

### Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Contemporary Music

## The BBVA Foundation recognizes Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho for breaking down the divisions between acoustic and electronic music

- The jury describes her contribution to contemporary music as “extraordinary in its individuality, breadth and scope”
- Since her early works of the 1980s incorporating electronic sounds, Saariaho has achieved what the citation terms “a seamless interweaving of the worlds of acoustic music and technology”
- The worldwide acclaim that greeted her first opera *L'Amour de loin*, composed in 2000 with a libretto provided by Lebanese author Amin Maalouf, “positioned her at the forefront of a world in which women have traditionally been underrepresented,” the citation continues

**Madrid, February 14, 2018.-** The BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Award in the Contemporary Music category goes, in this tenth edition, to Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho on the basis of “a contribution to contemporary music that is extraordinary in its individuality, breadth and scope.” From her earliest works, the jury continues, Saariaho has exhibited “a seamless interweaving of the worlds of acoustic music and technology,” a quality which the new laureate remarked, after hearing of the award, had come to her quite naturally. When she started studying music at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, she was frustrated at the acoustics of the venues she would attend to hear live performances. Wondering if it was possible to alter characteristics like the volume of the instruments, she began recording them and processing the sound for subsequent playback.

In 1982, she moved to Paris to continue her training at the Institut de Recherche et Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM), where she came into contact with the leading exponents of spectralism. The spectralist technique of decomposing sound left a recognizable imprint on Saariaho's writing in the form of electronic arrangements and computer-generated sounds. The combination of synthetic sounds, classical instrumentation and elements of nature shines through in early works like *Lichtbogen* (1986), inspired by the Northern lights. “Coming from Finland of course has made me more sensitive to nature,” she explains. “And this has a lot to do with the acoustics. When you walk through a

big forest after the rain, the acoustics are very different, because the leaves are wet and that creates a reverberation. The forest is like a church. The same thing happens with snow, which creates a very particular silence. These childhood experiences are part of me and part of my music."

Saariaho also acknowledges the influence of electronics and technology in her oeuvre to the extent that they have helped her pursue her chosen direction. However she does not see them as the core element: "My aim," she declares, "is that the listener doesn't perceive the frontiers of the electronic component in my music. It is part of the orchestration. When there is something I cannot do with natural instruments, I turn to computers, then I complete the orchestration, the musical idea."

For the jury, Saariaho's music has "a unique quality that is almost as visual as it is sonorous." And one that is steeped in imagination. As she says, "I have always loved music, as long as I can remember. My mother told me that at night when I was going to sleep, I would start to imagine that I was hearing music. So much so that I couldn't fall asleep and would ask her to 'turn off the pillow.' Music has always been in my mind and my imagination."

### **An opera debut meeting with worldwide acclaim**

Saariaho initially thought that her music was not dramatic enough for opera. Nonetheless the idea stuck in her mind. The definitive push came with a Peter Sellers production of Olivier Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*, performed at the Salzburg Festival, which she describes as "liberating," and "a sign" that she could venture into the opera genre. "It was a lengthy process," she recalls now, "lasting about eight years in all. At first I didn't know who would be interested or if I could do it. But finally the means came together to make it possible."

In the year 2000, back at the Salzburg Festival, she was present for the world premiere of her first opera *L'Amour de loin*, with a libretto by the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf. Its success, notes the jury, positioned Saariaho at the forefront of a world in which women have traditionally been underrepresented. Asked whether being a woman meant she had to work harder, she offers a meditated response: "It was undoubtedly an obstacle when I was a young composer trying to get a start, and it still is for many young women today. But now that I have made a name in music, I don't experience it as a problem."

She has followed up *L'Amour de loin* with a further three operas, *Adriana Mater* (2006), *Émilie* (2010) and *Only the Sound Remains* (2015), all of which address themes she considers important for humanity. "Love is one," she relates, "and another is death. Both are great mysteries that form part of our lives."

Saariaho is an eminently versatile author, known for her ability to switch genre. She has written for soloists and chamber groups, and composed orchestral works, operas, oratorios and vocal, incidental and electronic music. Her four operas, along with her chamber and orchestral music repertoire, are familiar ground to

conductor Ernest Martínez Izquierdo, who has directed every work of hers in a collaboration dating back twenty-five years. He talks admiringly of how she has carved out a path in a male-dominated profession. "It hasn't been easy, but she knows what she wants and doesn't stop until she achieves it. She comes over as very sweet and never raises her voice, but she has character and if she doesn't like something she says so. She is honest and forthright."

Martínez Izquierdo admits that Saariaho's music is a challenge to perform, "but not because the score is very complex, as might happen composers like Boulez, but because you also have to grasp her musical poetics. Her music is more than the notes, it is also color. And to perform it, you have to coax that color from the sounds. Her approach to the orchestra starts from electronics, and she knows how to get the musicians to produce effects and sounds from that world, which she then fuses with actual electronics. The result is that both sounds merge so smoothly you cannot tell them apart."

He also adds that "as a writer she is always thinking of the performer, and is very loyal to those she has worked with. She spoils us, and gives us an unaccustomed degree of freedom. With other composers, you can feel like a metronome; she makes you part of the creative process in a way very few authors do, which is why I cherish working with Kaija."

Perhaps this freedom flows from the importance that the Finnish composer accords to creativity, the bridge, as she sees it, between science and culture: "All the great inventions come from creative minds, so there are obviously many meeting points between the two worlds. I follow scientific developments with great interest, especially in the domain of music and acoustics."

Kaija Saariaho is currently working on what will be her fifth opera: "It is a long piece that I started on some years ago, and I will continue working on it until early 2019."

### **Contemporary Music jury and technical committee**

The jury in this category was chaired by **Nicholas Cook**, Emeritus Professor of Music at the University of Cambridge (United Kingdom). The secretary was **Pwyll Ap Sion**, Professor in Music in the School of Music at Bangor University (United Kingdom). Remaining members were **Tom Huizenga**, a music producer, reporter and editor for radio network NPR Music; violinist **Leila Josefowicz**; **Andrew McGregor**, a broadcaster with BBC Radio 3; and **Alex Ross**, music critic and staff writer on *The New Yorker*.

The **Technical Committee of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)** was coordinated by **María Victoria Moreno**, the Council's Deputy Vice President for Scientific and Technical Areas, and formed by: **Emilio Ros**, scientific researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution; **María Gembero**, a tenured researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution; **Antonio Ezquerro**, a scientific researcher at the Mila i Fontanals Institution; **Luis González**, a tenured researcher at the Mila i Fontanals

Institution; and **José Antonio Berenguer**, Coordinator of the Humanities and Social Sciences Area and scientific researcher at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Mediterranean and the Near East (ILC).

The **Contemporary Music** award in last year's edition went to Russian composer Sofia Gubaidulina for the "spiritual quality" imbuing her work and "the transformative dimension of her music."

### **About the BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards**

The promotion of knowledge based on research and artistic and cultural creation, and the interaction of these domains, forms a core strand of **the BBVA Foundation's** action program, along with the recognition of talent and excellence across a broad spectrum of disciplines, from science to the arts and humanities.

In line with these objectives, the **BBVA Foundation Frontiers of Knowledge Awards** were established in 2008 to recognize outstanding contributions in a range of scientific, technological and artistic areas, together with knowledge-based responses to the central challenges of our times. The areas covered by the Frontiers Awards are congruent with the knowledge map of the 21st century, in terms of the disciplines they address and their assertion of the value of cross-disciplinary interaction.

The BBVA Foundation is aided in the evaluation process by the **Spanish National Research Council (CSIC)**, the country's premier public research organization. As well as designating each jury chair, the CSIC is responsible for appointing the technical evaluation committees that undertake an initial assessment of candidates put forward by numerous institutions across the world and draw up a reasoned shortlist for the consideration of the juries.

### **CALENDAR OF UPCOMING AWARD ANNOUNCEMENTS**

<b>Economics, Finance and Management</b>	Tuesday, February 20, 2018
<b>Development Cooperation</b>	Tuesday, February 27, 2018

#### LAUREATE'S FIRST DECLARATIONS AND IMAGES

A video recording of the new laureate's first interview on receiving news of the award is available from the Atlas FTP with the following coordinates:

Server: **5.40.40.61**

Username: **AgenciaAtlas4**

Password: **mediaset17**

The name of the video is:

**"PREMIO MÚSICA"**

In the event of connection difficulties, please contact **Miguel Gil** at production company Atlas:

**Mobile:** +34 619 30 87 74

**E-mail:** [mgil@mediaset.es](mailto:mgil@mediaset.es)

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