Kaija Saariaho

Six Japanese Gardens

Kaija Saariaho, a Finnish composer, studied traditional composition at multiple renowned academies, such as Sibelius Academy and Musikhochschule in Germany. In 1982, Saariaho attended a computer course at IRCAM, the Institute for Research and Coordination of Music and Acoustics, in Paris. Electronic elements have since become an essential part of Saariaho’s composition. Saariaho worked at the innovative music studio in Darmstadt, one of the original centers for developmental music. Saariaho has become well known for her ability to take electronic music and blend it with more classical instruments, such as cello, traditional percussion, and vocals. Her music encompasses a wide range of genres. She has written a score for a ballet, as well as composed a piece for soprano and electronic instruments. Saariaho once said “Everything is permissible as long as it is done in good taste.” Saariaho’s music combines traditional sound with electroacoustic technology. Plus, her tastes push music forward while remaining pleasing to a larger audience than purely electroacoustic music may have. I was able to listen to an entire CD of Saariaho’s unique combinations of electronic and traditional music while working on this paper, whereas I doubt I would have been able to listen to an hour of James Tenney’s Dialogue. Six Japanese Gardens is written specifically for electronics and percussion. (http://www.saariaho.org/, http://www.schirmer.com/composers/saariaho/bio.html.)

Six Japanese Gardens is composed of 6 small movements. Saariaho came up with the idea for the composition while in Japan [CUT and] exploring a series of gardens. Each movement symbolizes a specific garden she visited. Although each small piece contains unique
ideas and has its own specific feel, there are certain trends which are carried throughout the almost 20 minutes of *Six Japanese Gardens*.

The first movement, *Tenju-an Garden of Nanzen-ji Temple* began with a triangle creating a steady beat which continued throughout the entire movement. It seems appropriate that a triangle, or another metallic chiming instrument, began this section. I was looking at pictures of the Nanzen-ji Temple. One of the rooms in the temple appeared to have a large amount of gold and metal. Perhaps Saariaho found inspiration in such a room. ([http://www.dgolds.com/oldsite/Japan/Nanzeni_Temple_and_environs.htm](http://www.dgolds.com/oldsite/Japan/Nanzeni_Temple_and_environs.htm)) This temple seemed to have a very peaceful and tranquil air surrounding it. A simple piece, such as the one Saariaho created, mirrors the tranquility of the Nanzeni-ji Temple. A mild constant percussion rhythm over simple electroacoustic tones brings the listener to an almost meditative state. The triangle was just the initial carrier of the simple beat; other instruments carried the same rhythm throughout the rest of the section. There were no clear divisions in the first movement. The primary changes that occurred during the first movement were changes in which percussion instruments carried the beat. At first the triangle carried the simple sound. There was a gradual transitioning to have a drum carry the beat. However, the beat was consistently kept strong and steady. The dynamics of this movement ranged from very soft to a medium volume; there were no dramatic shifts in dynamic in this movement. The beginning and ending of the movement were very mild, fading in and seemingly fading out at the end. The electroacoustic aspect of this section was very soft. However, without the electronic support, the drum rhythm would not seem to be connected, and I believe the movement would have felt sparse.

The second movement, *Many Pleasures (Garden of the Kinkaku-ji)*, is the only movement that included any type of vocals. It is the vocals that truly separate this movement from the other five. The modifications on the vocals seem to transform the vocals into almost a percussive instrument. They are given a staccato feel especially around 36 and again at 55 seconds into this specific movement. The vocals almost seem to take on the sound of a rapidly fired gun: very rapid and short. The opening of this movement immediately jumps into a faster
moving tempo than the first movement. Again, the tempo of the piece is relatively consistent. Unlike the first movement, there is only one shift in the primary carrier of the beat. For the most part, chimes or bells and synthesized bell sounds carried the movement and decided the exact tempo and rhythm. There was, however, one point when the chanting voices seemed to determine the beat and tempo, and then the bells entered again.

The faster tempo found in *Many Pleasures (Garden of the Kinkaku-ji)* seems appropriate, especially after reading a little bit about the actual Garden of the Kinkaku-ji. I found this garden has waterfalls on the grounds. Initially, I thought the movement of water was the only reason for the faster tempo of this second portion. However, I read that there is an ancient myth which involves fish swimming up the waterfalls and then being transformed into dragons ([http://kabuki.eecs.berkeley.edu/~rsn/japan.html](http://kabuki.eecs.berkeley.edu/~rsn/japan.html)). Since dragons have a much more forceful nature than fish, this could be a reason why Saariaho gave this section a more forceful sound.

*Dry Mountain Stream*, the third movement, like the second movement immediately jumps into a rapidly moving set rhythm. Few breaks are taken during the 3 minute and 20 second movement, as there seems to be constant percussion action. Initially it is difficult to separate percussion from electronic aspects in this song. It seems to me that the electronics in this movement enhance and change the true sound of the specific percussion instruments. There are certain times in the movement where it seems as though the percussion attack is rounded out; it is not a natural sounding attack. Also, Saariaho makes use of space in the movement, particularly towards the end. Between 2:20 and 2:40, and 3:00 and 3:15, the sounds seem to be moving from channel to channel. It is as if the music is calling the listener and making the listener chase the music.

*Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji* begins more like the first movement, rather than the second or third. It is a slow building opening, with an electric base. Percussion then began to add onto the deep electric tones. The movement was driven by some startling percussion attacks. Again, Saariaho continued with her trend of not having strong dynamic changes. This movement did include more variation in dynamic than heard in the previous three movements, but there were no
great crescendos or drop offs as heard in many traditional pieces. This movement did not have a clear beat as the other movements up to this point have had.

I was surprised when I saw pictures of the Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji. It appears the garden is very peaceful except, as two websites pointed out, when there are tourists (http://www.miksovsky.com/Japan/2000-05/Ryoanji%20Rock%20Garden%20Tourist.htm, http://www.sacredsites.com/asia/japan/ryoan_ji_kyoto.html). When I listened to Saariaho’s adaptation of the garden into a musical arrangement, it seems as if she were hiding something. I kept expecting a shocking change in either the tempo or a large dynamic change. Although Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji did include more dynamic variation than other sections, the combination of notes seemed to trick the listener to expect more. I read that no matter where in the Rock Garden of Ryoan-ji you sit, you will never see all of the stones at once; one stone is always hidden from your view. In my mind, Saariaho seems to have incorporated the secretive and hidden nature of the actual garden into the fourth section of Six Japanese Gardens.

The fifth movement, Moss Garden of the Saiho-ji, began with a now familiar triangle or chiming instrument. The triangle sets an easily followed tempo. This movement was similar to the first movement in that there were changes between electronic and acoustic instruments, but the changes occurred in a seamless fashion. In the first movement, the changes included shifting between which instrument would keep the tempo going steady. In this movement, the primary instrument is the chiming instrument, and the changing part of the movement is the tempo. The tempo changes are very subtle, and unless you are listening critically, they are easily missed. In this movement, Saariaho still did not employ dramatic dynamic changes.

The dynamic of the sixth movement, Stone Bridges, is one of the loudest levels heard in the entire piece. The movement did have dynamic variation, and unlike other movements, the dynamic tended to stay loud with insertions of shorter quieter sections, rather than the trend of soft dynamics with short louder sections. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the last movement is the way in which it ended. Saariaho tended to employ the same basic instrumentation throughout each individual movement. In the last movement however, she
shifted in the middle from mallet/wooden percussion back to the triangle or chime instrument which began the very first movement. Keeping with her trend of seamless changes, the triangle entry into the final movement is barely noticeable until all other percussion instruments were no longer playing. Then it became difficult not to hear the same consistent beat being carried on by a single chiming instrument.

Focusing only on the use of percussion and electronics, it seemed the electronic instrumentation acted primarily to support the percussion theme. Particularly in movements one and four, the percussion seemed to carry the piece and define the overall movement. The electronic aspect of movements one and four often seemed to support the percussion, not allowing any empty silence throughout the entire movement. It was as if Saariaho wanted the listener to hear the electronics but not actually be aware of them. The specific percussion instruments chosen for the entire piece seem to be non-traditional percussion instruments. The first percussion instrument heard, I believe, is a triangle, and it is also the last instrument heard. This specific choice to begin and end a piece with the same instrument ties the entire piece together. It seems as though Six Japanese Gardens has completed an entire circle beginning with a triangle creating a steady rhythm, and ending in the same simple manner. Overall, bells and other chiming instruments were used more frequently in Six Japanese Gardens than in other traditional musical pieces. For example, bells, or other similar chiming instruments, basically carry all of movement two. In other compositions, bells and triangles have been used mainly for emphasis of a certain section, not consistently to drive a movement to completion.

The dynamics of Six Japanese Gardens did not vary greatly. The volume level tended to go from very quiet, to only medium loud. Within each movement, there was slight variation. I do not believe Saariaho’s primary concern was shocking the audience with dynamic changes. In fact, the relatively consistent dynamic level made it easier to listen for Saariaho’s gentle shifts in tempo, and also her use of electronic instrumentation.

One continuing trend through each of the six movements was the ease with which electronic instrumentation was mixed in with acoustic instruments. Frequently it was difficult to
tell if the primary tone was 100% acoustic, 100% electric, or if it was an electrically enhanced acoustic tone. When Saariaho chose to move between electric and acoustic tones, she was very delicate in combining them, creating an almost seamless transition from electric to acoustic or vice-versa. Each movement had certain trends that flowed throughout the piece, but there are many interesting and unique characteristics that were only found in one of the six movements.

It seemed as though Saariaho was able to get a feeling about each of the temples or gardens she visited while in Japan, and then transform the feeling into a unique musical piece. Each of the gardens appears to have a strong sense of tranquility associated with it. Throughout *Six Japanese Garden*’s entirety, a mild range of dynamics and tempos easily lent themselves to a calming and sometimes meditative state. I have never physically visited the gardens, and it would be impossible to say what exact aspects inspired Saariaho to compose such an electroacoustic piece. However, by merely looking at pictures, I can get a sense of what Saariaho was experiencing, and perhaps, I can begin to connect the music with the inspirational location.

I believe Saariaho has done an excellent job in multiple aspects of her composition. She has taken in her surrounding environment and placed it in a musical piece, flawlessly combining electronic and acoustic sounds. There were many times when I had to turn up the volume or repeat a specific section in order to really listen for the electric aspect of a movement. I think the entire piece was more easy listening compared to other electroacoustic pieces which we have listened to during class. I believe it is a reflection of Saariaho’s ability to use electronic tones as support to traditional percussion instruments. I listened to a few of the other tracks on the CD. I don’t know if the other pieces were inspired by a specific environment. However, I did enjoy listening to them. It seems as though Saariaho’s goal, at least with these specific pieces, was to create music where electric and acoustic elements could truly come together to form a new class of music, stronger than electric music or acoustic music could be when separate.
References

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