

Kaija Saariaho
Maa
ballet music in seven scenes
(1991)

Bio
Saariaho
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Maa ('Earth' in Finnish) is written for seven instruments and electronics. The ensemble (flute, percussion, harpsichord/keyboards, harp, violin, viola and cello) comes together as a whole only in the last part. The ballet itself has no story line. One general theme is passing from one state to another; opening doors, gates, falling, crossing the water. These themes, often found in mythologies, offer possibilities to musical metamorphosis, transformations and other ways of proceeding from one material to another.

This work was written at the request of the choreograph Carolyn Carlson, and was realized with her for the Finnish National Ballet, who commissioned it.

The electronics consist of pre-recorded and transformed natural sounds (wind, sea, whispering voice, etc.), and of amplified and processed instrumental sounds. These natural sounds were recorded by myself during the spring and summer 1991 with a DAT recorder.

This material has been brought into a Macintosh, where it has been edited and mixed with the SoundTools system (by Digidesign). After that it has been either brought directly to a multitrack tape recorder, or first processed with tools like Resonate (a real-time digital synthesizer based on the idea of resonance filters as a multi-DSP system peripheral of the Macintosh, and controlled with the Max graphical programming environment developed by Jean-Baptiste Barriere and Adrien Freed), different reverbs (Lexicon PCM70, Lexicon LXP-1) and sound processors (SPX90, SPX500, Lexicon LXP-15).

The final mixes are copied back to a hard disk play back system, which in the performance is usually the AKAI DD1000.

All the seven instruments are amplified and processed in various manners in the different parts of the piece, except the first and fifth parts, which are purely 'tape music' (played from the hard disk).

The general settings are handled with the Yamaha DMP7 digital mixer, and specific local transformations are made with two Lexicon LXP-15 processors and a Yamaha SPX90.

All the work concerning the electronic aspects was done with the assistance of Jussi Liimatainen, and the pre-recorded passages were realized in the Experimental Studio of the Finnish Radio.

Voyage, the completely electronic first part of the piece, introduces the elements, which slowly transform from the world of the concrete into a more abstract sound-landscape.

Gates is a trio for flute, harpsichord and cello, opposite to the first part in that it is entirely instrumental, with the sounds being only slightly processed.

...de la Terre ('Of the Earth',) for violin and electronics is the third part and the musical heart of **Maa**. All the material is born in this piece, from which it radiates to the preceding and following parts of the ballet.

Formally, this piece (like the other six others) consists of seven parts, of which everyone focuses on a specific aspect of the musical material. In this piece all the elements are presented, often in their purest form. For example, the overriding harmonies, as well as the timbral procedures of **Maa** are introduced in a reduced form. A small passage towards the end of the piece finally unifies all the elements, before they vanish into the wind sounds of the tape part.

Unlike in the other parts of **Maa**, the pre-recorded sounds in **...de la Terre** are heard completely without any transformations.

The solo violin, on the other hand, is transformed with a changing reverb (rev. time between infinite and 0.2 seconds). The reverberation used is a program in Lexicon LXP-15 in which the reverb time is changed constantly by the amplitude of the input signal. The general idea here is, the quieter the sound, the longer the reverb.

Forest is an instrumental piece for plucked instruments (harpsichord/keyboards, percussion, harp, viola and cello). The keyboard part consists of sampled natural sounds (wind, birds, voices) and synthetic sounds played with the Yamaha SY77 synthesizer. The instruments are processed with two Lexicon LXP-15 processors, the main effects being delays and reverbs.

Windows is the second purely 'tape piece' in **Maa**. Here the material already heard (concrete and instrumental) is slowly evolving on several layers, throughout which the listener is guided.

Fall is a short piece for harp and electronics. The processing (with LXP-15) consists mainly of changing delay effect. As in the handling of the reverb for **...de la Terre**, here the delay time is constantly changed by the amplitude of the input signal.

Aer is the last part in the series of the seven pieces of **Maa**, and a musical synthesis of all the six pieces which have preceded it. Electronically, the procedures are a culmination of those from the previous pieces. Musically, the elements of former parts are also again found, developed and brought together. On a large scale, the material of former passages appears in inverse order, so that the piece ends with the sea wave elements from the beginning of the whole ballet. Formally, this piece, as in all the other six pieces, consists of seven parts, of which each part focuses on a specific aspect of the musical material, which in its turn is developed separately in the pieces which preceded.