



Sakari Oramo

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Saariaho

Three Preludes^a. Saarikoski Songs^b. Vista^c

^{ab}Anu Komsi *sop* ^aMarzi Nyman *gtr*

^{bc}BBC Symphony Orchestra / Sakari Oramo

Ondine (ODE1512-2 • 54' • T/U)



Reviewing Anu Komsi's recording, also conducted by Sakari Oramo, of Kaija

Saariaho's 2007 cycle *Leino Songs* in this magazine 15 years ago (12/11), Guy Rickards described it as 'almost a *Four Last Songs* for the 21st century – although one hopes Saariaho will continue to write solo song sets'. In the end there were to be only three more before her death: two for baritone, then one more for Komsi, composed initially (like *Leino Songs*) with piano accompaniment and then transformed into the orchestral version heard here.

It sets five texts by the Finnish poet Pentti Saarikoski (1937-1983), and even though all the poems are drawn from a collection published in 1973, they seem astonishingly prescient, resonating with present-day worries around the destruction of the natural environment ('In the wind one can hear / the song of birds who died in the extinction'), post-truth ('Everyone from now on will have their own this / to which they are bound'), and even anticipating the strange stillness of the lockdown conditions under which the last two songs were written.

Saariaho consciously chose a more modern and direct style of poetry than in *Leino Songs*, and the settings are correspondingly straightforward yet evocative. The vocal writing is mostly syllabic (though the first song features extensive wordless vocalises), but covers a wide range from melodic lyricism to speech-like vehemence. Komsi is marvellous throughout: expressive and assured in both the lyrical odd-numbered songs and the more dramatic second and fourth. Her clarion high notes are a particular pleasure, while Saariaho's transparent scoring means the detailed instrumental textures are always ideally balanced with the voice.

The orchestration was made between mid-2020 and January 2021 – after the completion of the 2019 orchestral diptych *Vista* but before its Covid-delayed premiere – and thus stands as the last orchestral music Saariaho wrote apart from her final work, the trumpet concerto *HUSH*. It is also the last music she wrote before receiving the diagnosis of the brain tumour that would claim her life in June 2023. Yet except in the case of *HUSH*, a conscious farewell, any valedictory interpretation imposed on these works can only be retrospective; indeed, *Vista* seems to have been intended at the time of its composition as a deliberate striking-out in new directions after three years of intensive

work on the opera *Innocence*. Conceived while driving the interstate highway along the USA's Pacific coast, it sets a first movement of shimmering heat and relaxed scenery against a second of surprising density and propulsion, vividly captured here by Oramo's BBC forces and Ondine's reliably excellent sound engineering.

Complementing these two late works is one from the opposite end of Saariaho's career: a set of three miniatures for soprano and organ composed in her late 20s, tiny expressive distillations of verses from the Psalms and Isaiah, set in Finnish and again confidently projected by Komsí. Saariaho had played the organ as a student in Finland; in retrospect, it can be seen as a predecessor to the electronics with which she worked extensively after her move to Paris in the early 1980s. In the last years of her life she was able to endow an organ at the Helsinki Music Centre – a fantastically futuristic conception by the Austrian firm Rieger Orgelbau, whose pipes are inventively integrated into the cover design of the present release – and it is on that instrument that *Three Preludes* is recorded here. **John Fallas**