

The Flute Music of Kaija Saariaho – Some notes on the musical language

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Laconisme de l'aile (1982)

In 1981, Kaija Saariaho was studying in Freiburg and experimenting with incorporating "noise" in the form of airy sounds into a coherent flute composition. She associated the flute with birds, with primitive music and with legends, and she was also interested in the flute's timbral continuum from low breathy tones into the clear and pure upper register. The piece she was working on became *Laconisme de l'aile*, which means brevity, or terseness, of the wing.

About this piece she writes:

“The possibility to move from secret whispers into clear, beautiful and 'abstract' sound was one of the starting points for *Laconisme de l'aile*, started in Freiburg and finished in Paris in 1982. Another important image on which I focused my mind when writing this piece was that of birds, not really their song but rather the lines they draw in the sky when flying. I had already started the piece when I felt the need to add a text in the beginning, which would in fact be the source for the musical material. The book *Oiseaux (Birds)* by St.-Jean Perse (1887-1975, a French poet and diplomat, Nobel-prize-winner in 1960) got into my hands in the public library of Freiburg, and I found a passage in this collection of poems that described somehow the images that I had in my mind: that of birds, fighting gravity, flying away, secret and immortal.”¹

Here is the passage:

*Ignorants de leur ombre, et ne sachant de mort que se qui s'en consume
d'immortel au bruit lointain des grandes eaux, ils passent, nous laissant,
et nous ne sommes plus les mêmes. Ils sont l'espace traversé d'une seule pensée.
Laconisme de l'aile!*

(Ignorant of their shadow, knowing of death only that immortal part which is consumed in the distant clamour of great waters, they pass and leave us and we are no longer the same. They are the space traversed by a single thought. Laconism of the wing!....)²

As one senses from this writing, these birds signify something quite different than "Il Cardellino" of Vivaldi or "Le Merle Noir" of Messaien. So, too, in her composing, Saariaho sought to captivate more than the birds' melodies. The sounds suggested in the poem include that of the "distant clamour of great waters", which somehow consumes the immortal part of death, and perhaps also that of the beating of the wings in flight. All of this can be heard in this piece, which culminates in the "space traversed by a single thought", represented by ethereal scales flying by and disappearing.

The music has two themes or ideas which interact and converge, but in this piece it is not only changing pitches and intervals which give momentum to the form. She has also incorporated into the process a wide range of extended techniques such as air sounds, key clicks, singing and playing, multiphonics, a variety of timbres, controlled vibrato, glissandi and microtonal scales. Her music wanders from the speaking voice to traditional flute tone to various degrees of timbral alterations and noise and various combinations of all of these.

This piece was the first in which she explored the possibilities of integrating all these effects into a coherent and distinctive musical language. Pierre Gervasoni later called this language a "harmony of timbres".³ In *Laconisme de l'aile*, and in her following compositions, she has organized the extended techniques according to a range of timbre, and is thereby able to create and build tensions normally associated with harmony while at the same time developing richer polyphonic textures for solo writing. ("If it's too linear, it's very boring," she once said to me.)

Specifically, the piece begins with the spoken poetry, interrupted by sighs but gradually developing into a scale of pure flute sound. This is more or less the capsule of the whole composition, a piece concerned with interrupted transformation of one type of sound to another, of certain musical gestures to another.

¹ Saariaho, unpublished

² Washington, March 1962, in *Collected Poems*, Bollingen Series LXXXVII, Princeton. Trans. by Robert Fitzgerald. p.638, 639.

³ in a monograph published by Edition Wilhelm Hansen A/S Copenhagen, ca. 1987, transl. by Deke Dusinberre.

Note for example the last part of that beginning in lines 4-5. Later on, that scale goes through different transformations, e.g. from flute sound to air, in line 11.

Here the scale falls at the end. This is another source of tension in the piece: that created between the rising scales and the falling glissandi. As the piece develops, various of these elements are superimposed on each other, adding to the timbral tension as well as creating polyphony. In one place (lines 18-19) she interrupts the *dolce* flute sound with measures in which almost everything happens at once: the rising and breaking scales, the voice, the falling glissando, and finally the air sound on the flute.

Ultimately all the elements of this composer's language serve to draw the listener into the special atmosphere evoked by the rather enigmatic, mystical vision of the messenger birds. Birds, which, as Kaija Saariaho writes, "-at least in my mind--became symbols of something unreachable, spiritual, 'longing for eternity'...."⁴

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NoaNoa (1992)

After *Laconisme de l'aile*, Saariaho continued to use the flute (indeed one of her favorite instruments) in various chamber music or orchestral works such as *...à la fumée* (1990) or *Oi Kuu* (1993) for bass flute and cello. Over the years, she developed a very personal way of writing for this instrument, combining the flute sound with phoneme material, using breath as an active element of the writing, singing certain kinds of glissandi, introducing microtonality, and carefully controlling the vibrato.

While Saariaho was composing the music to the ballet, *Maa* (1991), gestures from the flute parts seemed to develop a life of their own, leading her to compose *NoaNoa*. About this impulse she wrote, "Listening to the playing of Camilla Hoytenga over the years gave me the idea of writing a piece for her, and also to bring these aspects of my flute writing to an end..."⁵

She expanded in the introduction to the published score: "*NoaNoa* (Fragrant) was born in 1992 from ideas I had for flute while writing my ballet *Maa*. I wanted to write down, exaggerate, even abuse certain flute mannerisms that have been haunting me for some years, and thus force myself to move into something new. Formally I am experimenting with the idea of developing several elements simultaneously, first one after the other, then superimposed.

The title refers to a woodcut by Paul Gauguin called *NoaNoa*. It also refers to a travel diary of the same name, written by Gauguin during his visit in Tahiti 1891-93. The fragments of phrases selected for the voice part in the piece come from this book.

NoaNoa is also a team work. Many details in the flute part were worked out with Camilla Hoytenga. The electronic part was developed under the supervision of Jean-Baptiste Barrière, with Xavier as programmer."

With *NoaNoa*, innovative in terms of the compositional processes, the flute writing, and in the use of electronic tools, Kaija Saariaho created wonderfully exotic music and one of the most complex polyphonic works of the flute repertoire.

She achieved this polyphony by combining classical flute playing with an array of extended techniques including glissandi, trills, air sounds and multiphonics, as well as a special use of the voice, discussed in more detail below. She further enriched the texture with the use of electronics, employing them basically in three ways:

- 1) certain notes (like the high e at the beginning) are caught on to a reverb and extended while the flute continues to play
- 2) pre-recorded and processed flute and vocal material is triggered by the player during the piece
- 3) pre-recorded filter material is added.

These last are especially interesting: what has happened is that sounds of the flute and of some percussion instruments, like the cembalon or cowbell, have been analyzed by computer for their timbral content. Filter models have been built according to these analyses, and these in turn are used to alter the flute or other sounds, such as speaking or whispering.

⁴ Kaija Saariaho, unpublished, Dec.6, 1984

⁵ Kaija Saariaho, "Some notes about the use of flute in my music", unpublished

Originally, all these electronic additions were created in "real time," that is to say, they were effected by the player during the performance, the computer being triggered to react according to the pitch the flutist played.⁶ This was extremely complicated, however, because the score-follower had trouble reading glissandi and noise, and because the workstation only existed in one or two specialized studios. Subsequently a version was made for the Macintosh computer, which involved pre-recording and then programming the triggered effects to be later called up by the player via pedal during the performance. This, with subsequent updates, became the standard version.

Musically, one of the most prominent gestures is the **leap**. Introduced in the first measure, this is exaggerated in, for example, m. 17 and even more in m.102. Later it is filled out with a multiphonic (m.135) to which is added a filter.

Another important gesture, found already in the second measure, is the **glissando**. It is elongated in m.12, played then with fluttertongue in m. 30, with voice in m.77, and with fluttertongue, air sound, voice and electronic filter in m. 128.

Trills appear throughout the piece, exaggerated in a number of ways: overblown in m. 6, "doubly trilled" in m. 20, in various combinations with fluttertonguing, voice, and air, or extremely spun out as in m.137-141.

Ascending scales are of course also very present, the first one appearing alone in m. 29. Later they return with reverberation or repetitions, all of which piles up into an exaggerated series with added grace notes, quartertones, the voice and electronic filters at the end of the piece. In fact one hears that it has climaxed to the breaking point.

Unlike in *Laconisme de l'aile*, the **voice** is always used in combination with the flute or electronics, never independently. Again inspired by literature, Kaija Saariaho this time requires the flutist to recite not only phonemes, but complete words and fragments of Gauguin's text such as: *l'arbre sentait la rose très odorant...mélange d'odeur parfums parfums de santal très odorant...etc.* (the tree smells (senses) the rose very fragrant, a mélange of odors perfumes perfumes...etc.). These words are to be spoken, whispered or sung simultaneously with more or less normal flute sounds. This requires a particular way of blowing into the flute, of producing enough air for the flute to be able to vibrate, while also allowing the vocal cords to function between whispering and singing (m. 23, m. 48, m.72...). And of course, one also has to eventually combine this technique with the various other flutters and filters. The last combination with a word is on the word "*fanée*", which means "wilted". With this event, the text has also "wilted" and what reappears from it are only consonants and syllables. They introduce, accompany, and, together with the electronics, finally destroy the climactic scales (m. 142-156).

The ending is an augmented and transformed echo of the beginning and of the textures that have been present. The final word, "*la fleur*," (the flower), reminds us of the fragrance....*NoaNoa*....

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COULEURS DU VENT (1998)

For this piece I offer Kaija's notes in French, the German translation from a program followed by the English translation.

„*Couleurs du vent* est une improvisation sur le matériau de Cendres. Pendant des années, j'ai écouté la partie soliste de mon double concert "...à la fumée" pour flûte en *so* et violoncelle, en pensant toujours à l'explorer de nouveau. Je voulais surtout me concentrer sur la gamme de couleurs mates et bruitées de la flûte. Le matériau de Cendres, - qui était encore vif dans mon esprit, car je venais de finir la pièce, fut le point de départ pour une écriture fébrile. La pièce est née en quelques jours dans de grandes émotions pendant les premières journées en France après avoir passé une année en Finlande. En présence d'une maladie mortelle dans ma famille, le souffle, le vent est devenu pour moi le symbole de la vie, et la pièce est devenue une histoire de la respiration..."

⁶ From the introduction to the first version: "*NoaNoa* is a piece for flute and the IRCAM Signal Processing Workstation (ISPW, based on the Next computer). Different flute materials were recorded in the sample memory of the card, and are triggered and processed in specific places of the score, either with the aid of an automatic score follower (from pitch- and envelope-following of the flute), or by a pedal controlled by the performer. It also controls real time processing tools, including harmonizers, reverbs, delays, and finally "models of resonance" (bank of filters whose parameters are derived from a specific analysis technique developed at Ircam by J.B. Barrière, Y.Potard, P.F. Baisnée) which were transported on the Ircam Workstation at the occasion of the piece. Generally speaking, the electronic part extends the musical ideas of the solo instrument."

--K.S.

Die Farben des Windes - eine Improvisation über den Grundstoff *Asche*. Jahrelang hatte ich den Soloteil meines Doppelkonzertes " ... *an den Rauch*" für Altflöte und Cello im Kopf und dachte daran, ihn neu zu erkunden. Ich wollte mich vor allem auf die Bandbreite der dunklen Farben und Geräusche der Flöte konzentrieren. Der Stoff *Asche* war in meinen Gedanken noch lebendig, denn ich hatte gerade erst das Stück beendet und wurde der Ausgangspunkt für ein fieberhaftes Schreiben. Das Stück entstand in Tagen grosser Emotionen, noch unter dem Eindruck meines einjährigen Aufenthaltes in Finnland, von dem ich gerade zurückgekehrt war. Angesichts einer tödlichen Krankheit in meiner Familie, wurde der Hauch des Windes für mich Symbol des Lebens und die Komposition ist nun die Geschichte des Atmens.

Couleurs du vent ("Colors of the wind") is an improvisation on the material from **Cendres** ("Ashes"). Over the years I had in mind the solo parts of my double concerto ...**a la fumée** ("towards smoke") for flute and violoncello, thinking about exploring them anew. I wanted above all to concentrate on the scale of dark and noisy colors of the flute. The material of **Cendres**--still fresh in my mind since I had just finished the piece--became the point of departure for feverish writing. The piece (**Couleurs du vent**) was born in several days of great emotion during the time I had just returned to France after spending a year in Finland. In the presence of a mortal illness in my family, the breath, wind, became for me the symbol of life and the piece a story of breathing...

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Aile du songe (2001)

Written immediately after her first opera, *L'amour de loin*, *Aile du songe* was also somewhat a "purging" process for Kaija Saariaho. Clearing her head of the larger dimensions of opera, she created a more transparent, intimate work, which nonetheless is full of intensity and passion.

Almost 20 years after *Laconisme de l'aile*, she was again inspired by passages from "Oiseaux" by St.-Jean Perse⁷. She was almost apologetic in telling me that she was returning to "bird themes", but of course I didn't mind at all. I only asked if there could perhaps be a section more rhythmic than in her other pieces. She kindly answered this request with *Oiseaux dansant*, the first movement of the second part. While the other four movements are more or less inspired by the metaphorical birds of St. Jean Perse, this one comes from an old aboriginal tale⁸ of a dancing girl who was changed into a bird because she danced too much in the village. Of course as a bird she continued to dance, teaching all the other birds to dance as well. In the concerto, the flute then teaches the orchestra to dance.

As in *Laconisme de l'aile* and *NoaNoa* her musical language includes trills, glissandi, air sounds, multiphonics and the use of the voice. With the voice, however, the flutist is given freedom of choice as to how she uses it. Except for in the last movement, Kaija has indicated in the score *where* the voice should be added, but not *how*. Her only hint was that she wanted something „quite crazy“. After some experimenting on my own and then demonstrating various solutions to Kaija, I chose various phonemes, shrieks, and words, inserting them according to colours in the orchestra (e.g. „ssh“ or „ke“ to match percussion effects) or to enhance the flute line (e.g. high singing or voice glissandi to produce difference tones and multiphonics with the flute sound, whispering to create tension at a transition). The cadenza is also left up to the performer, as is the realization of the ascending and disappearing multiphonics and trills in final few bars of the concerto.

Here is Kaija's introduction, in French and in English:

AILE DU SONGE
pour flûte et orchestre

I Aérienne
Prélude - Jardin des oiseaux - D'autres rives

⁷ For an English translation of excerpts of this epic, please see Saint-John Perse: Selected Poems, Mary Ann Caws, Editor. New York: New Directions Books, 1982.

⁸ In *Wise Women of the Dreamtime*, Katie Langloh Parker - Johanna Lambert, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International (1993)

II Terrestre

Oiseau dansant - Oiseau, une satellite infime

D'une manière générale, la flûte m'est un instrument très proche, et ceci depuis mes premières pièces. J'aime le son où la respiration est toujours si présente et les possibilités timbrales qui conviennent bien à mon langage musical: le corps de l'instrument permet de réaliser des phrases qui traversent des textures bruitées, colorées par des phonèmes chuchotés par la flûtiste, allant, graduellement si on le veut, vers des sons purs et lisses.

Le titre du concerto comme tout l'esprit général de la pièce ont été inspirés du recueil *Oiseaux* de Saint-John Perse: "*Aile falquée du songe, vous nous retrouverez ce soir sur d'autres rives!*".

Cette pièce n'est pas la première dans laquelle j'associe les vers de Saint-John Perse à ma musique. Déjà dans *Laconisme de l'aile*, écrite en 1981, j'utilisais quelques phrases de *Oiseaux*.

Dans ces poèmes, Saint-John Perse ne décrit pas le chant des oiseaux. Il parle de leur vol et utilise la riche métaphore des oiseaux pour décrire, dans un langage abstrait et multidimensionnel, les mystères de l'existence:

"Ignorants de leur ombre, et ne sachant de mort qui ce qui s'en consume au bruit lointain des grandes eaux, ils passent, nous laissant et nous ne sommes plus les mêmes. Ils sont l'espace traversé d'une seule pensée."

Le concerto se divise en deux grands parties: **Aérienne** et **Terrestre**. Ces deux grands titres se trouvent aussi dans un poème de Perse, cité plus loin.

Les trois parties de **Aérienne** décrivent trois situations concertantes différentes:

Dans *Prélude* la flûte envahit graduellement l'espace et génère la musique de l'orchestre. Quant au *Jardin des oiseaux*, la flûte est en dialogue avec des instruments individuels de l'orchestre, et *D'autres rives* montre la flûte comme un oiseau solitaire qui, en volant très haut, dessine avec son ombre des images différentes, jouées par des cordes, sur le paysage inchangé de la harpe, du celesta et des percussions.

Le première partie de **Terrestre**, *L'oiseau dansant*, introduit un contraste important avec tout autre matériau du concerto. Elle renvoie à un conte aborigène, dans lequel un oiseau virtuose de la danse apprend à tout un village à danser. En écrivant cette partie, j'avais spécialement à l'esprit Camilla Hoitenga et sa personnalité de flûtiste.

Le finale, la deuxième partie de **Terrestre**, fait une synthèse de tous les aspects précédents, avant que le son de la flûte ne s'éloigne de nous de plus en plus et disparaisse.

"Dans sa double allégeance, aérienne et terrestre, l'oiseau nous était ainsi présenté pour ce qu'il est: un satellite infime de notre orbite planétaire."

AILE DU SONGE est dédiée à Camilla Hoitenga, avec laquelle j'ai travaillé de nombreux détails concernant la partie de soliste de cette pièce.

Her translation:

The sound of the flute has been a feature of my music since my earliest works. Its ever-present breathiness and all its timbral possibilities suit my musical language very well. The character of the instrument lends itself to phrases which gradually transform through gritty textures coloured with phonemes whispered by the flautist, into pure and smooth sounds.

The title and the general mood of the piece are derived from Saint-John Perse's collection of poems *Oiseaux*: "*Aile falquée du songe, vous nous retrouverez ce soir sur d'autres rives!*". In these poems, Saint-John Perse does not describe the singing of the birds. He speaks rather of their flight, and uses the rich metaphor of birds to describe life's mysteries through an abstract and multi-dimensional language:

"Ignorants de leur ombre, et ne sachant de mort que ce qui s'en consume d'immortel au bruit lointain des grandes eaux, ils passent, nous laissant, et nous ne sommes plus les mêmes. Ils sont l'espace traversé d'une seule pensée".

The concerto has two main movements: *Aérienne* and *Terrestre*. These two titles are also taken from one of Perse's poems, quoted at the end of this note.

The first movement, *Aérienne*, describes three different musical situations: in *Prélude* the flute gradually pervades the space and generates the orchestra's music. In *Jardin des oiseaux* the flute interacts with individual instruments from the orchestra, while *D'autres rives* likens the flute to a lone, high-flying bird, whose shadow forms different images among the strings over the unchanging landscape of the harp, celesta and percussion.

The first section of *Terrestre, Oiseau dansant*, introduces a deep contrast with the other material in the concerto. It refers to an Aboriginal tale in which a virtuosic dancing bird teaches a whole village how to dance. I was thinking particularly of Camilla Hoytenga and her personality as a flutist as I wrote this section. The finale and second part of *Terrestre – Oiseau, un satellite infime* – is a synthesis of all the previous events: then the sound of the flute slowly fades away. "*Dans sa double allégeance, aérienne et terrestre, l'oiseau nous était ainsi présenté pour ce qu'il est : un satellite infime de notre orbite planétaire*".

Aile du songe is dedicated to Camilla Hoytenga, with whom I worked on many of the details in the solo part.

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Dolce Tormento (2004) for solo piccolo

With a duration of 5 to 6 minutes, *Dolce Tormento* is relatively short, but, as the title suggests, full of „sweet torment“ in the character of the music. The text is from a sonnet of Petrarch, reprinted below in the original as well as in various translations.

But there are also „sweet torments“ for the player! Kaija chose the piccolo for this piece because we had not yet explored combining voice with this instrument. Both the high range and limited resonance of the piccolo, as well as the nature of the Italian language posed new challenges in developing a musical polyphony.

Of all her flute works this is the most freely notated, and interpretation is a further challenge, especially for flutists not familiar with Kaija Saariaho's musical language. I, of course, am steeped in it, and since she was writing for me, writing rather quickly besides, the score is more or less in „shorthand“, which she knew I'd be able to understand.

The usual Saariaho vocabulary is present: air sounds, controlled vibrato, glissandi, trills, multiphonics, use of the voice and layers and transitions of all these. But there are no bar lines, no tempo markings beyond „rit. A tempo“ (three times on the last page), no dynamics, and a minimum of musical instructions: „*Sempre dolce, espressivo, libero*“ at the beginning, then „*piu agitato*“, „*molto rubato, espressivo*“ and „*calando*“ toward the end. Traditional notation is used for the rhythmic values of the pitches, but the way the notes are spread out on the staff plus the way the phrases of the text are inserted without indication of duration suggests more a „space-time“ notation/interpretation than in her other scores.

Two further hints toward interpretation appear in the printed score under „Performance Notes“:

„One characteristic of this piece is an unstable playing between octaves, with the desired sound vacillating freely between the octaves with fragile expression.“

„The text should always be recited between whispering and *sotto voce*, in such a way that the given pitch resonates either as air or tone.“

-- K.S.

PETRARCA, Canzone 132

S'amor non è, che dunque è quel ch'io sento ?
Ma s'egli è amor, per Dio, che cosa el quale ?
Se bona, ond'è l'effetto aspro mortale ?
Se ria, ond'è sì dolce ogni tormento ?

S'a mia voglia ardo, ond'è l piano e lamento ?
S'a mal moi grado, il lamentar che vale ?
O viva morte, o diletitante male.

Come puoi tanto in me s'io nol consento ?

Et s'io l consento, a gran toto mi doguin.
Fra si contrari venti in frale barca
mi trovo in alto mar senza gonozoïde,

si lieve di saver, d'error si carica
ch'i' medesimo non so quel ch'io mi voglio,
e tremo a mezza state, ardendo il verno.

ENGLISH:

If not love, then what is this that I feel?
If love – dear God, what kind of thing is it?
If good, why then this mortal, bitter kiss?
If evil, why is every torment sweet?

If I want pain, why do I cry and wail?
And if I don't, then what good is lament?
Oh living death, Oh happy, happy pain –
How can you govern without my consent?

And if I do consent, my grief is wrong.
My frail boat rocks among contrary winds
on high seas, and I find I cannot steer –

I know so little, and so much I err
that I myself do not know what I want:
In summer I am ice, in winter, fire.

trans. Teresa McGurk (a.k.a. Sheila Tombe)

<http://hubpages.com/hub/Five-Ways-of-Making-Petrarch-Live>

FRENCH (first verse):

Si ce n'est pas l'amour, qu'est-ce donc que je sens?
Mais si c'est l'amour, pour Dieu, qu'est-ce que l'amour peut être?
S'il est bon, pourquoi son effet est-il âpre et mortel?
S'il est mauvais, pourquoi tous ces tourments ont-ils l'air si doux?

GERMAN:

Wenn es nicht Liebe ist, was ist es dann, das ich empfinde?
Doch wenn es Liebe ist, bei Gott, was ist das und welcher Art?
Ist es etwas Gutes, woher kommt die herb-tödliche Wirkung?
Ist es etwas Böses, warum ist dann alle Qual so süß?

Wenn ich willentlich brenne, warum dann das Weinen und Klagen?
Wenn gegen meinen Willen, was hilft das Klagen?
O lebendiger Tod, o lustvolles Leiden, wieso vermagst du so viel in mir,
wenn ich es nicht zulasse?

Und wenn ich es zulasse, klage ich sehr zu Unrecht.
Bei so gegenläufigen Winden in zerbrechlicher Barke,
befinde ich mich steuerlos auf hoher See,

so leicht an Verstand, an Irrtümern so beladen,

dass ich selbst nicht weiß, was ich will;
und ich zittere im Sommer, während ich im Winter glühe.