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FIRST NIGHT | CLASSICAL

# Total Immersion: Saariaho review — contemporary music at its best in a concert to remember

Barbican

Geoff Brown

Monday May 08 2023, 12.00pm, The Times

Music



The BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sakari Oramo

MARK ALLAN

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★★★★★

Considering the slowly mutating textures strung out at the start of this final concert in the BBC's day devoted to Kaija Saariaho, it may be hard to imagine that this Paris-based Finnish composer has written five operas, each with degrees of dramatic conflict. Reviewing her latest, *Innocence*, last month, Richard Morrison in this paper wrote of its "visceral swirl" and "volatile mood changes", with the whole "designed like a thriller".

None of those ingredients was on the table in *Du cristal*, though that doesn't mean that this early fruit of Saariaho's association with French "spectralist" composers, devoted to dissecting the innards of sounds, was in any way unrewarding.

Every work in the BBC Symphony Orchestra's concert, conducted by Sakari Oramo with precision and passion, pulled its weight in different ways. Each of them also left the audience hanging on to the final notes in appreciative silence until Oramo's hands came to rest. Heaven.

From the start of her career in the 1980s, when other young continentals were still composing music as easy to swallow as barbed wire, Saariaho ensured that her offerings always communicated, whether through their visionary atmosphere, gestural life, colour kaleidoscopes, or lyrical impulses.

*Notes on Light*, a cello concerto of sorts from 2007, featured the soloist Anssi Karttunen eloquently darting and slithering, with the equally mobile orchestra acting as friend or foe. This, in its own way, was also a thriller.

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The dramatic element grew larger still in the later *Saarikoski Songs*, five settings of Pentti Saarikoski poems about nature, originally written for soprano and piano, though surely better served surrounded by Saariaho's recent ear-tingling arrangement for chamber orchestra.

No instrument, however, blotted out the technical daring and tonal beauties of the soprano Anu Komsu, resplendent in a tulip-splattered dress, and consistently gripping even when the poetry's precise meaning soared over one's head.

The final work, *Circle Map* (2012), capped the concert with a spectacular flourish. This too had a vocal element, with readings of verses by the 13th-century Persian poet Rumi processed into an electronic thread subtly woven into a busy but hypnotic orchestral tapestry; accompanied too by a visual commentary that might have intruded but never did. Here was a concert to remember, with superb performances and contemporary music of genuine power and human appeal.

**Broadcast on May 19, then on BBC Sounds**

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