizamat Jung Bahadur.<sup>73</sup> The libretto for *L'Amour de Loin* is a French poetic adaptation written by Amin Maalouf.<sup>74</sup> The opera is not a historical or mythic opera, but instead an interpretation of the medieval narrative created by Maalouf.<sup>75</sup> *Opera News* referred to the writer's libretto as "the finest of the last hundred years."<sup>76</sup>

The theme of love, longing, and death implies that the opera is of the romantic conventions reminiscent of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, although holistically, the opera is most closely related to the convention of spiritual opera similar to Messiaen's *St. François d'Assise* and Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande*.<sup>77</sup> The opera is an emotional musical presentation about longing and maturing love with the majority of the drama occurring within the characters' mind sets instead of actions.

The plot of the opera is a minimalistic mythic tale of unrequited love. It recounts the tale of the twelfth-century Prince of Blaye in Occitania, in southern France, who falls in love

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72 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 47.

73 Ibid., 114.

74 Anthony Tommasini, "With Women in Command, the Met Opera Addresses a Gender Gap," *The New York Times* (September 15, 2016): AR46.

75 Kaija Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*. Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin. Kent Nagano. With Ekaterina Lekhina, Marie-Ange Todorovitch, Daniel Belcher, and the Rundfunkchor (Berlin. Published 2009). Original sound recording made by harmonia mundi s.a. HMC 801937.38 (2 compact discs), 13.

76 William Braun. "Songs of Love from Far Away: Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin* receives its Met premiere, conducted by Susanna Mälkki." *Opera News* (March 2017): 33.

77 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 100.

with the Countess of Tripoli, now known as Lebanon, whom he has never met. The third character in the opera, the Pilgrim, sways back and forth between the distant lovers transmitting the troubadour's songs creating a pendulum effect in the story.<sup>78</sup> After spending the days writing poems about his beloved, Jaufré finally decides to journey across the Mediterranean to join her. While voyaging across the stormy sea, the prince falls ill only to die in the countess's arms upon arrival. Clémence, the countess, is devastated and swears off love for the rest of her life by vowing to enter a convent.

Even though the plot line of the opera is minimal, the music depicts the emotional shifts in the characters as they try to deal with the universal themes of idealism versus reality. She employs smaller sections of the orchestra to interpret the individual character's emotions. Her use of this type of chamber like texture creates an ethereal score luring the audience into a trance with its haunting sounds.<sup>79</sup> The vocal lines of the characters are lush and intense with bursts of dramatic orchestration. Moments of volatile expression are created with passionate outbursts of the fuller ensemble, common elements expected in a dramatic grand opera.

Saariaho's use of familiar operatic ideas reinforces the opera's drama and passion. However, she cleverly employs conventional ideals without adhering to their normal usage. Saariaho chose a story that takes the conventional operatic plot of boy-meets-girl, boy-gets-girl, then tragedy strikes, and inverts the story line while bringing it together with

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78 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

79 Priscilla Frank, "In Just Over 100 Years, The Met Has Only Staged Two Operas By Women," *The Huffington Post* (December 20, 2016), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/met-opera-woman-composer\\_us\\_58583f7ae4b03904470a19d6](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/met-opera-woman-composer_us_58583f7ae4b03904470a19d6).

sensuous music.<sup>80</sup> Instead, the boy meets the girl just before he dies, therefore he is unable to get the girl. This plot line, however, allows Jaufré's vulnerability to be revealed more dramatically, creating for an expansive theatrical climax when he eventually dies.

The opera also explores the timeless themes of love and death; however Saariaho approaches them differently. The simple plot deepens from the emotional weight of the characters, lacking the conventional action and physical movements we might expect in an opera. There are no fights or murders. In fact there is no physical violence between the characters within the story, only turbulence and discord within the motion of the music. According to the composer, this opera speaks through the mindset of the characters. Peter Sellars described the opera by saying, "[I]t is highly theatrical in the sense that it dramatizes the life of the soul, it dramatizes this inner movement, leaving most of the events of the outer world apart."<sup>81</sup> The opera falls into an internal or external scope of action. Even though the dramatic elements of the story occur predominantly within the mind of each character, each character's motivation is still clear. Alex Ross described it when reviewing the DVD documentation of *L'Amour de loin* made at the Finnish National Opera. "Saariaho's music captures with magical immediacy the drastic emotions that swirl around this romance, which is different from standard operatic melodrama in that the action is largely psychological. Saariaho's stroke of genius is to keep the melodic lines

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80 Anne Midgette, "A woman's distant opera takes the Met stage," *The Washington Post* (December 18, 2016), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style/wp/2016/12/18/a-womans-distant-opera-takes-met-stage/?utm\\_term=.d8bc197a1310](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style/wp/2016/12/18/a-womans-distant-opera-takes-met-stage/?utm_term=.d8bc197a1310).

81 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 96.

spare and directly admit the orchestral phantasmagoria; Debussy's *Pelleas and Melisande* is her vocal model."<sup>82</sup>

In a recent interview on NPR, Saariaho suggested that with this opera she asks the questions "What does it mean that we love somebody?" and "Do we really love another person, or do we love our idea of love?" In grand opera, the theme of doomed love is a standard subject, but Saariaho focuses on the intensity of desire. The opera implies a greater truth, that loss gives joy meaning.<sup>83</sup> Regarding death, it inquires "What happens to us when we lose somebody we love?"<sup>84</sup>

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82 Ross, "Birth: A new opera,"

<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2006/04/24/birth>.

83 Justin Davidson, "Opera Review: Kaija Saariaho's *L'amour de loin* Is Iridescently Beautiful, *Vulture* (December 2, 2016), <http://www.vulture.com/2016/12/lamour-de-loin-is-iridescently-beautiful.html>.

84 Lunden, "Half Of Humanity Has Something To Say," <http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/12/03/503986298/half-of-humanity-has-something-to-say-composer-kaija-saariaho-on-her-met-debut>.



## THE COMPOSITION

There are audience members who attend an opera expecting to hear music in the style of Mozart or even Puccini and have great difficulty enjoying operas written in a comparatively newer style. Howell states that, “there have been notable few successful atonal operas; those which exist have generally found some alternative to diatonic harmony as fuel for continuous forward motion.”<sup>85</sup> The true success of a work is not fully understood for decades after it is written. A musical piece that has stood “the test of time” is when it is truly successful. But for works that are only a few decades old (or less), then its success becomes about the works public reception, how often it is performed, how well it is attended, and how many positive reviews it receives. Opera companies around the world work to program operas that people will want to see and seasons that inspire patrons to donate their money. As mentioned in the introduction, opera companies produce fewer contemporary operas, or for the purpose of this paper, operas written within the last fifty years, than the more widely performed operas from earlier periods. Why is this? Most likely audiences do not tend to support the newer works as much as the familiar ones, thus causing the companies to rely on “the old favorites” to appeal to audiences, donors, and sometimes conservative Boards of Directors for financial support.

As the compositional conventions begin to change in music, the organizations that perform these works have to allow the audience’s aural expectations to change as well in

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85 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 110.

order for the new works to be fully embraced. Major-minor tonality has prevailed in western music since about the seventeenth century until the early twentieth century when atonality began to be utilized more frequently. After a long reign of this particular compositional convention, it is understandable that a new aural experience that has only existed in music just over one hundred years might still have trouble being accepted by the general audience of concerts and operas. Atonality in its broadest sense is music that lacks a tonal center or key and does not conform to the system of tonal hierarchies characterized in classical European music. By this definition, *L'Amour de loin* could be considered atonal, but Saariaho created a foundation of rich timbres containing a few harmonic threads that are woven throughout the opera. These timbres allow Saariaho to create a force similar to the conventional concepts of harmony that unconventionally create harmonic drive and structural coherence.<sup>86</sup> Shirley Fleming from *Musicalamerica.com* described the opera saying, "Though the score cannot be called tonal, its harmonic language hits the ear as hypnotically consonant."<sup>87</sup>

Another use of sound color in Saariaho's music provides a conventional framework that is obtained through a revolutionary approach. In tonal music the buildup and resolution of tension that determines the form of a piece usually occurs as a result of the harmonic functions of consonance and dissonance; however in this piece, she deploys timbre as her building block for the structure, using fields of sonorities and dynamics similar to that of conventional harmonic functions. Tommasini explains in one of his reviews, "Her harmonic language is tonally grounded, with frequent uses of sustained low

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86 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and L'Amour de Loin," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

87 Moisala, *Kajja Saariaho*, 47.

pedal tones, but not tonal. Bits of dissonance, piercing overtones, and gently jarring electronic sounds spike the undulant harmonies, but so subtly that the overall aural impression is of beguiling consonance.”<sup>88</sup>

Saariaho creates tension and release with dichotomies of color and texture by using sounds such as cacophony versus still, bright versus dark, or grainy versus smooth sounds allowing her to build directional transitions and movement within the piece and create anticipation and resolution. The oppositional sound characters create movement reminiscent of a harmonic progression in tonal music.<sup>89</sup> Although it is a contemporary opera without the use of conventional tonal hierarchies, Saariaho is still able to create forward motion and structure through her use of sound dissonances. She said:

My music does not necessarily lead to developmental progression in the same sense that it would in romantic music, although my music does have a sense of direction, which is created by using unconventional methods. The musical dynamics arise from the directions, which can be heard, so that the audience perceives the direction in which music is moving.<sup>90</sup>

Saariaho’s music is not viewed as conforming to rules of conventional analytical tools, but reorganizes the conventional hierarchies of musical parameters. She tends to prioritize timbre over pitch and harmony, reversing the more familiar hierarchical paradigms and achieving structure within the conventional framework by featuring instrumentally and electronically varied sound color. The opera’s unique colors are accomplished through rich orchestration, pre-recorded electronic material, expanded vocal techniques such as glissandi, and instrumental techniques such as bowing close to the

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88 Anthony Tommasini. “Opera Review; A Prince Idealizes His Love From Afar,” *The New York Times* (August 17, 2000), <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/17/arts/opera-review-a-prince-idealizes-his-love-from-afar.html>.

89 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 79.

90 *Ibid.*, 74.

bridges. Paul Nelson analyzed Saariaho's use of electronics, noting that in the manner with which she uses them, they shape her composition making the form clear to the ear in the same way the structure is clear in more conventional music.<sup>91</sup>

The music of the opera has been described as radiating metallic shimmer and a sheen of iridescent sea foam. She captured changeable textures such as bell-like sinuous landscapes and whirlwinds of violence by combining acoustic and electronic sounds.<sup>92</sup> The score is alive with color and inner details including animated buzzing, frenzied riffs and swift ostinatos along with murky, hovering slowness.<sup>93</sup> Nelson believes many composers use electronics to set a mood or create new sounds, while Saariaho uses them to create the form of the piece.<sup>94</sup> Saariaho's purposefully placed use of electronic sounds is another way in which she generates forward motion and heightens the drama.

Saariaho's use of conventional musical devices such as medieval European harmonies and Middle Eastern rhythms is another way she creates her picturesque tones in the opera.<sup>95</sup> Fleming from *Musicalamerica.com* noted, "Ms. Saariaho occasionally evokes an antique flavor with the struck harp arpeggios of the troubadour music, rhythms of medieval dance and modal harmonies tailored to each of the three characters."<sup>96</sup> She sparingly used medieval resonances in the opera, namely modal scales, faint drones, harp figures to represent the lute, and augmented seconds to suggest the East.<sup>97</sup> These

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91 Paul Nelson, "The Uses of Electronics in Three Works by Kaija Saariaho," <http://www.pnelsoncomposer.com/writings/KaijaSaariahoAnalysis.html>. May 10, 2004.

92 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

93 Tommasini, "A Medieval Love Story," C5.

94 Nelson, "The Uses of Electronics in Three Works by Kaija Saariaho."

95 Platt, "The Sound of Love," 11.

96 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 47.

97 Saariaho, *L'Amour de loin*. Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, 16-17.

recognizable musical gestures, passages, and patterns are fully integrated into her own compositional language and help bring the story of this troubadour to life.

Another conventional musical device employed by Saariaho is motifs, short musical phrases used to identify characters, ideas, or other plot elements. Although short recurring musical phrases can be heard in music dating back to Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), Saariaho repurposed these motifs to bring life to her composition. The motifs evolve like characters within the context of the opera; they are constantly modified as the characters gather new experiences and remember the past differently, yet the motifs retain their recognizable identity.<sup>98</sup> Her ever-changing gestures regularly alter the color of the orchestration, as the orchestra reflects and interacts with the vocal lines as opposed to merely serving an accompanimental function. The text merges into the orchestra creating an interdependent relationship between the vocal line and orchestral color, a unique aspect of Saariaho's style. This relationship created between the vocal lines and the orchestra forms a perpetually moving organism in the music.<sup>99</sup>

From the very beginning the orchestra establishes the story's mystical atmosphere with expressive murmurings; the low strings are the foundation from where other musical events can grow.<sup>100</sup> The music begins by emerging out of a deep shudder and seemingly transports us into the consciousness of the troubadour.<sup>101</sup>

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98 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 92.

99 Ibid., 99.

100 Wenger, "The Troubadour and the Lady," <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

101 Ross, "Sound Waves: In New York, the oceanic music of Kaija Saariaho and Gérard Grisey," 96.

Arising out of the opening low string foundation appears an oboe solo, a clear example of an evolving motif heard throughout the opera. The oboe solo in the overture is the original statement of the motif followed by returns of the musical gesture in fragments or variations at moments when love and longing are depicted within the drama. Anni Oskala referred to this motif as the “Love from Afar” theme.<sup>102</sup>

The theme first appears in the overture as the oboe plays the entire gesture accompanied by the orchestra. In evaluating the score, it is noted that the oboe melody begins on an A moving down through a trilled G before resting a third lower on an E. Then it jumps back up to the original A and repeats the same melodic gesture; this time it appears as a triplet moving down to G and E, continuing down to B-flat before resting slightly on A. This second melodic idea is completed by leaping up to an F and ending a half step lower on an E. The third phrase of the theme again uses a triplet figure before ending on a trilled A for three beats. The last phrase of the theme starts on a G-sharp, rises to an A and continues upward to a trilled D. After being held for four beats, the D rises to an F that is held for five and a half beats. After two and a half beats of rest, the “Love from Afar” theme ends on a trilled E for seven beats.

In Act II, Saariaho intersperses a fragment of the oboe solo in the Pilgrim’s line as he tells Clémence about the troubadour and sings his song. In Act III, as Jaufré is relating his dreams about Clémence to the Pilgrim, the oboe sings in duet with Jaufré a variation of the opening motif. In the love song accompanied by the “love from afar” theme, Jaufré expresses his inability to keep Clémence near.

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102 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 49.

The variation of the theme begins on the same A moving through a trilled G to an E but this time ends on an F. The second phrase begins again like the original melody: A moving to G and E, then leaping down to B-flat and A before leaping back up to F and E. Although, in this variation the phrase continues repeating A, G, E and A, G, down to B-flat before ending on E. The next two phrases of the variation center around A, B-flat, and E leading to the final phrase that repeats the opening statement of A, G, E before leaping up to the B-flat and ending with a final statement of A down to E.

In Act IV Clémence sings the same variation from the previous act in a dream Jaufré has while crossing the ocean to be with his love. In the score at this point, Clémence sings the opening statement of the variation A, G, E elongated over several measures. This melody soars over Jaufré's line and the female chorus. The return of Jaufré's melody sung by Clémence in the dream foreshadows the prince's death. His fears of not keeping Clémence close will soon be realized through death.

The motif is not heard again in its entirety and original form until the end of the Act V when Jaufré dies and Clémence has decided not to love another again. At this point in the score, the oboe once again plays the original melody from the overture accompanied by the orchestra. As Clémence vows to continue loving Jaufré beyond the grave, the return of this melody serves as a reminder that love outlives death.

Other uses of musical motifs included interweaving hints of medieval sounds such as the hypodorian modal essence in Jaufré's melody to define the character throughout the entire opera. She created recurring musical gestures in combinations of melodic lines, rhythms, and instrumentations to represent the three main characters in the opera. These

gestures not only provide compositional consistency, but Saariaho also uses them to further develop the characters.

Jaufré's music is set consistently in the lower register voiced by the oboe and low strings. The harp plays perfect fifths and fourths to signify the spirit of the troubadour's lute song. His vocal parts move stepwise within a narrow register, differentiating Jaufré's character as a diatonic, modal identity, especially with respect to the other characters.<sup>103</sup>

In my study of the score, the harp was observed playing fifths to introduce his narrow, step-wise melody. At this moment in the drama, Jaufré is writing a song about unachievable love, and the use of the harp represents him composing a song on his lute, the typical instrument of choice for a troubadour. The phrases of his first lament reveal a medieval aura.<sup>104</sup> The song Jaufré sings in his initial appearance has clear historical influences creating a significant melody heard throughout the opera.

Musicologists have identified four of Rudel's melodies that have survived through the years. Saariaho paraphrased one of these melodies, *Lanquan li jorn*, to create additional music for Jaufré in the opera. She did not quote or imitate the original melody, but simply wrote a variation of it to represent the character. As the melody appears throughout the opera, it is sung with French text but also occurs in its original language of Occitanian. The original text of the poem further captures the medieval atmosphere.<sup>105</sup>

Figure 1 is the original melody written by Jaufré Rudel in the twelfth century. The opening melody for the character Jaufré Rudel written by Saariaho does not directly quote the original melody. Instead she employed fragments and variations of the troubadour's

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103 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 114.

104 Tommasini, "A Medieval Love Story," C5.

105 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 98.



original melody to give her character's voice a modal quality. In the evaluation of the score it is noticed that the modal quality of Jaufré's melody is in the use of the hypodorian scale built upon a lower tetrachord of D, E, F, G consisting of tone-semitone-tone followed by the pentachord G, A, B-flat, C, D, tone-semitone-tone-tone. His opening melody stays within the octave but never reaches the higher D and primarily moves by step, never leaping wider than a third as is also the case with the original troubadour melody from the twelfth century.



Figure 1 Jaufré Rudel's original troubadour melody

Clémence is portrayed musically with a bright sonority, and her lines are frequently set against high-register instruments, such as bells, triangle, piccolo, harp, and violins.<sup>106</sup> Her motif usually contains rising scales and wide leaps accompanied by fifths on the harp, and the vocal line often includes rich ornamentation and short glissandi. Moisala noted that, "The Oriental flavor, for its part arises from microtonality and melismatic vocal lines."<sup>107</sup>

After examining the score, the brighter timbre of Clémence's music is clearly heard in the high register of the instruments. Saariaho engages the chorus to contribute to the distinct sound by keeping the women higher in their registers with clear sustained pitches,

<sup>106</sup> Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 114.

<sup>107</sup> Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 98.

F-sharp for sopranos and B for altos, as Clémence's melody continues to climb through trills and glissandi, starting on F-sharp and eventually reaching a B. Each of the elements coalesces to give the countess her own unique timbre throughout the opera. Although Jaufré and Clémence each have their own separate harmonic language, the two sound worlds eventually merge together.<sup>108</sup> This enriched timbre lyrically moves the tragic story forward.<sup>109</sup> Mälkki describes Saariaho's masterful combination of the worlds of the troubadour and the romanticized woman as a resulting, intimate piece.<sup>110</sup>

The Pilgrim spends his time traveling between the distant lovers' worlds. His unique sound frequently features a descending motif played alternately by the piccolo and three other flutes.<sup>111</sup> Befittingly, the Pilgrim's music connects the spatial difference between Jaufré and Clémence, just as his character spans the physical distance between the two lovers in the drama. His motif rises out of the deep and ascends to the higher realm of the flutes and piccolo before beginning its descent.

The score shows the initial ascent leading up to the piccolo and flutes before descending to the Pilgrim's initial entrance in the opera on a low G-sharp and ascending up the interval of a seventh to F-sharp before descending back down to the G-sharp. His opening line foreshadows his role in the opera of connecting the distant lovers.

During a beautiful moment of the opera, the Pilgrim recalls Jaufré's songs to Clémence. At this moment Saariaho revisits the medieval modes of Jaufré's motif as the Pilgrim sings. This change of character in the Pilgrim's music by the use of Jaufré's modal

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108 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

109 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 98.

110 Lunden, "Half Of Humanity Has Something To Say,"  
<http://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2016/12/03/503986298/half-of-humanity-has-something-to-say-composer-kaija-saariaho-on-her-met-debut>.

111 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 98.

identity played in the reeds and hints of exotic dances effectively depicts the pilgrim's travels.<sup>112</sup> These motifs and individual sounds Saariaho created for the characters function as *leitmotifs* throughout the opera; by writing a motif to represent each character Saariaho established unity and aural relationships within the work.

Another conventional operatic device Saariaho included in this work is the use of a chorus. In fact, the chorus supports the plot similar to that of a "Greek chorus." (In ancient Greek plays, a group of performers would collectively comment on the dramatic action.) The women of Tripoli are Clémence's friends who help ground her as she falls in love with someone who is an ocean away. They help us to hear the inner dialogue in Clémence's mind, while the men's chorus plays a similar role for Jaufré.<sup>113</sup>

The chorus's role, however, is not limited to commenting upon on the story; it serves to intensify the drama as well. In *L'Amour de loin*, the chorus is given text painting such as the "tears motif". Throughout history, composers have used the *pianto*, a sighing gesture of a falling second, to indicate tears or sorrow. For example, in Bach's *St. John Passion*, BWV 245, the soprano aria "Zerfließe, mein Herze" frequently depicts the word "tot" (dead) in the music with a falling second. In Act II, scene 2, the chorus sings the falling second to signify the loss of Clémence's childhood.

Another example of text painting given to the chorus is at the beginning of Act IV. As Jaufré and the Pilgrim face their voyage across the sea, the chorus creates the essence of the ocean by producing percussive sounds to represent the waves of the sea. In the score, it

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112 Tommasini, "A Medieval Love Story," C5.

113 Seter, "Getting Close with Saariaho and *L'Amour de Loin*," <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

can be seen that each section of the choir has a different rhythmic pattern chanting a “sh” sound to create the effect of the crashing waves.

Saariaho emphasizes the deep emotional drama of the opera through another familiar musical form; in the last act Saariaho writes a song that is reminiscent of a hymn or chorale for the chorus to accompany Clémence as she sings her prayer. This conventional musical device illustrates Clémence’s spiritual transcendence.<sup>114</sup> According to Saariaho, the chorus is a sonic bridge between the orchestra and the characters.<sup>115</sup> The chorus amplifies the sonorous colors and textures of the scenes to increase the dramatic effect.

Another familiar musical device Saariaho includes is a folk dance. Dance forms have often been used in music to denote social classes. For example, in *Don Giovanni*, Mozart included a minuet to signify the noble standing of Donna Anna, Don Ottavio, and Donna Elvira. Likewise, in *L’Amour de loin*, Saariaho composes a tarantella to represent Jaufré’s friends.<sup>116</sup>

The tarantella originated in folk music as a Neapolitan folk dance in 6/8 or 3/8 time. It is typically characterized by an upbeat tempo and accompanied by the tambourine as can be seen in Act I. The orchestra accompanies the men’s chorus in a playful 6/8 tempo. Saariaho composed this dance to make clear that Jaufré is of a higher social class than his friends.

Incorporating the folk dance also augmented the text. Jaufré’s friends declare that he has changed and are bewildered that he has stopped participating in their activities. The

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114 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 99.

115 Woolfe, “Your Guide to a Met Milestone,” AR12.

116 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 115.

composer's addition of the tambourine emphasizes the rhythm of the tarantella; this explicit rhythm further reinforces the declamation of the text.

Like many composers before her, Saariaho furthers her expressive writing by placing descriptive musical motifs, often in the form of text painting, within the orchestral texture. This text painting occurs throughout the opera to embellish the characters or enhance the emotional drama. She integrates these musical devices in conventional ways, but develops them in her contemporary style.

In the introduction to Act III Saariaho composed music sounding like a galloping horse to set the scene of the prince riding a horse through the scene. Although a horse is not referenced in the opera, the motif signifies Jaufré's status as lord of the manor. In southern France during the twelfth century, a prince such as Jaufré would have engaged in many chivalrous pursuits such as hunting. Saariaho's orchestration makes this musical gesture uniquely descriptive, in which the galloping horse motif is brought to life by the 6/8 rhythms. These rhythms are played by the marimba, vibraphone, harp, and piano.<sup>117</sup> The percussive capabilities of the instruments bring to life the sound of the hooves against the ground.

This rhythmical gesture also creates a sense of urgency in the music. Saariaho allows the listener to feel the growing emotional intensity inside Jaufré as his conscious and unconscious thoughts revolve around Clémence; his desire for her seems to be overtaking his rational thought. The audience learns of his lovesickness shortly after the galloping horse motif when the Pilgrim informs the prince that everyone in the land thinks he has lost his mind.

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117 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 115.

Death is one of the main themes of the opera, and the composer wrote multiple musical gestures to foreshadow Jaufré's death. On numerous occasions, Saariaho wrote a descending scale in connection with the text foreseeing the prince's death. This can be considered a *catabasis*, which was used in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries to refer to death, the grave, or hell.<sup>118</sup> This descending figure first appears in Act IV when the troubadour and his friends are facing the storm. It begins in the harp, representing the troubadour's lute, and moves downward into the piano to foretell Jaufré's descent to his grave.

Another musical gesture to depict death in *L'Amour de loin* is Saariaho's composition of a cradlesong to accompany the ailing prince as he is carried to the castle. In the fifth act as Jaufré is dying, the harp plays a soft and slow 3/4 rocking rhythm as if to lull him to eternal rest. Although our perception of a cradlesong typically represents new life or childhood, there are also many musical examples where it refers to death. In Finnish operas, the cradlesong often depicts death, examples of which can be found in Armas Launis's *Kullervo*, Aulis Sallinen's *Horseman*, and Olli Kortekangas' *Daddy's Girl*.<sup>119</sup>

As Jaufré's death becomes more imminent, Saariaho indicated in the score for the instrumentalists to 'cease playing, one after another,' then later writes *morendo* (gradually dying away). These markings create a sense of life gradually ebbing away from the troubadour. Finally as Jaufré utters his last words to Clémence a steady beating motif is heard in the violins representing Jaufré's heart singing for Clémence as he slowly dies. As the rhythm-based motif fades it is taken over by the timpani. The timpani represents the beating of the prince's heart; the rhythmic gesture ends at the moment the prince dies. The

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118 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 117.

119 *Ibid.*, 118.

stopped heart is followed by the flutist being instructed in the music to blow air into a non-sounding instrument to represent the last of the air being expressed from the body or, perhaps, to imitate the snuffing out of a candle. The use of these three gestures individually brings awareness to death, but Saariaho's sequential use of these gestures elevates the climax of Jaufré's death.

Saariaho composed *L'Amour de loin* in her own musical language, but used conventional devices within her music to enhance the aesthetic and emotional qualities. She took a simple story with very little physical action or tension and captured the inner drama of the characters through the use of familiar musical gestures found throughout history.

## A MULTIMEDIA ART FORM

In an interview in 1984, Saariaho revealed, “as far as I myself am concerned, opera could perhaps mean some kind of multimedia experience.”<sup>120</sup> Robert Morgan described multimedia as the mixing of vocal and instrumental performances with other modes of artistic expression. This definition describes several projects Saariaho developed, leading her to compose an opera using conventional music devices and opera ideals in her own style, thus updating an art form she was determined to reform. As early as December 28, 1997 she sketched the word “film” in the margins of the score to denote the intent of using a video in the opera.<sup>121</sup>

Projection is not the only media Saariaho uses in *L'Amour de loin*. The score calls for 80 passages of pre-recorded electronic material in the opera. She utilized electronics in multiple ways throughout the work, as they allowed her to create effervescent and dreamlike worlds. For example, in the dream sequence of Act IV, Saariaho interjects whispers and birdsongs to distinguish Jaufré’s dream from the reality on stage.

Another opportunity for directors to incorporate a different media into the opera is the representation of the sea. Some even consider the sea to be the fourth character in Saariaho’s opera. The mood of the water is musically and intentionally connected to the

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120 Howell, *Kaija Saariaho: Vision, Narratives, Dialogues*, 108 – 109.

121 *Ibid.*, 110.



moods of the characters.<sup>122</sup> Robert Lepage, the director of the Met premiere, said, “I felt that she was trying to express musically what it is to be sitting separated by the sea. It swells, and it swells, and it swells, and it swells.”<sup>123</sup>

Saariaho’s music in *L’Amour de loin* has inspired her collaborators to further her idea of the multimedia production with regard to the “fourth character.” She depicted the mood of the sea through fluid dynamics, creating geysers, spray, and currents as well as the “effect of having no underlying rhythmic pulse,” according to William Braun from *Opera News*.<sup>124</sup> Peter Sellars, director of the world premiere, as stated above, as well as the Paris and Santa Fe productions, was motivated to literally create the ocean on the stage. He responded by covering the entire stage with ankle deep water.

Daniele Finzi Pasca, the director of the English National Opera and Canadian Opera Company productions, used sails of turquoise cloth with wind rustling the ocean waves. Saariaho’s multimedia art form also encouraged Pasca to draw on his experience with Cirque du Soleil.<sup>125</sup> Each of the principle characters shadowed by two acrobats was above the stage adding another layer of drama with this visual effect.

Robert Lepage opted to go in a different direction by creating the sea with a “stage-spanning” field of thousands of LED units constantly shifting like waves. The concept was designed by Michael Curry and Lionel Arnould.<sup>126</sup> The *Wall Street Journal* described it in

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122 Michael Cooper, “With 28,000 LEDs, It’s Lights! Lights! Lights! Action!,” *New York Times* (November 30, 2016): C1.

123 Wenger, “The Troubadour and the Lady,” <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-troubadour-and-the-lady-kaija-saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

124 William Braun. “Songs of Love *from Far Away*.” *Opera News* (March 2017): 32.

125 Mark Ronan, “Review – *L’Amour de loin*, English National Opera, London Coliseum, July 2009,” <http://www.markronan.com>. July 1, 2009.

126 Braun, “Songs of Love *from Far Away*,” 32.

this way: “Representing the sea, their colors changed kaleidoscopically, flowing with the characters’ moods and reinforcing the shape of the music.”<sup>127</sup> Lepage indicated in a recent interview that he felt the sea not only “separates the distant lovers and nations, but also connects them.”<sup>128</sup> James Jorden wrote, “The visual highlight of the evening, and indeed one of the most breathtaking sequences I’ve ever witnessed in an opera house, is Lepage’s depiction of a storm across the ocean, and ideal visual counterpart to Saariaho’s lurching brass fanfares.”<sup>129</sup>

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127 Heidi Waleson, “Songs Across the Sea: Only the second opera by a female composer to play the Met,” *Wall Street Journal* (December 5, 2016), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/lamour-de-loin-review-songs-across-the-sea-1480716175>.

128 Tommasini, “A Medieval Love Story,” C5.

129 James Jorden, “Lovers Separated by a Sea of Light in Met’s Production of ‘L’amour de Loin’: For the first time in a century, a woman composer is heard at the Met,” *Observer* (December 2, 2016), <http://observer.com/2016/12/lovers-separated-by-a-sea-of-light-in-mets-production-of-lamour-de-loin/>.

## RECEPTION HISTORY

The world premiere of *L'Amour de loin* was enthusiastically greeted by most critics in attendance.<sup>130</sup> After the premiere in Salzburg, *The New York Times* reported that Saariaho's evocations of the troubadour songs, with medieval modal harmony and fragments of elegiac tunes, were marvelous, and that it was a haunting and resonant work, as well as an often transfixing and utterly distinguished work.<sup>131</sup> David Murray of *The Financial Times* wrote, "*L'Amour de loin* is a strange idyll in suspended time: not, certainly, a repertoire piece, but a rare and rather magical experience." H.D. Pribil of *Wiener Zeitung* praised the opera, which "impresses through its bright, shimmering, waving, vibrating sound colors, which is reminiscent of both French impressionism as well as Messiaen."<sup>132</sup> Anthony Tommasini wrote: "Best known for her explorations of sound, Ms. Saariaho continues in that vein here with music that combines vivid orchestration, the subtle use of electronic instruments and imaginative, sometimes unearthly writing for chorus, which sings from the side of the stage."<sup>133</sup> By the end of 2000, Tommassini and Humphrey Burton of *BBC Music Magazine* agreed that *L'Amour de loin* was the best new opera of the year. It was also noted by Burton that, "there were standing ovations at every performance. Not

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130 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 45.

131 Tommasini. "Opera Review; A Prince Idealizes," <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/08/17/arts/opera-review-a-prince-idealizes-his-love-from-afar.html>.

132 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 45.

133 Woolfe, "Your Guide to a Met Milestone," AR12.

since 'Madam Butterfly' has there been such a touching depiction of a woman's ecstasy and grief."<sup>134</sup>

Within five years of the world premiere, *L'Amour de loin* was performed in many settings. In 2001 it was performed at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris and in the Opera House of Bern. In 2002 it had its U.S. premiere at the Santa Fe Opera. Robert Spano, the conductor of the American premiere, described Saariaho's music as "inviting and sensual. The sort of restated medieval music that runs throughout the opera [links] to chant, to certain medieval practices. It's an entirely new sound world. This world is so elegant and pristine and at the same time, so expressive and rich."<sup>135</sup> The *Houston Chronicle* said that it was one of the most acclaimed recent operas and a compelling first opera by a composer with a haunting musical voice.<sup>136</sup> Cori Ellison of *The New York Times* reviewed the opera by saying that it "appears well on its way to becoming one of the stand-out music dramas to emerge in recent memory." A few weeks later, James R. Oestreich of *The New York Times* referred to the opera as the main event of the Santa Fe Opera season.<sup>137</sup>

Within a few years of the American premiere of *L'Amour de loin*, Saariaho's works were being performed by major orchestras in Boston, Los Angeles, New York, and Washington. They were also performed at various music festivals, including the Ravinia Festival in Illinois and Tanglewood Festival in Massachusetts.<sup>138</sup> The opera received the Grawemeyer Award for Music Composition in 2003, an honor considered to be "the

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134 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 46.

135 Ibid., 46.

136 Charles Ward, "Review: Santa Fe's *L'Amour de loin* shines," *Houston Chronicle* (July 30, 2002), <http://www.chron.com/entertainment/music/article/Review-Santa-Fe-s-L-Amour-de-Loin-shines-2075624.php>.

137 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 47.

138 Ibid., 47.

foremost North American recognition given to a contemporary composer.”<sup>139</sup> This honor was awarded by a jury consisting of renowned musical experts and representatives of concert audiences.

A new staged version of the opera was performed in Darmstadt, Germany during the spring of 2003. The *Darmstädter Echo* reviewed the performance as follows: “Many were fascinated by the enchanting magic of the sounds unfolded by Saariaho in her opera, from the almost bewitchingly beautiful and vocal sensual and multicolored iridescent music.”<sup>140</sup> Many concert versions of *L’Amour de loin* were performed in the years following its premiere, taking place in cities such as Amsterdam, Brussels, London, Lebanon, Strasbourg, Berlin, and Paris.

The opera was finally performed in Saariaho’s hometown of Helsinki, Finland, in both 2004 and 2006. In the year between these productions, a DVD of the Finnish National Opera production was released as the world premiere recording. The production was conducted by long time friend and collaborator Esa-Pekka Salonen and directed by Peter Sellars.

In 2008 the opera was produced by the Bergen National Opera, for the Bergen International Festival in Bergen, Norway. The same year a recording was made with the Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin and Rundfunkchor Berlin. Kent Nagano was the conductor of this project and described Saariaho’s music as fundamentally impressionistic. “It creates impressions of colors, impressions of pictures, and impressions of several

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139 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 23.

140 Heinz Zietsch, “Magic of Love, magic of sounds, German première: Philippe Arlaud staged Kaija Saariaho’s opera *L’Amour de loin* in the state theater Darmstadt,” [In German.] *Darmstädter Echo* (April 28, 2003), [http://www.publicopera.info/opera200203/amourdeloin\\_darm\\_recensioni.html](http://www.publicopera.info/opera200203/amourdeloin_darm_recensioni.html).

different emotions, of a rich spirituality.”<sup>141</sup> It was released by harmonia mundi in 2009, and awarded a Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording in 2011. *Gramophone* reviewed the recording predicting that Saariaho’s opera might establish itself to be “one of the most significant and successful operas of recent decades.”<sup>142</sup>

After the English National Opera’s production in 2009, *The Telegraph* stated that “Saariaho tells this tale in music that is soft-grained and sinuously alluring, somewhere along a Late Romantic fault-line that leads from Massenet to Messiaen.”<sup>143</sup> Mark Ronan described this performance: “It is a static, dreamlike creation lacking theatrical action...[t]he production however was extraordinary.”<sup>144</sup>

Finally after being performed around the world, recorded twice, and winning an award, *L’Amour de loin* was noticed by Opera de Québec and the Metropolitan Opera Company. In 2015, Festival Opera de Québec agreed to produce a joint production with the Metropolitan Opera. After the Opera de Québec performance, *Opera News* characterized Saariaho’s musical world as sparse and intriguing. “[I]t ranges from seductive to alien, welcoming and frightening.”<sup>145</sup> The reviewer François Cavallès described the music of the opera saying, “It flourishes in the mode of alert, a feeling that it knows how to make alive in

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141 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 75.

142 John Allison, “Saariaho *L’Amour de loin*: A significant recent opera superbly played and performed,” *Gramophone* (February, 2010), <https://www.gramophone.co.uk/review/saariaho-lamour-de-loin>.

143 Rupert Christiansen, “ENO’s *L’Amour de loin*, review: ENO’s latest production is the operatic equivalent of a warm bubble-bath,” *The Telegraph* (July 6, 2009), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/opera/5756555/ENOs-LAmour-de-loin-review.html>.

144 Ronan, “Review – *L’Amour de loin*, English National Opera.”

145 Lev Bratishenko, “*L’Amour de loin*: Festival Opera de Québec,” *Opera News* (August 2015), [https://www.operanews.com/Opera\\_News\\_Magazine/2015/10/Reviews/QUEBEC\\_L’Amour\\_de\\_Loin.html](https://www.operanews.com/Opera_News_Magazine/2015/10/Reviews/QUEBEC_L’Amour_de_Loin.html).

a superb diversity, to join the ambition of the libretto and express the fears, the fragility of the heart.”<sup>146</sup>

In preparation of the Met debut, *The New Yorker* described “L’Amour de loin” as “an entrancing tale of doomed medieval love.”<sup>147</sup> Michael Cooper of *The New York Times* stated that *L’Amour de loin* is “one of the most acclaimed operas of the 2000s.”<sup>148</sup>

As with all new productions, certain aspects of the production and performances of the Met premiere received mixed reviews, the work itself was the subject of widespread admiration. In a review by the *Wall Street Journal* after the premiere, “L’Amour de loin” hailed as “one of the most important new operas of our era.”<sup>149</sup> *The Washington Post* described the work as “a long dreamlike suspension of expectation.”<sup>150</sup> Pricilla Frank of *The Huffington Post* noted that the stillness and simplicity of the storyline accentuates the mesmerizing soundscapes and hallucinatory visuals.<sup>151</sup> Russell Platt draws a comparison between Saariaho and Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992), a likeminded composer who also perceived colors when hearing musical chords, concluding that Saariaho’s gift “for weaving elements of mysticism and sensuality into that essentially intellectual quest, in a manner that has been more expressively refined and emotionally restrained than that of

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146 François Cavallès, “L’Amour de loin, opéra de Kaija Saariaho,” [Love from a distance Opera by Kaija Saariaho] *Anaclase la musique au jour le jour* (August 3, 2015), <http://www.anaclase.com/chroniques/lamour-de-loin>.

147 Ross, “Sound Waves: In New York, the oceanic music of Kaija Saariaho and Gérard Grisey,” 96.

148 Michael Cooper, “Met to Stage Its First Opera by a Woman Since 1903,” *New York Times* (February 17, 2016): C1.

149 Waleson, “Songs Across the Sea,” <http://www.wsj.com/articles/lamour-de-loin-review-songs-across-the-sea-1480716175>.

150 Midgette, “A woman’s distant opera,” [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style/wp/2016/12/18/a-womans-distant-opera-takes-met-stage/?utm\\_term=.d8bc197a1310](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/style/wp/2016/12/18/a-womans-distant-opera-takes-met-stage/?utm_term=.d8bc197a1310).

151 Frank, “In Just Over 100 Years,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/met-opera-woman-composer\\_us\\_58583f7ae4b03904470a19d6](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/met-opera-woman-composer_us_58583f7ae4b03904470a19d6).

Messiaen...”<sup>152</sup> Ronit Seter describes Saariaho’s hallmark compositional style in *L’Amour de loin*. “Her syntheses of the medieval style, minimalism, and spectralism – with touches of Debussy’s vocal style from his *Pelléas et Mélisende* and echoes of Wagner’s *Tristan* (the latter, clear at the end of the opera) – are just that, compelling syntheses; the seams are unseen making us blind to yet transfixed by the stylistic transitions...”<sup>153</sup> The *Observer* cheered *L’Amour de loin* as a journey to operatic bliss with the chorus as “golden voiced dolphins.”<sup>154</sup>

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152 Platt, “The Sound of Love,” 11.

153 Seter, “Getting Close with Saariaho and L’Amour de Loin,” <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/getting-close-with-saariaho-and-lamour-de-loin/>.

154 Jorden, “Lovers Separated by a Sea,” <http://observer.com/2016/12/lovers-separated-by-a-sea-of-light-in-mets-production-of-lamour-de-loin/>.



## CONCLUSION

Saariaho's opera *L'Amour de loin* has brought the standard for staged opera productions to new heights. *The Huffington Post* said it best: "As Saariaho's piece shows, new perspectives come with new ideas, aesthetics, and tactics. *L'Amour de loin* breaks from opera's conventional tropes to speak in a language unmediated by historical expectations."<sup>155</sup>

Opera was a natural path for Saariaho to pursue because she has always been stimulated by the human voice, especially the female voice as she feels that it is her voice.<sup>156</sup> Given her early affinity toward the voice and text, one might deduce that writing opera was inevitable. Ultimately by fulfilling her visual and aural expectations she successfully developed an art form that is truly a multimedia experience.

Although Saariaho's opera does not function around the classical tonal hierarchy of pitches, she incorporates numerous conventional musical devices to assist the audience in understanding her contemporary musical language, such as musical motifs, text painting, and traditional dance. Though her composition is abstract, the musical structure is clearly understood, thereby enabling the audience to listen outside conventional tonality. Her search for new timbres provided her with the tools to create new structures for her music without following conventional or more recognizable harmonic progressions. Saariaho

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155 Frank, "In Just Over 100 Years," [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/met-opera-woman-composer\\_us\\_58583f7ae4b03904470a19d6](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/met-opera-woman-composer_us_58583f7ae4b03904470a19d6).

156 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 111.

used her considerable musical knowledge and unique educational background to create her own musical language, often building progressions on changes in tonal colors to propel her music forward.

*L'Amour de loin* merges romantic opera conventions with contemporary spectral aesthetics. Her unique ideas toward timbre, in addition to her use of electronics, allowed Saariaho to modernize an art form using these familiar traditions and deepen the emotional weight of the characters. Saariaho placed electronic accents and changes of color in the sound within the opera to strengthen the climactic drama of the story.

By weaving musical devices such as text painting and folk dances into her composition, Saariaho brought clarity to the story and life to the characters; a galloping horse illuminates the stature of one character while the tarantella portrays the lower standing of his friends. Employing different harmonic languages for individual characters allows the audience to relate to each one's personality and emotions. Further, a steady, repeated rhythmic gesture conjures understanding for the loss of a life.

Saariaho paints mesmerizing scenic passages through tonal colors that can easily whisk the listener away and then ground them with familiar gestures. Her use of other media, including video and electronics, broadens our concept of opera while renewing the art form for a world immersed in this 21st-century multimedia culture. The success of her opera lies in her ability to compose new and unfamiliar sounds within a conventional framework that aids the audience in interpreting her musical language, thereby creating a modern experience for this timeless art form. Saariaho's works cleverly expand our comprehension of classical musical genres without opposing conventions.

Saariaho's music teaches us the importance of learning from and acknowledging the past as she transforms her own knowledge and experience into new paths and new frontiers of musical composition. She feels, "[t]he art music of our time is not elite music but an alternative movement...the task of today's artist is to nurture with spiritually rich art. To provide new spiritual dimensions. To express with greater richness, which does not always mean more complexity but with greater delicacy."<sup>157</sup> Kaija Saariaho's contribution to opera brilliantly merges conventional and unconventional devices while advancing the philosophy that music and all the arts must continually change and grow to communicate with the changing language of society in order to remain relevant and impact humankind.

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157 Moisala, *Kaija Saariaho*, 24.

## GLOSSARY

**Atonality** – The term refers to the absence of a particular kind of tonality, sometimes called tonic-dominant or triadic tonality.

**Hypodorian** – This term describes the second mode of Western church music, the plagal counterpart of the authentic first mode. It is composed of a lower tetrachord of tone-semitone-tone plus a pentachord tone-semitone-tone-tone.

**Modernism** – The dissolution of the traditional tonality and transformation of the foundations of tonal language, searching for new forms of altered tonality.

**Minimalism** – Music based upon the repetition of slowly changing common chords in steady rhythms, often overlaid with a lyrical melody. It utilizes repetitive melodic patterns, consonant harmonies, motoric rhythms, and a deliberate striving for aural beauty. It tends to have uninterrupted texture made up from interlocking rhythmic patterns and pulses. The harmonic sonorities are simple and presented in a slow harmonic rhythm.

**Musique concrète** – A composition technique using recorded sounds as raw material. The fundamental principle of musique concrète lies in the assemblage of various natural sound recorded on tape to produce a montage of sound.

**Permutation** – In music, a permutation of a set is any ordering of the elements of that set.

**Serial Music** – Music in which the organization of particular parameters, such as pitch, duration, timbre, register, and dynamics, is based on a particular ordering.

**Spectral Music** – (or spectralism) A compositional technique developed in the 1970s, using computer analysis of the quality of timbre in acoustic music or artificial timbres derived from synthesis.

**Texture** – The character of a composition or passage as determined by the relationship among the elements of which it consists including harmonic, spacing, tone color, and rhythm.

**Timbre** – It is the perceived tone quality or color of a sound given by its overtones such as the quality of tone distinctive of a particular singing voice or musical instrument.

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## APPENDIX I

### Performance history of *L'Amour de loin*

- The World premiere was August 15, 2000 at the Salzburg Festival.
- In 2001, the opera was performed at Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.
- It was staged at Stadttheater Bern, Switzerland in December 2001.
- The US premier was July 27, 2002 at the Santa Fe Opera.
- It was performed as a new staged version in Darmstadt, Germany in spring of 2003.
- It was performed at the Finnish National Opera in Helsinki in 2004 and 2006.
- In 2005, Jan Latham-Koenig conducted two concert performances as part of the Al Bustan International Festival of Music and the Arts in Beirut.
- Other concert versions were performed in Amsterdam, Brussels, London, Strasbourg, Berlin, and Paris.
- In 2008, the opera was produced by the Bergen National Opera, for the Bergen International Festival in Bergen, Norway.
- The English National Opera presented a new production in July 2009 at the London Coliseum.
- The Canadian Opera Company presented a co-production with English National Opera and Vlaamse Opera in February 2012.
- In 2015, the Landestheater Linz presented a production of the opera.
- The Aspen Opera Center presented it as part of the Aspen Music Festival and School's 2016, summer season.
- The opera premiered during the summer season of 2015 for the Festival d'Opéra de Québec. This was a co-production with the Metropolitan Opera.
- The Metropolitan Opera premiered *L'Amour de loin* in December of 2016.