

Some Features of Libretto and Musical Composition in “L’amour de loin” by Kaija Saariaho

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Abstract—The article is dedicated to the opera “L’amour de loin” by the famous Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, recognized as a masterpiece of contemporary musical theater. The libretto, written by the French writer of Lebanese origin Amin Maalouf, is based on the legend of troubadour Jaufré Rudel and his distant lover. The text and music of the opera include a variety of dissimilar allusions. This is also the contact with the troubadour epoch through the plot and the processing of musical material and a kind of intersection with the “Tristan und Isolde” by R. Wagner and “Pelleas and Melisande” by C. Debussy. The original approach of Kaija Saariaho, together with the ideas of Amin Maalouf, made it possible to achieve a harmonious intertwining of these heterogeneous lines in their individual interpretation. The article attempts to write “Love from afar” in the general European musical and theatrical context on the basis of an analysis of the libretto and the score of the work.

Keywords—Kaija Saariaho; *L’amour de loin*; contemporary musical theater; Jaufré Rudel; Amin Maalouf

I. INTRODUCTION

The opera “L’amour de loin” (Love from Afar, year 2000) of the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho (born 1952) is recognized as a masterpiece of the modern musical theatre. The work received multiple awards, including a Grammy in 2011 for Best Opera Recording, and its countless production allows us to refer to it as a “triumph of Finnish opera” [1].

Alongside Magnus Lindberg, Jukka Tiensuu, and Tapio Tuomela, Saariaho represents contemporary Finnish school of composers. But its music has long spread beyond the Finnish borders. Saariaho’s compositions sound at almost all major festivals; their premieres are held across the globe, performed by some of the greatest musicians and bands.

Saariaho’s work is fairly broad and diverse in the genre sense. It contains 4 operas, oratorio, ballet, over 15 orchestra compositions, around 40 vocal compilations, among which are choral compositions, soloists with orchestra, choir with orchestra, soloists and ensembles, chamber compositions for various instrumental ensembles, including electronic elements, as well as several electronic and sound installations.

Her creative career began in her hometown of Helsinki, where she studied composition at the Sibelius Academy with

Paavo Heininen (born 1938). She also studied under a British composer Brian Ferneyhough (born 1943), and Swiss composer Klaus Huber (born 1924) in Freiburg, Germany. After moving to France in 1982, Saariaho continued her education in IRCAM (Paris), perfecting her mastery in the area of computer composition. All this experience has later greatly affected her orchestral writing.

The first steps in the world of opera Saariaho made at the brink of the XXI century. Five years after the “L’amour de loin”, first produced in Salzburg, she wrote “Adriana Mater” (Paris, Opera Bastille, 2006). Both productions were directed by Peter Sellars, who gained global recognition for his interpretations of the operas of Handel, Mozart, and modern musical and theatrical compositions. The third opera is monodrama “Emilie” (Lyon, Opera de Lyon, 2010), completed in 2009. All three operas were written to a libretto of one of the most prominent modern writers of France — Amin Maalouf, of Lebanese descent, born in 1949. The most recent opera of Saariaho “Only the Sound Remains” (Amsterdam, Dutch National Opera, 2015), the libretto based on translations of Nôh dramas by Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa.

II. LIBRETTO

The creation of “L’amour de loin” took 8 years. The world premiere, which took place at the Salzburg musical festival, was very well received. The critics were calling it a historical event. “Simply unadorned and crystal-clear — Kaija Saariaho’s Love From Afar is modern opera at its most beautiful” — writes the researcher of composer’s work Liisamaja Hautsalo, and later adds “A new page was begun in the history of Finnish opera with the world premiere of Kaija Saariaho’s first opera” [2].

Libretto of the opera is based on the medieval legend about the troubadour Jaufré Rudel — the Prince of Blaye (just North-West of Bordeaux). It almost precisely follows the story of the troubadour [3]. Jaufré Rudel (prior to 1113–1170) was a real historical figure. Judging by his biography, he was a nobleman. According to the legend, Jaufré Rudel fell in love with Hodierna of Tripoli (her character in the opera was named Clémence) for her beauty, kindness, and nobility, of which he heard from the pilgrims. The troubadour wrote many wonderful poems in her honor. To finally see his “far-off love” he embarked on a voyage to the

Near East, joining the Crusade of 1146. The story holds it that Rudel fell ill during the voyage, and died shortly after arriving in Tripoli in the arms of his beloved countess. She requested that he be buried with honors in the cathedral of the order of Templars, while she herself went into convent. This legend was very popular in European literature. Edmond Rostand used this story in his play “*La Princesse lointaine*”, and Petrarch and Heine wrote about Jaufre Rudel.

The storyline of the libretto also intertwines with the Rudel’s poem “*Lanquan Li Jorn Son Lonc En Mai*”, which also became the literary foundation for Saariaho’s play “*Lonh*” (1996), for soprano and electronics. The main theme of the canzone — longing for the far away lady on a spring day:

When the days are long in May,
I enjoy the sweet song of the birds far away,
And when I am parted from their song,
The parting reminds me of a love far away;
I go bent with desire, head down;
Then neither the song nor the hawthorn's flower
Pleases me more than the winter's ice ¹ [4].

While image of the main character of the legend does not create serious doubts, the prototype of the heroine on the contrary sparks controversy: some scholars believe that she was Hodierna, wife of Raymond II of Tripoli (1136-1152), while others believe she was a daughter of the count — Melisende of Tripoli (after 1140–1161). But the fabula of the opera intrigues not as much with its parallels with the history, as it does as it sends people to the legendary times filled with romantic stories about troubadours and beautiful ladies, of the timeless struggle between love and death, and the tragic entanglement.

The opera has a very precise symmetrical structure: 13 scenes, grouped into 5 acts. Division into scenes (all of them are titled by the librettist) has its own dramaturgical logic, which overlays the 5-act structure traditional for the French opera. The first act is the exposition of the character of Jaufre. The second act draws the contours of the character of Clémence. But by second scene of the opera, the most mysterious figure emerges — Pilgrim: unclear, whether he is a traveler or a pilgrim. The key in this character is that he serves as a link between two distant worlds, the East and the West; it is he who connects the two people, longing for each other, and at first not even aware that the other exists. Thus the Pilgrim immediately takes on the role of an important “intermediary” figure.

¹ The fragment of canzone by JaufreRudel “*Lanquand li jorn son lonc en mai*”. Thranlation by V. Dynnik. JaufreRudel and his Distant Lady // Portal of thematic Internet libraries “Global Folio” [Electronic resource]. Access mode: URL: <http://www.globalfolio.net/archive/viewtopic.php?t=598>(date of the resource: 20.09.2018).

The development stretches across three scenes (4–6). Unlike the beginning of a typical drama, instead of conflict it rather presents a certain pause, a poetic conceptualization. The main characters learn of each other’s existence, but take no action; instead they are submerged into a world of various feelings and thoughts.

The most intense development and climax of the drama is concentrated in the fourth act. All of the events take place under the sign of the sea — the most important symbol dating back to ancient mythology. In the opera, the voyage across the sea also signifies the inner changes that Jaufre was undergoing. The all-consuming passion transforms into despair, fear, morphs into delirium, and brings the poet to the brink of demise. While bringing the hero closer to his dream, the sea simultaneously deprives him of his life.

The final act fulfills several functions at once. It contains the lyrical culmination of the opera — the long awaited lovers’ duet, resolution, and the epilogue. The external action here is also less significant than the internal. The main poetic fabula relates to the revelation of the eternal topic of “love and death”, which gains a special meaning with Maalouf and Saariaho. The *L’amour de loin* in their interpretation gives life, movement, inspiration; the “attained” love leads to suffering, madness, and death, which having taken the earthly existence of Jaufre, once again turns Clémence’s love into unattainable and distant, and returns light and grace into her soul.

In one of her interviews Saariaho said: “*L’amour de loin*” is an opera not only about love, but love and death. The multiple operas written on the subject of “love–death” — “*Tristan*”, “*Pelléas*...” [5]. This statement reflects an important aspect of the “*Love from afar*”. Saariaho’s opera in many ways represents a type of a creative reaction to the musical drama of Wagner and opera of Debussy.

In “*Love from afar*” we can see a reflection of some of the *Tristan*’s ideas: in Wagner’s opera the love is forbidden, here — unattainable; there, the love is suffering, and death — reunion in the afterlife, here — life is full of joy, and sorrow, while death — a sudden separation. Such parallels between two operas are just as interesting as direct connections. The storyline connections with *Pelléas* are mostly expressed in a tight fusion of the motifs of love and death, and in both cases the death does not unite, but separates the heroes. But in Saariaho’s opera it was not jealous and insulted husbands that ended the lovers’ relationship, as in the stories of Wagner and Debussy, rather the love itself that becomes the deadly venom that poisons them.

The sea theme and the voyage across it also connect the worlds of “*Love from afar*” and “*Tristan and Isolde*”. In the beginning if Wagner’s drama the sea pushes the dying *Tristan*’s boat to the shores of Ireland, then “in the arms” of this storm *Tristan* and *Isolde* drink the love potion, the same sea carries *Isolde* towards her beloved at the end of the opera, opening for them the gates of the desired death. The same water and sea theme also plays a significant role in “*Pelléas*”. The storming sea prevents *Pelléas* from departing, which causes a tragic finale, where *Mélisande*’s wedding ring falls

into the deep fountain. In Debussy's opera there is no sea voyage, but rather the inability to cross the sea in the end entices the feeling of the fatal inevitability.

The sea is a dual symbol, representing the endlessness of time, and a powerful destructive force; the permanence, and variability. The sea separates, but also connects. In "Love from afar" the Pilgrim, who returns from a voyage, tells the prince about a countess, and turns his dream into reality. During the second voyage, the Pilgrim brings Clémence the message about the admiring poet. The third voyage inspires Jaufre to travel to the East himself, and finally the sea voyage of the troubadour, which leads to his demise.

The sea theme felt and greatly brought to life by Sellars. "The sea stretched between them — the mysterious, dark waters that were connecting and separating the heroes.... Every so often the Pilgrim crosses the dark sea..."; "In Sellars' production the water is an ambiguous symbol. It is dark...; something mysterious is looming in its depths — love" [6].

Libretto of the opera absorbed the effects of multiple creative traditions. In this regard it can be viewed as an intertext, which covers such pages of world culture as poetry of troubadours from the times of the Crusades of the XII century, Persian love poetry, Biblical texts, and of course opera.

"Love from afar" is tightly linked to the courtly tradition. Its conception dates back to medieval literature; it is connected to celebration of deep love of the noble knight towards a beautiful lady. The theme of love for a lady emerges in "Love from afar" in an unusual form. Troubadour worships the idealized image that he himself created, and then transposes it onto a real woman. As noted by literary scholars, the courtly love is oriented not towards achieving a goal, but the yearning, and that is the only thing that can bring the ultimate joy to the lover [7]. The prince from Saariaho's opera closely follows this principle, initially not making attempts to find his beloved, but nurtures his fantasies and dreams, which become the driving force in his life.

There is an opinion that the art of medieval Arab poets influenced the art of troubadours. The libretto of "Love from afar" can be used as an argument to support it. Motif of a temperate mystical love becomes the dominant element of Jaufre's character. In addition to that, the troubadours' poetry also intertwines with the Sufi tradition. "The object of idolatry... was associated with worshipping a divine lover, as an idol" [8] — writes orientalist Carl Ernst in his book "Sufism". The topic of deifying a lady is revealed in remarks of the Troubadour Rudel: "Clémence, Clémence, like the heavens are clement!" (III, 1, "In the Blaye Citadel"); "Why did I covet the forbidden fruit? Why did I covet the bright star?" (IV, 3, "Storm"). The motif of the forbidden fruit, the unreachable source, undoubtedly has its roots in the Bible. But its presence in the opera has a dual meaning. While the prince endows his beloved with divine qualities, the countess when calling out to God in prayer literary recreates the image of Jaufre: "My prayer rises to you who are so far from me now, to you who are so far. Forgive me for having doubted

your love... Lord, Lord, you are love, You are the distant Love..." (V, 4, "I still hope").

This motif is likely to have been influenced by the work of Teresa of Ávila, a Spanish nun and the author of mystic tales² [9]. The title of her treatise and some of its ideas laid in the foundation of Saariaho's vocal cycle "The Castle of Soul" ("Château de l'Âme", 1995), which would suggest that the composer was well acquainted with the work of the nun. It is known that Teresa of Ávila had visions, in which she saw Christ and a cherub, who have penetrated her heart with a fiery spear. It is recorded in her memoirs: "He (Christ) often tells me: I am yours, and you are mine. These favors from God made me feel unmeasurably bewildered. They hold both, pain and bliss" [10]. These words display a certain switch of spiritual feelings with earthly passion. A similar situation takes place in the scene of the prayer of Clémence in the final scene of Saariaho's opera.

Libretto of the "Love from afar" invokes of multiple literary and musical and theatrical associations, and instills various allusions. The musical score of the opera is just as complex and intertextual "canvas". It is the result of a harmonious fusion of modern compositional thinking and medieval storyline about love of French troubadour and countess of Tripoli.

III. MUSICAL COMPOSITION

The musical dramaturgy is built upon cross-referencing of three main intonation-figurative spheres connected to historical, geographical, and figurative aspects of the storyline. The sphere portrayed by the historical period of the events in the opera submerges the audience into the era of troubadours — in this case, the XII century. Another area is associated with the geographical aspect. Jaufre is a Provençal nobleman; Clémence is also French, but lives in Tripoli. The contrast and interconnection of these characters with the geographical gap between them is an important layer of musical fabric of the opera. The third sphere pertains to the main idealistic "core" of the opera — the subject of love and death. On one hand, the heroes are stricken by fairly earthly feeling of passion; on the other — the story of their love is steeped with some type of a surreal, mystical flare.

Polyphony of the figurative spheres of the opera is manifested by the very unique and extremely rich musical language. Saariaho is very original in her approach towards all of its components. In her article "Timbre and harmony: interpolations of timbral structures" she states her position with regards to harmony: "Here the harmony is impossible to perceive as a series of different chords since it is presented as a continuum, as an uninterrupted chord which is continuously modified" [11].

² Teresa de Ávila — (1515–1582) is a Spanish nun, a Carmelite, a Catholic saint, the author of mystical works. The treatise "The Inner Castle" ("El Castillo Interior", 1577) is her most famous book. Theresa of Avila // Website "Wikipedia" [Electronic resource]. Access mode: URL: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D2%E5%F0%E5%E7%E0_%C0%E2%E8%EB%FC%F1%EA%E0%FF(date of the resource: 20.09.2018).

This approach has largely determined the harmonic language of the opera. The sound world of the “Love from afar” is static; it is comprised of long polyphonic vertical complexes. The change in the consonances is gradual, and the new chord is often a variant of the previous with a certain number of common sounds — “pedals”. This creates a feeling of a gigantic sound canvas, on which the shift from one tone to another is hardly noticeable, and very difficult to detect.

Modality is yet another component of harmonic base of the opera. Its shades are often present in vocal parts. For example, in Jaufre’s part we can often hear fragments of medieval modes, while chords are rich with perfect fifths — the “signature” of this character. Vocal lines of the Pilgrim are also often modal, underlining the intermediary role of his character, which carry the traces of Jaufre as well.

The musical language of the “Love from afar” is fairly limited, which is unusual for a two-hour opera. A small assortment of constantly “rotated” chords aimed at intensifying the dramaturgy: repetition of consonance is often linked to a certain topic or character. In realization of the idealistic-figurative layer of the opera the key role is played by the leitmotif aspect. The approach used by the composer in a way is close to both, “Tristan”, and “Pelléas”, which “Love from afar” resembles to in the plot-dramatic regard. Same as Wagner, Saariaho uses only one motif, but upon its development the entire dramaturgy of the work is built. It is the motif of a “love from afar” that comprises the main material for thematic work. At the same time, Saariaho does not strive for such scrupulous transformation as in “Tristan and Isolde”. Similar to motifs-symbols in Debussy’s opera, the leitmotif of the “Love from afar” carries in itself a certain generalized idea, laid into the foundation of the drama.

The musical images of the heroes are characterized by a number of repeating language elements — melodic patterns, harmonic structures, and timbres. The vocal part of Jaufre is constructed on conjunct motion in a rather limited range, and often sounds being accompanied by a harp. Clémence’s melody characteristics consisted of scale-wise motifs, and wide jumps. Rich ornamentation and short glissandi are also inherent in her solo, and recreates the Eastern flavor. The musical image of the Pilgrim is characteristic with descending conjunct motion of flutes.

Staticity of the harmonic component in the opera is compensated by the variety and dynamic of the texture. Saariaho uses both, the traditional types of expression — homophonic and choral, as well as various textured imagery, inherent in sonority music. The first are usually intrinsic to arioso, the second — to orchestral episodes. For example, the use of continues type of texture creates an effect of a “wavering” sound mass. It is one of the most important means used in culmination and final parts of the opera. In these moments the texture moves to the forefront of the expressive instruments of the composer.

Orchestration is the key dramaturgical element in “Love from afar”, as with Saariaho’s style in general. All types of sounds are potential material for her oeuvres. “The sounds of

nature, all around us, are really for me the most beautiful sounds you can hear. I feel no separation between our breathing, the wind, the sea, the birds, and some of my own music. It is for me a natural continuity.” [12]

The orchestra of the opera includes 30 different instruments. Besides the traditional instruments, it is equipped with additional timbres — electronic keyboard, and non-traditional percussion instruments such as o-daiko (Japanese drum), shell-chimes (“ringing wind”), guiro (Latin musical instrument), and others. The timbres of percussion and sounds created using electronics dissolve in the general fabric, but at the same time create special shades that complement the orchestral texture. In her opera Saariaho creates an exclusively rich and colorful sound spectrum, inside which the “fields” of sound constantly change and shimmer.

The orchestral consonance is also enriched by the untraditional playing techniques: a specific pressure of the bow on strings and its gradation, “circular” glissando of harp, barely noticeable dynamic changes that “wind down” the sound or starting it “from scratch”, etc.

Working with orchestral timbres in “Love from afar”, Saariaho prefers clean sound over mixed. In this regard she follows Debussy. As noted by NikolayBarabanov: “as in impressionism the foundation lies in a clean color, for musical imagery Debussy prefers exclusively clean sound” [13]. The favored “colors” for Saariaho are percussion and harp, which often associated with the key themes and characters of the opera. They are the “core” of the orchestra in “Love from afar”, while its foundation (“the body”) is comprised of string group, while woodwind instruments are usually given the counterpoint and decorative role. The brass is mostly used during culminations, often copy the string group, the sustained chords of which comprise the foundation of the instrumental part.

As to the electronics, per composer’s claim, its role in the opera is rather modest. Saariaho uses sounds of wind, sea, birds, rustle of leaves, bells, and human voice. The electronic material is reproduced using a midi keyboard connected to a computer. In sheet music it is written in form of a numerical code.

“Love from afar” demonstrates Saariaho’s mastery of an exquisite, truly beautiful and diverse vocal writing. The solo vocal lines, with a rare exception, are similar to a recitative that is developing on the background of static harmony, which distinguishes it from the traditional opera recitative that is usually rather mobile from the harmonic point of view. The recitative vocal style of the opera resembles a more of an arioso melody. Called to embody the inner state of the characters, their feelings and thoughts, it is free of formality, typical turns of phrase, its intonation is as natural as human emotions. At the same time, the vocals in “Love from afar” represent a full-fledged opera singing abundant in spikes and sustained sounds. It holds an array of vocalization techniques: singing, speech, whisper, “semi-singing”, as well as various types of “portamento”. In Saariaho’s opera we can also hear characteristic to her style “sliding” into Sprechstimme,

whisper, vocalization of not only vowels, but also consonants.

In the sheet music of “Love from afar” we can see a wide use of choir — mostly male or female, and rarely mixed. Function-wise its use serves two purposes. First — as a commentator of the thoughts and actions of the characters, similar to the choir in Ancient Greek tragedy. In such cases the choral style is declamational and rhythmic, often with a trace of modality. The second function — creation of additional orchestral colors, allowing richer, resonating harmonies. Sound of the choir combined with the orchestra is also used to create the so-called “soundscapes”, such as imitation of breaking waves and other natural sounds. In these types of episodes the choir provides additional resonance to the orchestral chords, and introduces new colors into the timbre palette.

IV. CONCLUSION

The music of the opera conveys thoughts and emotions of the characters to the minutest nuances. Peter Sellars talks about this music as of something personal: “It is a world where every heartbeat and every movement of the heart means something — it is like a seismograph — every little movement in the spiritual awareness set onto paper with great intensity” [14].

The originality of this love story lies in the fact that it dwells in some sort of a fantasy world, somewhere between reality and a dream, East and West, where imaginary love comes to life. What exactly defines the originality of this style? Perhaps in an organic fusion of seemingly different things — electronics, and medieval modality; traditional sonority, and diverse, at times exquisite vocals. Saariaho herself says this about her technique: “It always seems to me that I have the only possible aesthetic for my music, and that my music can exist only in one way, which is the synthesis of so many things that I cannot analyze it” [15].

“I felt when I wrote it that everything I had written up to that moment was somehow in that piece. All the material, my approach to harmony, to texture — all of it was there...It is so strange to me, because I don't feel like an operatic composer” [16] — says the composer about her opera. The music of “Love from afar” does not let us fully agree with KaijaSaariaho. The result of her first opera experience turned out so strong, that it forces us to speak of her as one of the brightest composers of the beginning of XXI century working in the sphere of musical theatre. The exquisite composition technique, beauty of orchestral fabric, fine scales of vocal intonations, abundance of allusions of most diverse range invokes a sensation of harmony and artistic accomplishment.

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