

University of Alberta

**Kaija Saariaho - From the Grammar of Dreams
The Composer and the Work**

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Kaija Saariaho

Born in Finland and living in Paris for more than 30 years, Kaija Saariaho is one of the world-renowned living composers. Many times her pieces are the result of the growth of a condensed musical idea that is extended gradually. This method of composing not just ensures an original musical language, it also characterizes the macro musical form as a reflection of the musical germs she uses (McHard 2008, 335-336). Commonly Saariaho is classified as a spectralist (or even post-spectralist) composer, although she does not consider herself under these categories, she admits to have a relationship with Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail's music. On the other hand, she uses resources from serialism (Saariaho 2015) but does not feel attracted with that school, after meeting Brian Ferneyhough on Darmstadt summer school in 1980 and take composition classes with him during two years, she did not pursued those studies because did not feel attracted to intellectualism. Her goals were to compose illustrative music, with clear form and meaningful harmony, aims that found an impulse when she arrived to the IRCAM in 1982 (Moisala 2009, 9). Saariaho has developed a quite large amount of electroacoustic works, including live processing.

It is always hard to describe the music of a composer, each musician develops their technique throughout the years and the musical results left during this process tend to be wrongly generalized under one label. Saariaho's music is not an exception, her formation as a student, added with her timid personality on her youth, and difficulty to find herself into her teachers' music made her travel between Finland, Freiburg and Paris to complete her formation, according to her each one of them left something important: From the Sibelius Academy the basics of music theory and composition, from private classes at that school with Paavo Heininen confidence in herself and in her music, from Brian Ferneyhough the practice on repurposing traditional music techniques and the rigid organizational skills needed to create art, from Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey the mastering of timbric and texture developments to connect successfully ideas and goals through meaningful harmonies and acoustic-like sonorities, finally from her work at the IRCAM during the 80's she learnt about physics, acoustics, synthesis, technology and live processing (Saariaho 2011, 6-12). Every one of this stages, left music composed, which clearly shows the flexibility of this artist and the impossibility of label her work under one category.

Music and Dreams

Her classification as post-spectralist comes mostly for her detailed and meticulous attention and development of timbre, and its relation with harmony. Saariaho harmonic developments many times are inspired on the sonic spectra generated by different techniques used on an acoustical instruments, taking the excited partials as a new pitches to do both: orchestrate with other instruments (orchestration and harmony), and to choose the following notes to play (horizontal development). These processes of transformations and gradual changes generate images of movements: “the music *enacts* an acoustic process” and they “reinststate the significance of pitch, or rather, of a pitch-based way of hearing this music.” (March 2011, 27)

Pirkko Moisala organizes the musical language of Saariaho in seven phases. The first phase is when she was a student at the Sibelius Academy, where her focus was on vocal music and where we find her first intentions of using live electronic processing. Secondly, the music composed during the firsts years abroad Finland. Her sound investigations at the IRCAM came third, where she spent time with computers that allowed her to analyze sound, the music composed during these investigations tend to be characterized by the development of timbre in a building up fashion of sounds travelling through a regular pulse. Listening and psychoacoustics are subjects that deeply interest her, starting in 1986 the fourth phase of her works can be grouped for the correlation on sound color, harmony, and form; the piece that stand out on this period is her first work for symphonic orchestra *Du Cristal* (1989) and the piece that we will discuss later *From the Grammar of Dreams* (1988). Next, on the fifth phase, Saariaho aims changed towards dramatics stages and sudden changes on the musical discourse, like in the one-hour and a half long ballet *Maa* (1991). This monumental work introduces us to the new phase where larger orchestral works are composed, characterized by transparent musical gestures and melodic developments, on this phase we find works for big choirs, a violin concerto, and one oratorio. Moisala sets the last phase starting after her first opera *L'amour de loin* (2000), where more operas were composed later, with a strong dramatic and tragic sense (Moisala 2009,26-27).

Interested in Freud and dream's interpretations, Saariaho has feed her desire to understand, analyze and utilize dreams theories on her music. Music is not “dreamy” in the popular sense, dreams are a door to unknown existences. Her concern with dreams is shown on many titles and thematic of her works, this is specially clear on the dream scene of *L'Amour de loin*, and also on other works like *Im Traume* (In a Dream), *Grammaire des rêves* (Grammar of

Dreams), *Nuits, adieux* (Nights, Farewells), *Caliban's Dram*, *Aile du Songe* (Wing of Dreams) (Oskala 2011, 41-42), and the one we will focus next: *From the Grammar of Dreams*.

From the Grammar of Dreams

The use of the voice on Saariaho's hands is broader than usual, on top of traditional singing, she recurs to the elaboration of breath, speaking voice, pronunciation, whispering, emotional voice production, live amplification, live processing, and such (Moisala 2009, 86). Also, Saariaho is a dedicated reader and many times find on her hands texts to be used in the music world, these inspirations normally are mostly personal and somehow arbitrary (Moisala 2009, 59).

From the Grammar of Dreams (1988) explores the expressiveness of a dramatic text thorough diverse vocal techniques, in a perfect coalition of what is described above. This is evident on the program notes:

The texts used in this piece come from two books by Sylvia Plath: there are excerpts of her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, and fragments of the poem *Paralytic* from the poetry collection *Ariel*. The texts are strong, dealing with life and death, escaping into madness, self-destruction and the fight against it. Nevertheless, the piece includes an evolution: the painful nightmare ends in daylight and life. The emotional context of these texts, powerful in the extreme, led me to look for strict rules of musical organization, to contrast the emotional power. However, these rules do not always proceed in a rational or combinational thinking, but rather in the manner of our dreams, where thoughts are transformed into visual images with their colors, juxtaposition, movements and directions. I have sought to operate in the same way by opening the text with two voices, and creating with them five different soundscapes. (Saariaho 1998)

Dream theory as the structure to drive the trajectory of the whole piece

William David Foulkes is a dream theorist whom in 1978 wrote *A Grammar of Dreams*, a monograph about structuralism, linguistics, neuropsychology and a Freudian explanation of associatory tracks of the transmuting progressions of dream-work: connecting the vertical layered dream thoughts with the linear horizontal grammar of sentences (Oskala 2011, 51), or as Saariaho explains it: “. . . our thoughts which when we are awake and when we verbalize them, the sentences are always linear, and the logic is within a sentence, but in our dreams the sentence is scattered, it doesn't always advance in this linear and logic way.” (Saariaho 2012). *From the*

Grammar of Dreams was composed along with other two pieces where she applies the described principle (*Grammaire des rêves* and *Nuits, adieux*).

The use of the text and its correlation with musical concepts like melody, counterpoint and harmony is the first unique characteristic to be emphasized: along the five movements (or songs as we will refer) Saariaho works with sections of both texts, they are both semantic and sonic material. Plath's texts are assigned to the two singers throughout the whole piece as shown in fig. 1:

Sylvia Plath / ARIEL
PARALYTIC

I
Soprano

It happens. Will it go on?—
My mind a rock,
No fingers to grip, no tongue,
My god the iron lung

That loves me, pumps
My two
Dust bags in and out,
Will not

Let me relapse
While the day outside glides by like ticker tape.
The night brings violets,
Tapestries of eyes,

Lights,
The soft anonymous
Talkers: 'You all right?'
The starched, inaccessible breast.

Dead egg, I lie
Whole
On a whole world I cannot touch,
At the white, tight

Drum of my sleeping couch
Photographs visit me—
My wife, dead and flat, in 1920 furs,
Mouth full of pearls,

II
Soprano

Two girls
As flat as she, who whisper 'We're your daughters.'
The still waters
Wrap my lips,

Eyes, nose and ears,
A clear
Cellophane I cannot crack.
On my bare back
V. Soprano + Mello

I smile, ja buddha, all
Wants, desire
Falling from me like rings
Hugging their lights.

III
Soprano + Mello

The claw
Of the magnolia,
Drunk on its own scents,
Asks nothing of life.

194 SYLVIA PLATH / The Bell Jar

Melissa

A bad dream.
I remembered everything.
I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a gray skull.
Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb and cover them.
But they were part of me. They were my landscape.

THE BELL JAR 129

IV
Soprano

I thought I would swim out until I was too tired to swim back. As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears.
I am I am I am.

THE BELL JAR 199

V
Mello

I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart.
I am, I am, I am.

Fig. 1 – From the *Grammar of Dreams* – Text distribution

A second exclusive feature to mention is what John Roeder calls “Polyvocality”, which refers to the closely (but not unison) singing lines of the two voices, where for moments both singers use the same words (or syllables, or even phonemes), but with different rhythms and pitch contour. (Roeder 2006, 1) The two melodies are interlocked in a knitting-like correlation, were both switch the role of original and imitation in a fast fashion. This technique is the one that gives to Saariaho the idea of vertical grammar, like the one described by Foulkes. Saariaho reaffirms this idea in an interview, she talks about the two vocal lines coming from the same person, this notion is so crucial that in 2002 she creates a “solo” version of the piece, which requires just one singer and electronics (where the tape performs the voice of the mezzo-soprano) (Saariaho 2012).

The Drama and the Music

The novel *The Bell Jar* (1971) and the poem *Paralytic* (1965) are both tense and dramatic texts. Researcher Anni Oskala suggests the idea that the first song of *From the Grammar of Dreams* is the waking up process of a nightmare, the mezzo-soprano represents the person having the bad dream, and the soprano represents the nightmare itself. Then, the four remaining songs are diverse interpretation of the dream by applying Freudian analysis (free association) (Oskala 2011,55). Although this theory has fundamentals it is arguable, the 2002 version of the piece requires the presence on the stage of the soprano and not the mezzo-soprano (whose line is electronically reproduced). A body present on the stage is hardly thinkable as the representation of a “dream”, and the recorded voice (the one the audience do not see, just hear) is the “real” part of the story. After this evidence the “waking up” theory falls.

As I see it, songs I to IV recreates the experience of a different phases of a one-night bad dream, and the last movement is the processes of waking up, where the sung “I smile” at the very last measure of the piece suggest the character to realize that everything was a dream. In the overall view, there are two roles played by the two voices, with points where one leaks into the other. The soprano tends to act mostly as the storyline teller, the narration of a dream about being paralyzed (she mostly sings words from the poem *Paralytic*), and the mezzo-soprano is a permanent superimposed commentary on the narration, an overlapped and descriptive succession of facts, that for moments become part of the narration as well.

Song I: Suddenly the dreamer finds himself paralytic, this situation is claimed on the voice of the soprano. This disturbed story is represented musically by the use of agitated rhythms, exaltation on the vocal production and fast and broken melodic lines. In a tense and sobbing-like melismatic and poco rubato singing, the mezzo-soprano embodies the feelings of what the person is experiencing, the effective representation is achieved by Saariaho by requesting “intensive, restless” trills and legato melodies with chromatic gestures. Towards the middle of the song, the mezzo-soprano appeases the soprano by repeating the phrase “a bad dream, I remembered everything” which can be understood as the still conscious part of the brain that realizes that this is a nightmare, the relaxation process goes from the middle to the end of the song, achieved by using “poco doloroso” and “dolce” long trills; and “sad, tender” and “calm” spoken voice.

The second phase of the dream arrives in song II, on this agitated stage there are two different and unrelated stories aligned, both voices have the double role of describing their own experience, but also commenting on the other. On one hand, we find a singer holding a note (or with slight variations) while the other recites her text, this method allows the understandability of the words of one voice while the other feels like a representation of those lyrics. Alternatively, we also hear both stories at the same time, with non-matching rhythms, which produces an agitated cacophony.

The middle song appears to be the deepest phase of the dream, which is calmed, coherent and harmonic, where there is not much to tell regarding story but plenty about intimate emotions and somehow dark abandon, it may be the character accepting the paralysis and leaving the soul to take over. John Roeder created an entire article on this song III, he talks about a “double-edged epiphany” (2006, 3), reached by an elegant compositional technique where “the voices rarely attack together or double each other, they may be heard to collaborate to articulate the lines of the text, and to create a fairly traditional flux of tension and relaxation, through coordinated changes of pitch, intervals, and rhythmic behavior” (4).

Songs IV and V are analyzed in detail in the following two sections.

Song IV, complementary layers of dreams and music

To facilitate the analysis, I will propose to segment this song in four parts, the reader has to be aware that this is just for analysis purposes, music flows in a continuum movement.

This is the only movement where any text from *Paralytic* is present, since we agreed it to be a narrative storyline, we can think of this song to be mostly about confidential feelings, an intrusion to the heart of the character to experience his thoughts and sensations. Part I goes from measures 1 to 8 (fig. 2), where there is no pitched material and the rhythm is a construction of interlocked patterns that moves from fast, quick and breathless articulations to a relaxed and calmed feeling achieved by a continuum and proportionally written *rallentando*. During this opening both voices work together to create the sensation of one unique musical line, which remember us the main characteristic of song III. The next measure and a half (8 and the first half of 9) denotes the great composition technique by Saariaho, it is a transition between what I have called part 1 and part 2, it has elements of both to make the transition smooth, it is rhythmically equally interlocked as measures 1 to 7, but using as a center the interval of a semitone, which will be the musical gesture to developed on part 2, in this case on G# and A.

breathless, yet very precise
 $J = \sim 60$

both singers:
 bars 3-7: by turns exhale-inhale-exhale (etc.)
 f poss.

Soprano
 Mezzo Soprano

1
 2/4
 [a] [ha] [ha] [a] [ha] [ha] [a]

5
 5/8
 [h] [a]

9
 9/16
 [a] [ah] [a] [ha]

#

Fig. 2 – From the Grammar of Dreams – Song IV, part 1

The focus at the beginning of part 3 (fig 4) is the word “heart” sung by the mezzo-soprano (measure 28), who is the only one carrying text for now. Both voices start with a strong emphasis on G# in a beating-like pulse, grace notes emphasize this idea by ornamenting the interlocked continuous rhythm pattern produced by both voices, the lyrics on the mezzo-soprano says “I listened to the old brag of my heart”, the connection between meaning and musical representation is clearly audible.

Handwritten musical score for Song IV, part 3, measures 25-33. The score is written on two staves (treble and bass clef) with lyrics in Italian. It includes dynamic markings such as *mf*, *p*, *f*, *sff*, *mp*, and *f poss.*, and performance instructions like "inhale only, as if short of breath" and "exhale loudly". The lyrics include: "I I listen -", "-ed to the old brag of my heart heart heart heart", "padd-led on, my my heart heart-beat boomed like a like a dull mo-tor", and "in in my my ears I am I am I am I am I am I am".

Fig. 4 – From the Grammar of Dreams – Song IV, part 3

The second section of this part (m. 29 to 33) keeps surrounding the beating heart theme, but now the highlighted text is the one in the soprano. With a broken and less constant rhythmic pulse, two voices work integrally to illustrate the image of the words “as I paddled my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears”, this is the only time in the entire piece where the mezzo-soprano abandons the assigned text (as shown in fig.1) to recite part of the soprano’s. The dramatic climax on this section goes from measure 34 to 36, since both voices affirm “I am” a psychological battle is set, musically speaking Saariaho generates a breaking point on the work by requesting both voices to sing in their higher registry, in tight and sharp harmonic relationship, in a crescendo to a “fortissimo possible” and using rhythmic instability.

This tension is released on measure 37 and beyond (fig. 5), confirming that the real person is the soprano (repeating “I am”) and the mezzo-soprano is an imaginary entity, asking herself “Am I”? The quietness of the end of this section confirms that the dream has reached an end, and the individual is ready to begin the waking up process.

Fig. 5 – From the Grammar of Dreams – Song IV, part 5

Song V, Soothed Waking Up

I have claimed that Song number V (fig. 6) is the representation of the process of waking up and realizing that everything was a dream. This is the simplest song of the collection, where elements of all four previous movements are combined. This reinforces the idea of a conclusion, a culmination of the dream as a whole. Since lyrics are simple and harmony and rhythms are the result of the reinterpretation of previous material, I will focus my analysis on the presence of elements from other movements, and their adaptations.

Elements of Song I: the linear melismatic movement on the mezzo-soprano and its development are back, although now is present in both voices. Soprano and mezzo-soprano sing in a limited register, their rhythms suffer simple changes, there are tremolos and “poco rubato” notation (shown as a wavy beam) all over the first measures. The intervals slowly become bigger until they reach angular movements towards the middle of the movement. What has changed from song I is the register, before we found mostly medium register, and now the activity takes place mainly in the high register, where both voices find each other in a grazing relationship.

Elements of Song II: although in song V no text is used until the last measure, both voices complement each other by giving space to the other as it was made in song II (while one voice is moving melodically, the other is steady), this time the holding voice is elaborated by using a trill instead of a steady note. What has changed the most is the character, what before was “excited”, “intenso”, “doloroso” and such, now is “dolce”, “dolcissimo” and “calm”.

Elements of Song III: We mentioned the fusion of the two voices into one through the use of the same text and interlocked rhythms. In song V, the undulating linear melody of each voice, and the permanent crossing registers help to produce an atmosphere of confusion, where the listener cannot identify who is singing what. These fluent movements are achieved by generating a blended sounding texture within the two voices, this effect of “no rhythm” and permanent movement is accomplished by the use of trills, grace notes and non-coincident rhythms articulations.

Elements of Song IV: The importance of the semitone found on song IV is visible on song V, the chromatic movement of each voice also happens here but now is not just between two particular pitches but many. Also, the beating heart of song IV was achieved by the use of grace notes over a regular pulse, grace notes are now over a non-regular rhythm, the sensation of a heart beating is back.

To conclude, the last measure appears to be the key clue to notice that the person is awake: “I smile”, sung by the two voices over a simple harmony of a third, it sounds like an expression of relief after an agitated night, a joyful conclusion that follows a tragic nightmare.

All the elements discussed on the first part of this article are somehow present in *From the Grammar of Dreams*, as well as in most of the music by Saariaho, the coherency of a skillful composer becomes alive on her works.

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