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Interview with Kaija Saariaho (Finland/France)

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I would like to start by summing up some simple facts: you are from Finland, but you live in Paris, and you also spent some time in New York. Is there any connection between your music and the place where you live?

I think there must be a complex connection, which I cannot myself analyse very easily. I am not sure if anybody could do it. Certainly, for example, when I write vocal music, I like using language which surrounds me – it seems to be very natural. Over the past years, I have spent much time in New York. That's why I used texts written in English. It is something very concrete. But I am sure, there are also other influences which man cannot see so clearly.

Nature is also your inspiration. Do you think it is important to have a good connection with nature?

I would say yes, but at the same time I live in big cities. So if I had really enormous need to be with the nature, I think I would not have made this choice. My sensitivity to nature comes from my childhood in Finland.

I get the impression that light is also important for you.

As I said, I grew up in Finland, where light is very important. When I write for orchestra, I think about different degrees of light and shadow, but it is one element. When I compose I don't think about light, but about notes. Sometimes I feel that people like talking a lot about a possible visual side. On the other hand, maybe that is a personal aspect of my music.

One of your pieces – *Nocturne* from 1994, is dedicated for the memory of Witold Lutosławski. I also noticed some associations with Karol Szymanowski's music.

I like very much music of Szymanowski. His *Violin Concerto no. 2* op. 61 and *Myths. Three Poems for violin and piano* op. 30 are brilliant. When I discovered them, it was very personal experience. Of course, I love Chopin. But Lutosławski is someone very special for me. I heard his lecture when I was a student at Sibelius Academy. I was very impressed by his refinement as a person.

When you compose electronic pieces you use synthetic sounds. Do you think it is a kind of dehumanization of art and music?

It all depends, on what you do with them. They can be material like any instrument. It is just a matter of artistic idea behind them and then the realisation – how skilfully it is done. I don't think it is a limit for the kind of things we can use in music. For example, I really love the sound of nature, so I use it in my music, because it is music for me. All depends on how we use it.

What are your inspirations, when you write electronic pieces?

Sometimes, I want to bring sound from nature to my piece. But, in fact, every time it is something different and working with electronics is interesting, but I don't use it in every piece. Sometimes, the idea really asks for use of electronic, and sometimes not at all. It is just one way of

orchestration. Of course, there are so many ways to use electronics. It depends whether you are going to extend instrument or you add completely another element – there is so many things you can do. But it is not always necessary.

For you, as a composer, voice is also very important. In your pieces you use some kind of prayers, incantations – do you treat voice as an instrument? Why is it so important for you?

Because it is absolutely special. Voice tells us so much about people – whatever we want or don't want. Imagine that you talk to somebody you have never met before. How much can you say about him, hearing just his voice? It is a very powerful and special instrument, because it is a part of our body.

What kind of texts do you use in your pieces? They sound like prayers.

I am not a religious person. They are ancient texts and I have chosen them, because they are beautiful, maybe spiritual. They are not religious, and none of them are really prayers to God.

You are after master class with students from the Music Academy in Kraków. What are the most important things during learning and teaching composition?

It is important to know your history and to understand what you want to compose, what is your reason, what kind of thing you would like to express, if you can understand and verbalise it. It is important to hear and analyse a lot of musical compositions to find your own music inside you. Especially for young composers, it is necessary to know a lot of musical pieces, and through that to build their own music. Because everybody is so different. My music is connected with poetry, fine arts, literature.

You like working with some instrumentalists, for example Camilla Hoitenga, who plays flute. Is good cooperation between composer and musician important nowadays?

It has been always very important. When you look back at the history, composers always composed for certain musicians. Every composer had many violin concertos written for a famous violinist,

who rewrote the piece completely, sometimes with bad results, of course. It is very interesting to work, with musician who already knows musical intension, habits and language. I always tell young people, that it is much better and more authentic to find people in your age, who would have the same vision. One day, some of them will be great performers. Of course, if some great musician come and ask you to compose something, you do it. But you shouldn't be surprised, that the performance it is not finally so amazing, because you came from two completely different universes. If you really want to compose, you need to be prepared, that is a very tough profession. You need to find a good reason to do it.

You are the second female composer whose opera was staged at MET. Do you think that it is necessary to categorize composers as men and women?

I think it is quite ridiculous. Every art needs to have masculine and feminine sides. I also don't think it is important, because it is just one part of my personality, like, for example, being left-handed. It is important for my character as a person. But being composer – for women, it still can be a social problem. If we are speaking about opera – for what reason am I a second woman staged at MET? It's not that there are no interesting pieces wrote by women, because there is a lot of them.

Are you going to write an opera again?

Now, I am working on a new opera for the Royal Opera House for 2020, but I don't want to speak about it because it is not much advanced yet.

What are your impressions after these few days on the International Festival of Krakow Composers?

I am very happy to be here because I think very tenderly about Polish culture. I feel that this country is great for music. We have spoken before about composers, and I think Poland has great traditions, also of contemporary music – that is unusual. I am very happy to share my music and meet young people. Unfortunately, I cannot stay longer.