



REVIEWS

The Pain and Insight of *Innocence*

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SAN FRANCISCO—A year after Kaija Saariaho's death at the age of 70, her final opera, *Innocence*, received its much-anticipated American debut this month at San Francisco Opera. The work's reputation as a harrowing and innovative psychological drama preceded it, thanks to the chorus of praise surrounding each of its four stagings. It premiered at the 2021 Aix-en-Provence Festival and has since been mounted in Amsterdam, London, and Helsinki; *Innocence* heads to the Met in the 2025-26 season.

But it was at San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House that Saariaho herself had a chance to hear her intricately layered, deeply involving score for the first time. In 2018, General Director Matthew Shilcock made the SFO orchestra available for an early reading of the work-in-progress led by Clément Mao-Takacs, an expert in Saariaho's music. He returned to conduct the American premiere this month—including the riveting performance I attended on June 16, which showed the orchestra deeply attuned to Saariaho's aesthetic.



The unit set for *Innocence* shows the classroom at the top level, the wedding reception and restaurant kitchen on the bottom

Set in Helsinki "in the 2000s," *Innocence* unfolds both in real time over the course of a wedding reception and in an interlaced sequence of traumatic memories that reveal what had happened during a school shooting ten years before. A sense of tension, established in the ominous, cavernously dark opening measures, grips the audience from the outset, despite the ostensibly happy occasion of a family celebrating their son Tuomas's wedding. His life seems to have taken a new turn after meeting his new wife, Stela, while on vacation in Romania.

But Tuomas and his parents have withheld from Stela the terrible truth that his older brother committed the massacre that reverberates across the opera's unbroken span of 105 minutes. Survivors as well as some of the students who were killed are represented by a combination of actors and singers; some of them deploy a variety of vocal styles—such as an emotive *Sprechstimme* to characterize a high school teacher who continues to blame herself for not being able to protect her students. Tereza, whose daughter was among the victims, has been called in at the last minute to help out at the reception as a waitress. Her presence triggers a series of even more shattering revelations that further complicate the issues of guilt and responsibility.



SFO's beautifully produced program book cautions that the full synopsis contains "plot spoilers"—and, to be sure, there is a psychological-thriller aspect to the work in live performance. But *Innocence* aims to confront the abysses of human nature with the uncompromising intensity of Greek tragedy. As with the myths on which the tragedians based their plays—stories already well-known to their audiences—the narrative of a mass shooting follows basic patterns that, in our time, have become gut-wrenchingly familiar.

Saariaho's collaboration with Finnish writer Sofi Oksanen, author of *Innocence*'s first-rate libretto, seems to have opened up a new creative path in this sixth of the composer's stage works. Aleksis Barrière, Saariaho's son, added a multilingual dimension by translating texts for certain characters into eight other languages (in addition to Finnish) to depict the international high school where the shooting took place.

The polyglot result—some of the words are spoken, though in strictly preordained rhythmic patterns—mirrors the score's polyphonic abundance. Saariaho's orchestra, purely acoustic, together with the chanting backstage chorus (a key element in this sound world), becomes an omniscient narrator that shimmers and continually shifts in weight and color between extremities of high and low register.

Most of the cast, including some who had created their roles at the premiere, were making company debuts. Soprano Lilian Farahani was a moving Stela, the newcomer to the family whose forgiving nature in the end is overwhelmed, though she is genuinely in love with Tuomas. Tenor Miles Mykkanen portrayed the hope-filled groom's descent into self-loathing, while soprano Claire de Sévigné's coloratura reinforced the sense of a mother clinging to illusions instead of facing the truth about her shooter son. As her husband, baritone Rod Gilfry indicated how his own way of coping through blunt rejection has created a void inside. Mezzo-soprano Ruxandra Dunose made an especially powerful impression in the role of the bereft Tereza, as did Lucy Shelton as the Teacher who will never be able to recover from the horror she witnessed.

In addition to using *Sprechstimme* for the Teacher, Saariaho reaches beyond traditional operatic singing to distinguish such characters as the complicit student Iris (Julie Hega, in a haunting speaking role) and Markéta, Tereza's daughter, for whom the remarkable singer and "ethno pop artist" Vilma Jää channeled vibratoless,

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embedded in the title: Some of the characters attempt to hide their guilt while others (like the Teacher) take it on in ways that solve nothing. Saariaho's characterizations can be too streamlined at times, as with the family priest (Kristinn Sigmundsson), who seemed to have little more than a blurry presence.

Innocence is an ensemble opera for our fractured, siloed era: not only in its balancing act of portraying a large cast of characters from vastly different backgrounds, but as a contemporary Gesamtkunstwerk that meticulously fuses all of the production's elements to reinforce and enrich the theatrical experience. Nothing is as it seems in Simon Stone's direction. Chloe Lamford's unit set details the playing spaces for the wedding banquet and the school with heightened realism; its slow revolutions, like Arco Renz's slow-motion choreography of the students during the attack, introduce a surreal note of memories that can never be laid to rest. Rather than a concrete "CNN headline" topic, the international school where the shooting occurs looms as an open-ended metaphor.

Some of the commentary I've seen has fixated on the contemporary relevance of *Innocence* as a jeremiad against gun violence—though on that score, I suspect, at least for the San Francisco audience that seemed to be deeply moved by the performance I attended, it would be preaching to the converted. What I found most compelling is the psychological complexity that Saariaho and her collaborators fearlessly address and bring to the stage in such innovative ways.

I include myself among the many for whom Saariaho's music conjures a kind of "dream time," but new to me in *Innocence* is the virtuosity with which this extraordinary artist interweaves music depicting what is unfolding onstage, in the present, with layers of traumatic memory, fashioning an emotional counterpoint that combines immediacy with abstraction.

Above: Miles Mykkanen, Lilian Farahani as Tuomas and Stela

Right: Claire de Sévigné, Rod Gilfry as mother and father

Photos by Cory Weaver, SF Opera



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