

“Looking into the heart of light: Metaphors of Light in Kaija Saariaho’s *Notes on Light*”

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Needs audio/visual

Contemporary, Finnish-born, composer Kaija Saariaho has been, as Alex Ross notes in a 2016 *New Yorker* article, “a major force in contemporary music for decades.” Now in her 60s, with pieces commissioned from and performed by the major performing forces of the classical music world, Saariaho’s works have been receiving critical acclaim in the popular presses yet receive little scholarly attention. Notably, “many scores in Saariaho’s catalogue,” Ross writes, “are visually suggestive, with titles alluding to light, water, gardens, and night.” It is the metaphors of the light that I wish to further investigate.

Saariaho often speaks of the importance, physically, of sunlight on the Finnish psyche: “its importance for me comes from the experience of living in the ‘period of darkness’ – there’s a very specific term for this in Finnish: *kaamos* – all the while retaining hope that the sunlight will start strengthening again until it is fully restored.” While light has physical, empirical, and quantifiable elements, it is often subjectively perceived and felt by an observer who notices the warmth of the sun, the flickering of a light bulb, or the brilliant light of the moon. It is always there, but not always perceived. It is from the physical, observable, and yet subjective perspectives that metaphors of light are imbued into the music. While the translation of the worldly elements to music is not new, the musical metaphors of light in Saariaho’s works provide more than mere programmatic associations, they are embedded into the structural layering of the work.

*Notes on Light* (2006), a five-movement piece for orchestra and cello, is one among many of Saariaho’s works that make metaphors of light in music. It is a rich work with, often times, easily discernable formal structures based on the interactions between the cello and orchestra, episodic in nature. Material presented in the cello, by means of short phrases or gestures, create structural motives that inform the large-scale structure of a movement and in turn govern the piece as a whole. I will focus my structural and melodic analysis on movements one and five, analyzing the metaphors for light that are embedded into the musical form. I argue that the metaphor of the physicality of light is presented in the interaction between the smallest gestures and large-scale structure of the work.