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# Displaced time: transcontextual references to time in Kaija Saariaho's *Stilleben*

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**This article discusses the nature of transcontextual references to time in the light of one composition, Kaija Saariaho's radiophonic work *Stilleben*. The term transcontextuality indicates that a sound has a dual meaning, which refers both to the musical context created by the composer and to its original, natural or cultural context. The concept of transcontextuality is particularly rewarding because a substantial part of *Stilleben's* sound material is drawn from an earlier composition by Saariaho, *Lichtbogen*. The focus of the study is in defining the ways the composition refers to time outside of the musical time of *Stilleben* itself. These references are divided into two categories: (i) references to the musical time of *Lichtbogen*, and (ii) references to the passage of time in a non-musical context. The first category leads to a music analytical approach where dominance/subordination relations of the time structures of the two compositions in question are studied. It is concluded that the temporal structure of *Stilleben* is defined by the temporality of *Lichtbogen* on various structural levels. The second category gives rise to reasoning with respect to narrative interpretation: environmental sounds convey stories and thus refer directly to the passage of time.**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article the aim is to find out what kinds of transcontextual references to time there are in Kaija Saariaho's radiophonic composition *Stilleben*. The approach to musical analysis adopted here can be thought of as semiotic because referential processes are at the centre of attention. The analytical goal is to offer one possible interpretation of the composition, an interpretation based on a set of examined conceptions of time in music.

Kaija Saariaho is one of the most successful of contemporary Finnish composers. At the end of the 1970s, while studying at the Sibelius Academy, she belonged to a group of young composers going under the name of the Open Ears Association. Magnus Lingberg and Esa-Pekka Salonen were her colleagues at the time. She has also studied in Germany (with Brian Ferneyhough and Klaus Huber) and since attending computer music courses at IRCAM in 1982 she has lived and composed in Paris.

*Stilleben, Nature morte avec paysage en mouvement, à travers la fenêtre* (composed between 1987

and 1988, winning the Prix Italia in 1988 and the Prix Ars Electronica in 1989) is as a radiophonic composition an exception in Saariaho's output. Saariaho has composed mainly for chamber ensembles of different sizes and the ensembles have often been complemented by live-electronics or tape. She has written for orchestra in *Verblendungen* (1982–4) and in the diptych *Du christal... à la fumée* (1989–90).

The sound materials of *Stilleben* come from six different sources. Four of the sources contain material recorded specially for *Stilleben*: short phrases by soprano and flute, whisperings, murmurings and more conventionally sung fragments by the Finnish Chamber Choir and readings of texts by Franz Kafka, Paul Elouard and Wassily Kandinsky in three different languages (Finnish, French and German). Additionally there are environmental noises collected for use in *Stilleben* (train, aeroplane, underground, rail stations). Recorded extracts of the Avanti Chamber Orchestra practising an earlier composition by Saariaho, *Lichtbogen* (1985–6, for flutes, percussion, piano, harp, two violins, viola, violoncello, double bass and live-electronics), also have a very substantial role in the sound structure of *Stilleben*.

The question of time could be approached from widely differing points of view in musical analysis. John Kramer has adopted a standpoint according to which in addition to rhythm and metre, motion, continuity, progression, pacing, proportion, duration and tempo should be discussed if the full scope of musical time is to be understood (Kramer 1988: 2).<sup>1</sup> David Epstein is willing to nominate time as one of the fundamental elements of music: 'Without time – structured time – music does not exist; no discussion, no experience of music can take place divorced from

<sup>1</sup>Kramer seems to be overwhelmed by the horizons opened up by the study of time in music to such an extent that he is ready to argue that time is not bound by the laws of logic: '– time is not bound by the "law of contradiction", which holds that proposition and its negation cannot be simultaneously true. – Musical time is both linear and nonlinear – Music can be, for example, linear on a deep structural level yet nonlinear on the surface.' Kramer's argument is highly questionable. The example he gives is not a case of a proposition and its negation being true at the same time. 'Deep structural level' and 'surface' can be thought to be entirely independent aspects of music and there is no contradiction in one being linear and the other nonlinear at the same time.

the phenomenon of time.’ (Epstein 1987: 55). Clearly, the concept of time has to be differentiated in order for it to be a manageable parameter of musical analysis. For the purposes of this article a set of definitions concerning time in music will be derived.

To begin with, two points of view will have to be excluded from discussion here. The first concerns the experiential nature of musical time. A basic duality in the conceptions of time in connection with music is often seen between absolute time and experiential time. Philosopher Susan Langer has argued for the difference between absolute time (which she also calls ‘clock time’ or ‘the sequence of actual happenings’) and virtual time. According to Langer, music creates an order of virtual time where sonorous forms move in relation to each other. The virtual time of music is different from absolute time because it ‘is measurable only in terms of sensibilities, tensions, and emotions’ (Langer 1953: 109). In addition to Langer’s phenomenological reasoning, the experiential nature of musical time is emphasised by music psychologists studying the perception of musical structures.

Secondly, the nature of the perception of time can provide inspiration for the composer: ‘the musical time dominates throughout, even though to begin with I was prepared for two time concepts, of the music and the speech. reading a text takes time in a different way from music, which is much more intensive. we do, however, in places get a glimpse of the other, far more leisurely passing time...’ (Saariaho 1987–8: 10).

One of the poetic points of departure in *Stilleben* is Saariaho’s interpretation of the experiencing of time in music and speech. Here the duality is not between absolute and experiential time but between the more intensively experienced time of music and the more leisurely passing time of speech. Conceptions of time can have relevance at all stages of the production or interpretation of a musical piece. Ideas or intuitions concerning time can be influential both from the poetic and aesthetic points of view.<sup>2</sup> The study of time in music could be directed towards any of these stages. The particular approach adopted here is one of analytical interpretation from the point of view of transcontextuality. The concept of transcontextuality is employed in the meaning given by Denis Smalley:

‘In transcontexts the composer intends that the listener should be aware of the dual meaning of a source. The first meaning derives from the original, natural or cultural context of the event; the second meaning derives from the new, musical context created by the composer.’ (Smalley 1992: 542)

The present article is based on an assumption that one of the transcontextual elements can refer to time.

<sup>2</sup>On the concepts of poetic and aesthetic, see Nattiez (1990).

The aim is to explain two modes of time reference in *Stilleben* and to demonstrate their operation. Transcontextuality is being used as a criterion according to which the points of view to time in music are taken under investigation.

An auxiliary concept of ‘musical time’ has to be defined. Musical time denotes the temporal structure of a musical composition. It emphasises the temporal relationships of structural elements at the expense of the nature of the structural elements themselves. The concept of musical time also implies that there are structural elements in music that are essentially not temporal in nature. For example, the verticality of harmony can be thought to be such an element. It has to be pointed out that musical time is an interpretation by analysts of the immanent properties of a musical composition and as such makes no claims about the general qualities of perception of a composition. This is why the concept of musical time does not correspond with Langer’s virtual time.

The main questions of the inquiry can now be restated using this newly defined concept of musical time. The focus of the study is to explain the references to time outside the musical time of *Stilleben* itself. These references are divided into two categories: (i) references to the musical time of *Lichtbogen*, and (ii) references to the passage of time in a non-musical context. The first category leads to questions about the relations of the musical times of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen*. The second category is connected to the narrativity of sounding forms. Many of *Stilleben*’s sounds can be interpreted to have narrative elements. They convey stories and thus refer directly to the passage of time.<sup>3</sup> One possible approach to analysing the temporal nature of *Stilleben* would be to concentrate on the processivity of the composition. Transformations of timbre, sometimes implemented with the help of computer technology, sometimes through instrumental or orchestral gestures, are of utmost importance in Saariaho’s music. Analysis of spectromorphological transformation and research on the governing principles of sound colour organisation is a large topic for discussion in itself. Because the focus of this article is in transcontextuality, the spectromorphological aspect of processivity in *Stilleben* will not be dealt with here.<sup>4</sup>

The most important sources of the study are the scores and the recordings of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen*. In the case of *Stilleben*, aural analysis of the recording actually outweighs the study of the score as the main method employed. The score is not very descriptive or accurate in relation to the recording. It only works as an aid for the listener’s orientation.

<sup>3</sup>On the inseparability of time and narrative, see Ricoeur (1984: 3).

<sup>4</sup>On the principles of sound colour organisation in Saariaho’s music, see Kankaanpää (1995) (in Finnish).

## 2. THE TEMPORAL RELATIONSHIPS OF *STILLEBEN* AND *LICHTBOGEN*

As mentioned, sounds recorded from a rehearsal of *Lichtbogen* form a substantial part of *Stilleben*'s sounding material. The starting point of the following inquiry is to determine how the excerpts from *Lichtbogen* are situated in the musical time of *Stilleben*. The origin of the excerpts and their relation to the musical time of *Lichtbogen* will also be specified. Conclusions on the general characteristics of the relations of musical times of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen* will be drawn from these basic premises.

The analysis of the temporal relationships of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen* is divided into three areas. Firstly, the temporal relations will be studied on the level of individual fragments from *Lichtbogen*. Secondly, the material references of *Stilleben* to *Lichtbogen* will be presented. Strictly speaking, this aspect is not directly connected with temporality. However, the definition of material relationships supports the analysis in its third phase, where the total forms of the compositions are discussed.

Interpretative processes will take place at two levels. First, interpretations will be made about the origin of the sounds in *Stilleben*. Because the recordings of *Lichtbogen* have been electroacoustically treated and because one of the sources of sound in *Stilleben*, the flute, is present also in *Lichtbogen*, the decision as to whether sounds emanate from *Lichtbogen* or some other sound source in *Stilleben* is not always clearly unambiguous. Ambiguity prevails especially in the two last minutes of *Stilleben*. The second level of interpretation is to assign meanings to sounds and their relationships. To abstract a set of principles from the sound phenomena is to a considerable extent an interpretative process.

The table displays the points in musical time of *Stilleben* where the identity of *Lichtbogen* is distinctly present. The points in musical time of *Stilleben* are presented in minutes and seconds,<sup>5</sup> while the points

in musical time of *Lichtbogen* are expressed in bar numbers.

The relations of musical times of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen* vary between dominance and subordination. The musical time of *Lichtbogen* can either dominate the temporal structure of *Stilleben* or be subordinate to it. The main factors that decide the nature of the relation are the sound world of *Stilleben* and the quality of the fragments from *Lichtbogen*. If the sound totality is clearly dominated by a fragment from *Lichtbogen*, we are directed to conclude that *Lichtbogen* is dominant also at the level of temporal structure. Further, if the fragment from *Lichtbogen* forms a meaningful whole, it can be argued that *Lichtbogen* is temporally dominant.

The first fragment of *Lichtbogen* consists solely of an F# unison on strings and flute. Clearly, it does not represent any meaningful formal unit from *Lichtbogen*. The absence of piano and harp limits the possible origin of the fragment to somewhere between bars 1 and 18. There is a spectromorphological connection with this subordinate fragment of *Lichtbogen* and the reading of the text by Kafka. The reading of the text becomes more and more filtered and from 55" onwards it has a clear pitch of F#.

The first section of *Lichtbogen*, bars 1 to 40, is essentially an example of *Klangfarbenmelodie*. The section has very little harmonic or melodic material (almost nothing but an F# unison) but a formal unity is created by spectromorphological processes at the textural level and by the contrasting harmonic and textural variety from bar 43 onwards.

The second fragment of *Lichtbogen* consists of the first section of *Lichtbogen* in its entirety. The excerpt dominates the sounding totality of *Stilleben* from 1'07" to 2'25". It is contrasted only by the fading sound of an aeroplane.

The point 2'25" of *Stilleben*'s musical time is of structural importance. There are sound reasons for arguing that the point is the end of *Stilleben*'s first section. The global development of dynamics in the section suggests a formal entity: the crescendo and fortissimo (*sfff*) at the beginning of the piece are followed by a slow decrescendo towards 2'25". The dynamic development is evident in the environmental noises where the complex of train, aeroplane and underground sounds dissolves into the fading sound of an aeroplane. Also the reading of the text by Kafka follows the dynamic plan. In addition to the dynamic structure of the section, a formal unity is enforced by a development from complexity to simplicity. The beginning of *Stilleben* is characterised by a multiplicity of simultaneous sounding events. From this complexity the section evolves towards 2'25" where for a moment the only sounds to be heard are the double bass of *Lichtbogen* (playing an F# harmonic sound) and the fading aeroplane.

**Table.** Points in musical time of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen*.

Stilleben	Lichtbogen
(1)0'47"-0'50"	1-18
(2)1'07"-2'25"	1-40
(3)3'05"-4'52"	37-99
(4)5'55"-6'05"	110-114
(5)8'32"-9'22"	137-160
(6)10'57"-11'38"	189-203
(7)12'41"-16'41"	201-294
(8)17'18"-17'24"	301-303
(9)17'32"-17'38"	313-314
(10)19'25"-21'07"	334-357

<sup>5</sup>This kind of reference is possible and relevant because *Stilleben* exists as one definite realisation, the recording on Finlandia Records (FACD 374). The numerical values given are approximations. This is due to the nature of sound structures in *Stilleben*. When a sound fades in or out it is quite difficult to pinpoint the exact start and end times.

At 2'25" the structural nodes of *Stilleben* and *Lichtbogen* meet. Because of the dominance of *Lichtbogen* in the sounding totality of *Stilleben* from 1'07" at 2'25" and because the material from *Lichtbogen* forms a meaningful excerpt from the musical time of *Lichtbogen*, it could be said that the musical time of *Lichtbogen* determines the temporal structure of *Stilleben*. In a sense, the beginning of the second section of *Lichtbogen* (bar 43) triggers other sound events.

The third fragment of *Lichtbogen* is characterised by shifts on the dominance of sound totality. The sound material of *Lichtbogen* starts to fade in at 3'05" (bar 37) and is dominant at 3'15" (bar 43, where the second section of *Lichtbogen* starts). *Lichtbogen* fades out at 4'01" (bar 70, rehearsal mark E of *Lichtbogen*) and again fades in at 4'44" (bar 99, rehearsal mark H). Despite these shifts it seems obvious that the timing of sound events is regulated by the musical time structure of *Lichtbogen*. This is suggested by the coincidence of the times of fade in or fade out with the structural nodes of *Lichtbogen*. The first fade in coincides with the beginning of the second section of *Lichtbogen*; the fade out is marked by a rising melodic gesture on the flute and a change in texture; the second fade in is marked by a melodic gesture by a violin, similar to the previous one on the flute. It seems that the timing of the reading of a text (in German) and environmental sounds (station; steps) is determined by the pre-existing time structure of *Lichtbogen*. The fourth fragment is not a very coherent formal unit of *Lichtbogen*. Even the exact point from which the fragment originates is not unambiguous; probably it refers to bars 110–14. In its relation to *Stilleben*'s structures the fourth fragment is very similar to the first one. Although the fragment has no direct causal relations with the temporality of *Stilleben*, obvious material connections exist. The F# repetition on marimba is imitated in section 6'12" to 7'55" in the rhythmic character of environmental sounds. The fifth fragment is again temporally dominant. Transition to the fragment is achieved through the imitation of melodic gestures of piccolo by flute and soprano. The timing of the reading of texts is governed by the musical time of *Lichtbogen*: the French text by Elouard, 'La neige même...?', starts at the rehearsal mark N of *Lichtbogen* and the German text by Kafka starts at the end of the fifth fragment (bar 160). Fragment six seems to have obvious temporal relevance only at 11'38" (bar 203) where it ends. The transition from bar 203 to bar 204 is one of the dramatic culminations of *Lichtbogen*. The choir which starts at 11'38" is determined by *Lichtbogen* both in timing and in harmonic content. The choir (Augen) duplicates the harmonic structure of the ensemble in bar 204 (rehearsal mark S).

The seventh fragment is the longest one. The beginning of the fragment (bar 201) is temporally

subordinate: the start of *Lichtbogen* (12'41") is triggered by the reading in German (schreiben). The dramatic culmination of bar 204 and the duplication of harmonic structure of the ensemble are both repeated at 12'55", only this time they do not dominate the sounding totality of *Stilleben*. Although *Lichtbogen* is rather clearly audible until 13'58" (bar 219), it has no evident reference to the temporal structures of *Stilleben*. From bar 219 onwards only some of the instruments of *Lichtbogen* can be heard (mostly flute) and the identity of *Lichtbogen* becomes blurred. The next unambiguous reference to *Lichtbogen* is at 16'22" (bars 288–94).

The end of fragment seven is similar to fragments eight and nine. In these fragments the 'overbowed', noisy sounds of string instruments are complemented by environmental noises of trains and stations. Although the fragments are very short and the temporal nature of *Lichtbogen* is not effective in the fragments themselves, their overall placement follows the placement of the overbowed string sounds in the end of *Lichtbogen* (bars 294, 301–3 and 313–14).

The beginning of the last fragment is also similar to fragments eight and nine. The fragment ends when *Lichtbogen* ends. Because of the imitative flute of *Stilleben*, the identity of *Lichtbogen* is rather concealed.

On the basis of these analytical observations it is evident that references to the temporal structure of *Lichtbogen* are characteristic of *Stilleben*. There are sections in *Stilleben* which hover between the identities of the two compositions. Some of the aspects of transcontextuality in *Stilleben* are possible to detect even by listening alone; deeper temporal and material relations can be revealed with the help of scores of the compositions.

Most of the fragments of *Lichtbogen* represent some meaningful formal entity. The fragments seem to be selected mainly in terms of the temporal structures of *Lichtbogen*. This leads us to conclude that the fragments of *Lichtbogen* in many cases define the temporality of *Stilleben*.

Despite the overlapping of some of the fragments, it can be said that the musical time of *Lichtbogen*, within the context of *Stilleben*, proceeds from the beginning towards the end. Fragments of *Lichtbogen* follow each other in linear order. Also it can be seen that over two thirds of *Lichtbogen* is included in *Stilleben*. Together these facts lead to the conclusion that the overall temporal structures of the compositions are rather similar. It perhaps would not be an exaggeration to argue that the temporal structure of *Stilleben* is abstracted from the temporal structure of *Lichtbogen*.<sup>6</sup>

The temporal affinity is reinforced by the material similarities of the compositions. Many of the musical

<sup>6</sup>On abstract or abstracted syntax of a musical piece, see Emmerson (1986).

materials of *Stilleben* imitate the materials of *Lichtbogen* in one way or another. Harmonic structures of the choir are derived from *Lichtbogen*. The flute and the soprano in *Stilleben* imitate melodic gestures of *Lichtbogen*. Imitation can even take place at textural or timbral levels.

### 3. NARRATIVE REFERENCES TO THE PASSAGE OF TIME

The second category of reference to time outside the musical time of *Stilleben* itself is the reference to the passage of time in a non-musical context. These references operate through narrativity: some sounds can be interpreted to present as meaning a story which refers to the passage of time. The stories conveyed by sounds cannot be entirely verbalised: their meanings stem from the associations they give rise to. The stories cannot be replaced by verbal explanation.

The first narrative can be thought to be created by the environmental sounds in the beginning of *Stilleben*. The story has a theme of departure: a complex of train and underground sounds dissolves to a fading sound of an aeroplane. The sounds refer to a story of travelling. The story does have a protagonist, a person hearing the environmental noises as he or she commences the trip. The passage of time the story refers to is the time taken when leaving from a city centre for an airport.

The sketch of the story outlined above is supported by the composer's statements about her work: '[*Stilleben* is] a work about journeying, distances, communication between people when parted or far from their own country.' (Saariaho 1987–8: 10). It could be thought that if the composer had any narrative intentions, the story of departure would be a part of that narrative.

A more sceptical interpretation of the storyline is possible. It could be argued that the protagonist is in fact the composer moving around with a microphone. This interpretation is supported by the curious fact that the experiencing and hearing subject does not enter the aeroplane: the sound of the aeroplane fades and the listener remains firmly on the ground. From the point of view of referring to the passage of time both interpretations are acceptable.

The second narrative in *Stilleben* is created by a transformation of context occurring at 2'25". At that point the ensemble practising *Lichtbogen* suddenly stops playing and we hear Esa-Pekka Salonen coughing and starting to talk. The listener is drawn from the musical context of *Lichtbogen* to the context of an ensemble practising *Lichtbogen*. The passage of time this story refers to is the time taken by listening to the ensemble practising and discussing various aspects of the composition. Although the story has

musical elements in it, the time the story refers to is distinctly non-musical.

The third narrative reference to the passage of time is created by environmental sounds from 2'45" to 3'19". This reference also demonstrates the connection between space and time: we hear steps, sounds of walking in a very reverberant space; according to the score, sounds are recorded from a (railway) station. The sounds of walking point forward both in time and space. The passage of time they refer to is the time taken by walking.

On the basis of the similarities between these three narrative fragments it seems possible that there is a frame story, too: a meta-story which encompasses at least all the environmental sounds of *Stilleben*. It can be thought that the theme of this story is the same as in the first narrative: journeying, distances. The same alternative interpretation exists also. It could be thought that the meta-story refers to all the sounds the composer hears. The composer as a protagonist, a listening and hearing person, combines all the sounds of *Stilleben* in a single story.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Is there ironic or parodic intent, in this case at Saariaho's own expense, in the inclusion of substantial fragments of *Lichtbogen* in *Stilleben*? According to Linda Hutcheon, transcontextualization in the form of literal incorporation or reproduction in the new work may have a parodic intention. However, Hutcheon also argues that parody does not necessarily include the concept of ridicule (Hutcheon 1985: 8, 32). I am inclined to think that there is no such intent. It would be more consistent with the personality of the composer to view the inclusion of *Lichtbogen* in *Stilleben* from the angle of an all-inclusive meta-story, a story that embraces the totality of the sound world of the composer. To quote Saariaho herself:

'despite the abundance and movement of the material, the basic idea was one of a moment. . . I wanted to stop the moment and examine everything that may be embraced by the twinkling of an eye – all the layers of thought, reception, seeing, hearing. the contradiction is expressed in the relation of the title and the sub-title: a moment suspended in time (*stilleben*), within which is a vast amount of knowledge, experience that enters our consciousness with varying force. . .

a journey in all its dimensions; life in its entirety on the largest human scale.' (Saariaho 1987–8: 14)

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