

The Flute Music of Kaija Saariaho – Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

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Dear Flutists,

First of all I'd like to thank Lena, D. Andrew, Elena, Shin-Ying, Laura, Amanda, Kate, Hannah, Evelin, Claire, Shanna and many others for asking me questions so many questions about Kaija's music. Since I have been immersed in her musical language for so many years, it has been a good exercise for me to try to "stand back" to take another look in order to help others learn this language.

To all who are reading this: thanks for your interest and do feel free to contact me if you have further questions or comments!

GENERAL COMMENT

Before going on to the more technical details addressed here, I'd like to recommend you to read ***The Flute Music of Kaija Saariaho – Some notes on the musical language***. In striving for an authentic interpretation, whether of Beethoven or of Debussy, it is essential to know "where the composer is coming from" and thereby be able to determine what his or her notation signifies.

Just as performers in the 18th century differentiated between the French and Italian styles of what we now call Baroque music, so do performers of today need to differentiate between the styles of contemporary music. A quarter note (crochet) found in music descending from, for example, composers concerned with musique concrète or serialism (e.g. Varèse, Messiaen, Stockhausen) needs to be interpreted differently than one found in music assuming more classical performance practices (e.g. Debussy, Prokofiev, Takemitsu). To properly discuss the diversity of musical language found in Western classical music since the 20th century would require a separate (and lengthy!) treatise. Suffice it to note here that today more than ever performers are confronted with a plethora of musical styles coming from all over the globe. Learning something about the context of a particular piece is a necessary part of preparing a truthful and effective interpretation.

The use of "extended techniques" in composition in the 60's and throughout much of the 70's came more or less as a novelty, "shocking" listeners into more active listening. By the 80's, many composers, Kaija included, were using these once exotic sounds to form new kinds of musical vocabularies. While techniques and concepts from the tradition of musique concrète or experimental music can be found in the music of Kaija Saariaho, their function whether as part of a timbral scale or as a sort of polyphony, is to serve an *organic* musical language. This means that any "extended technique" is always integrated into the musical phrase rather than existing or being presented "for its own sake".

Whereas the tension of much 20th century music depends on rigorous attention to metronomic markings and even the production of tones as abstract durations with as little attack or release envelopes as possible, Kaija's music needs a certain flexibility in the rhythmic pulsation and tone production. In this sense her quarter notes are to be interpreted "traditionally", that is to say, one may vary how one attacks and release the notes, use vibrato at one's discretion, etc. She emphasizes, however,

that her music is not “romantic”, not a call to “wallow” in interpretation according to one’s feelings.

For her, the *structure* of the music is always important. She notates her scores carefully and respect must be given to all markings. Nothing in her scores is superfluous or intended to challenge the interpreter beyond his capabilities. All is in service of her composition. The musical tension, however, comes from the context of the *breath*, and phrases are to be created organically in this context. The interpreter, therefore, must literally “breathe life” into the score in order to realize the music.

Laconisme de l’aile – A Detailed Practice Guide

Spoken Introduction. The key word in Kaija’s instructions here is “recite”. You are not making casual conversation, but *reciting*, “declaiming” a text—calmly, without particular accents, but with the concentration and intensity necessary for stage performance. While the rhythm is organic to the flow of the words, it helps, as with music, to remain conscious of the pulse and to thereby better hold the tension, particularly over the rests. (In preparing to write up these notes, I notice that over the years (over 25!) of my performing this piece, my interpretation has become rather, shall we say “free”, as evidenced by a live recording that ended up on the Naïve CD. I am now enjoying going “back to the roots” for a refresher course....)

The inhalations interrupt the line as slightly disconcerting accents—further indication that this is not just a casual poem. The recitation evolves into the “forced whispering”—in other words, a “stage whisper”. This is not only necessary to project on stage, of course, but also to convey intensity.

Line 4. I take a good breath either before and/or after “l’es-“ and try to save air enough to make it through the ***sfff*** (connecting line 4 to line 5).

Line 5 scale. The ascending scale is just that, in spite of the notes not being attached to the beam. Kaija doesn’t remember why they’re written like that—maybe for a visual reason?

Line 5 ff. The key clicks should be a percussive counterpoint to the melodic line without disturbing the pitches of that line. This can be accomplished with the right hand pinky beating on the foot-joint keys until the *Ab* of line 6, at which point of course all the right-hand fingers can be added. The G-F-E-D clicks can be inserted in the rest, and the random clicks before the last B can evolve into E-F and then the E-F-B \flat air sounds as the B fades out. From here on, the actual pitches of the air-sounds and clicks should be inserted between the notes of the melodic line.

In this whole first section, from **Tempo I** in line 5 to the **Tempo II**, you should bring out the polyphony of the two lines as they exchange character: the classic sound of the melody becomes noise and the clicks evolve into sound, taking it to the breaking point! (In Line 8 is where the processes “cross”.)

Line 10, Tempo II – melodic “classic” flute sound, first striving to ascend but always breaking down into noise: into fluttertongue and air in **line 11**, into multiphonics and unstable pitch in **line 12**, again to air in **line 13**.... The idea is to produce continuous transitions from noise or distortion to pure sound. A long example is **line 13**, with the legato going to staccato to air to weak air (but still projecting her and keeping the tension!!) to stronger air, airy sound to pure sound again in **line 14**. Just as the G in **line 10** is exaggerated to breaking point, so must the air sound be brought to *sfff* in **line 11**.

NB: Details of articulation and dynamic are important—everything serves the ideas of the composition.

Line 14 – the first voice entrance. As you enter with the low E, it helps to think the voice pitch on the high side. Slip the voice in quietly and fade the flute out as the voice takes over the previous *mf* dynamic of the flute. The same type of transition in reverse happens in the next line, with the voice fading out as the flute crescendos to compensate.

Line 15 – concentrate on the voice while letting the fingers move by themselves. This also helps for the passage going from **line 18 to 19**. In line 18, the voice as a dotted quarter extends beyond the flute gesture; in line 19 the voice starts and the flute joins in so that they quietly end together. In both gestures one has time to change the vowel sound from “a” to “i”.

Line 20 – the inhaling and exhaling are as dramatic here as the breath interruptions in the recitation at the beginning. (The sixteenth-note gesture is also G#)

Line 21 – (if you sing the low B, you can also descend with the gliss an octave lower and disappear in the inhaled Eb.) Add a light tonguing articulation to the keyclicks to aid in bringing out the transitional character (again!) in going to **Tempo I**.

From this **Tempo I** the melody and noises are continually going in and out of focus, from extremely piano. “underpressured” breath-sounds to the extremely tense forte-to-the-breaking point “overpressured” outbursts.

Line 22 – yes, it is possible to form “aoao” in your mouth while singing this passage. Take your time with the flute part and move your tongue quickly to form the vowels.

Line 23 – Introduce the “sss” gradually as a disturbance to the f-sharp, increase your hissing as the f-sharp fades out, add the key clicks, gradually add air-sounds and increase the pressure of air for the last 4 notes. We are now entering the most “disturbed” and intense passage of the whole piece, a sort of compression of all that’s gone before. Play with utmost intensity, exaggerating the turbulence of going in and out of the forced, almost overblown sounds, then smoothly ascend to the *dolce possibile* D3 for one last hovering before the repeated scales.

Line 24-25-26 – note that the process is the reverse of the beginning: we’re beginning with the pure flute sound on D3 and descending via multiphonics and whispers to the “noise” of the spoken voice.

For the multiphonic, the fingering of L1 34 R vent2, 34 should work for most flutes. Drop the jaw and experiment with the lips to properly direct the angle of the airstream.

Lines 26ff. – ascending scales. Practice tips:

- add further beams to the scales to make groups of 4 or 3 sixteenth notes (easier for the eye to manage)
- practice the 7 G4s separately, listening for the differing lengths and dynamics
- (all of the scales are slurred as notated for the first group)
- (As in classical music, the runs are more effective when we can clearly hear the beginning and ending notes.)
- A slight pause after the first two scales adds to the drama and “announces” this final section.
- I chose fingerings for quartertones from books by James Pellerite¹, Robert Dick² and Pierre-Yves Artaud³ and then made adjustments for optimal functioning on my flute

Line 30 – don’t forget to begin the *poco a poco ritardando*

Line 35 – the “glissandi” that interrupt the long f take place over 3” and 2,5” and are actually a continuation of the quartertone scale patterns, so it is advisable to continue fingering the notes in these scales.

Line 36, 38 – It’s the performer’s choice whether the low C does or does not quietly resonate with the whistle-tones.

Line 37 – one final compressed ascent which then disappears into the last whistle-tones. I interpret the glissandi by sliding my fingers off the ring keys and supporting with my lips, but one may also choose to continue to finger the quarter-tone scale segments.

Line 38 – take a deep breath and enjoy developing the overtone melodies for as long as possible before having them fade away.

Finally a note on the use of **electronics**:

Laconisme de l’aile was conceived as a piece for flute alone. However, in the context of a concert I did in Paris where the other pieces were with electronics, Kaija didn’t want this to be the only acoustic one and therefore added the part with live electronics. They remain optional, as does the **live video**, which has also been developed in the meantime!⁴

ERRATA:

Slashes missing on groups of eighth notes:
Line 12 first group from the c-sharp

¹ *A Modern Guide to Fingerings for the Flute*. Alfred Publishing Co., Inc. (1998)

² *The Other Flute* www.robertdick.net/

³ *Flûtes au Présent (Present-Day Flutes)*. United Music Publishers

⁴ by Jean-Baptiste Barrière, with Pierre-Jean Bouyer and Isabelle Barrière

Line 15 first group

Line 20 last group

Line 21

Line 22

Further explanation:

--and in fact one should revise the instructions in the key. These groups aren't always to be played "as fast as possible", but perhaps also somewhat irregularly, rather with a sense of being "out of the rhythm".

NoaNoa

Q: *Should I say the text or only whisper like the phonemes (l,f,s,z...) part? And which is more important, making the text very clear or hearing the pitch and/or breath sounds of the flute?*

A: One must say the actual words while playing. I usually whisper the text, but sometimes I actually sing it (mm 97,98). Saariaho is flexible on this, but she does want the flute to keep sounding simultaneously. You have to adjust your embouchure and the way you exhale in order to do this. Experiment, and don't be afraid to produce a "non-classical" timbre on the flute. Phonemes are always a (fairly loud) whisper and more or less accented.

Q: *I cannot find a copy of Artaud's Present Day Flutes. What are the fingerings of the multiphonics?*

A: Here they are... (1 is the left hand thumb, etc. A is the first trill key, B the second trill key)

125C – 1234 3B45

127A – 1 3 23 5

126B – 1234 A3 5

77G-A – 34 23 5

Q: *What about that awful passage in m. 137 where one should slide quickly between Eb and C?!?*

A: There's always the trick of lubricating your right-hand pinky on the side of your nose (for ex. in m.123, where you can take extra time anyway after the electronic chords fades away). Then again, in one of the earlier versions of the piece the three notes were actually C, Db, D-natural, and Kaija does not object to your substituting these instead.

Cendres

Q: *What fingerings do you use for the multiphonics here?*

A: The following are the fingerings I use, but it might vary according to your flute....

m. 101: 12 4 2345 (5 on C keys) Trill 4 and 5

m. 102: 1234 234

m. 104: 12 4 2345 (5 on C keys) Trill 3 and 4

m. 106: 12345 23 5 (5 on C keys)

(m. 119: 1234 234)

m. 148: 12 4 23 5 (5 on C-sharp key)

For the “double trill” in m. 133, I land on the F-sharp with the harmonic fingering of B-natural (left hand fingers 1 and 2), then lift L2 and trill that key by rapidly alternating fingers 2 and 3 of my right hand on it.

Dolce Tormento

Two new challenges: how to speak/whisper Petrarch’s Italian?

And how to somehow integrate the vocal sounds into the music without the help of a resonant flute?

The solution I found for the first challenge was to be coached by a competent singer, and for the second one, was to concentrate on the “peripheral” sounds produced by speaking or whispering into the piccolo.