

Colloquium May 2, 2025
Marina Lee, Comps 1B Presentation

Title: “Approximately Kaija”

Abstract:

The focus of my presentation is Saariaho’s *Leino Songs*, viewed through the lens of Tymoczko’s approximate set theory (2023). This theory is notable in that it sorts chords based on their shape with the basic assumption of a mod-7 rather than a mod-12 system. The perceived atonality of Saariaho’s music comes from its emphasis on dissonant intervals, which undermine a clear sense of tonal centrality. One salient aspect of her aesthetic is her harmonic choice, often rooted in the creation of a resonant sonic space using certain notes or timbres. Based on personal listening experience, I feel that there is a gap between harmony and timbre that needs to be bridged in order to facilitate understanding of her work. Although her music tends to be associated with timbre, a thorough score analysis will aid audiences in pieces written with this melody-and-accompaniment texture, as it reveals the *why* behind the *what* of how her harmonies are as they are.

Most previous scholarship (Saariaho 1987, Lochhead 2016) on Saariaho’s music focuses on timbre and its use toward expressive ends. These explore it from the angle of timbre, but the works that they focus on are specifically sound-based, instead of composed with clear distinctions between melody and accompaniment. In order to fill the gap in the literature, I zeroed in on this piece’s texture: the accompaniment and the development of chords over the course of the work. I believe that through this angle, we will be able to understand and appreciate Saariaho’s music in a more comprehensive manner.

The approximate set theory model, in addition to being designed for harmonic analysis, is also flexible in that it is contextually based, and consequently allows for more than one interpretation of the passages in question. Using Tymoczko’s idea of *intrinsic scales* that the chord’s notes move along, it is possible to interpret sections of the songs in terms of their intervallic content and pitch collections to determine the form.

In summary, I have shown that in a work with a clear melody and an accompaniment, a score-analytical approach is most appropriate. My extension of *approximate set theory* to the accompanying harmony shows a deeper layer of structural coherence that helps shed light on Saariaho’s music from a more score-analytical angle. This research can further advance the appreciation and comprehension of atonal music that is grounded primarily in dissonance.