

The major item on this excellent new Ondine release is the suite for soprano and small orchestra (2011) from Kaija Saariaho's third opera, the monodrama *Émilie* (2008/09). About a third of the opera has been reworked into five vivid movements based on a single night towards the end of the curtailed life of the brilliant mathematician and scientist Émilie de Châtelet (1706–49). The delicate scoring, including a harpsichord for period feel (though no 18th-century player could ever have conceived of such harmonies), is beautifully expressive of her state of mind while in the later stages of pregnancy and working on translating Newton's *Principia* (title of the central movement), framed by forebodings of her death in the outer songs.

Saariaho's genius as a song-writer is displayed in ravishing form in the orchestral version of *Quatre Instants* (2002), as with *Émilie* to texts by Amin Maalouf. These four musings on love combine restraint and longing as well as unleashed passion, the closing 'Résonances' almost Janus-faced as it inwardly closes the emotional circle while outwardly ecstatic. Here, as in the *Émilie Suite*, Saariaho has found a near-ideal interpreter in Karen Vourc'h – who already has the full *Émilie* opera as well as the oratorio *La Passion de Simone* in her repertoire – whose radiant tone is enchanting.

I am not overly familiar with the Strasbourg Philharmonic Orchestra but they play with unusual fervour and refinement, relishing Saariaho's at times opulent sound world (even when deploying small instrumental groups). This is manifest also in their vibrant performance of the string-orchestral *Terra memoria*, Saariaho's 2009 arrangement of her second string quartet (2007). Ondine's recording, engineered by Arnaud Houpert and Dennis Fenninger, is superb.



SAARIAHO *Émilie Suite. Quatre Instants*

SAARIAHO *Émilie Suite. Quatre Instants*

(4) Instants

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Terra Memoria for String Orchestra

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*Émilie Suite*

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