

Emilie

Opéra de Lyon, Lyon

3 / 5



Andrew Clements

guardian.co.uk, Friday 5 March 2010 22.20 GMT

Kaija Saariaho's new opera, *Emilie*, has been made to measure for her fellow Finn, the soprano Karita Mattila, who is alone on stage throughout its 70 minutes. It is less a monodrama along the lines of Schoenberg's *Erwartung* and Poulenc's *La Voix Humaine* than a portrait of one of the French Enlightenment's most singular figures, the mathematician and physicist Emilie du Châtelet, who may be best remembered now as Voltaire's lover, but who has strong claims to have been Europe's first female scientist.

Amin Maalouf's libretto depicts Emilie in the last days of her life, in September 1749. She is about to give birth to her fourth child and, haunted by premonitions of death, is desperate to finish her translation of Newton's *Principia*. Across the nine scenes she reviews her life and the significant figures in it, and wrestles with the philosophical problems and concepts presented by Newton's work. It's a sympathetic enough treatment, but never moving, and quite doggedly undramatic. The opera ends as it began, with the birth and the death still to come and Mattila's dramatic gifts never really tested. Saariaho's arioso vocal writing hardly makes fullest use of one of the most thrilling voices of our time, either.

There are some striking effects when Mattila duets with herself, pre-recorded and digitally transformed, and, as Kazushi Ono's conducting shows, there are also some transparently beautiful things in the orchestral music, to which a hyperactive harpsichord (an instrument the historical Emilie played) adds an extra frisson. But narratively and theatrically it is all inert, and even the best efforts of the director, François Girard (in a striking set by François Séguin, which is dominated by a rotating orrery), can't provide what's lacking.

Until 13 March. Box office: (00 33) 826 305 325.

© 2012 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.