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**Tensional processes and perception of form
in three selected compositions by Kaija Saariaho**

by Brad Jenkins

A 90-point exegesis and portfolio of original compositions
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ABSTRACT

The primary feature that gives 'spectral music' its stylistic uniqueness within the field of art music is the blurring of the traditionally distinct roles of harmony and timbre, through the use of chords derived from the naturally occurring overtones of instrumental timbre (often referred to as *timbre chords*). Development of these chords typically occurs very gradually, meaning it is often difficult to perceive the overall form of a spectral work based on the progression through its constituent timbre chords. This approach contrasts with the traditional reliance in both art music and other Western music styles on perceivable pitch-based development as a primary means of providing musical tension and form. Composers of spectral music must rely on the manipulation and development of other musical parameters to provide sufficient interest through 'foreground ornamentation' while its underlying harmonic/timbral macrostructure unfolds beneath.

This analysis shows how key musical parameters are manipulated over time to provide tension and resolution (or, in Wallace Berry's terminology, 'progressive and recessive processes'¹), giving spectral works a perceivable, dynamic form. Parameters examined include rate of harmonic change, dynamics, spectral/registral spread, rhythmic activity, sound/noise, spectral density and harmonicity/inharmonicity (the latter two providing a spectral analogue to conventional notions of dissonance). Particular focus is placed on the rate of harmonic change in the selected works and changes in the harmonicity/inharmonicity (through spectral distortion) of harmonic material that give spectral music its distinctive harmonic character. The way in which these 'parameter curves' intersect with one another is also examined.

For this study, three works by Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho are analysed. The works cover a range of forces and display varying degrees of overtly 'spectral' influence: *Nymphéa* (1987) for string quartet and electronics, *Du Cristal* (1990) for orchestra, and *Cendres* (1998) for piano, cello and flute. Analysis of the background levels of parametric change reveal how Saariaho manages to maintain microstructural interest in her spectral works while adhering to an underlying macrostructural plan. Findings from this analysis will also be discussed in relation to how they have influenced my own creative output for my MMA portfolio.

¹ Berry, Wallace. *Structural Functions in Music*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1976. 11

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