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April 26, 2001

Vivier knew how to put us in our place

Canadian composer was mostly unsung at home, until now

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National Post

One of the painful ironies of Canadian culture is that this country's most successful composer is better known abroad than in his homeland. Claude Vivier is a household name in the Netherlands, where a staging of his 1980 opera *Kopernikus* was a major event at last June's Holland Festival. Just last month, Brussels audiences took in a four-concert series devoted to Vivier's music. And his music crops up regularly on concert programs in Paris, where the composer was murdered in 1983, shortly before his 35th birthday.

But *Kopernikus* has yet to receive its first professional performance in Toronto -- a lapse that is about to be corrected, thanks to a new Canadian-French production of the opera.

The production, which opens at the Opera de Montreal tonight, is presented by the Toronto-based Autumn Leaf Performance company. Its cast -- seven singers and eight musicians -- features musicians from both sides of the Atlantic, including Canadian sopranos Patricia O'Callaghan and Patricia Green, British contralto Shaunaid Amette, and French mezzo-soprano Isabel Soccoja. The production, which wowed critics in France and England last fall, is directed by Stanislas Nordey, artistic director of France's Theatre National de St. Denis, and French conductor Pascal Rophé.

In *Kopernikus*, Vivier turned to the ritualistic, magical roots of theatre, and to the primal themes that obsessed him: childhood, loneliness, love, death and immortality. (One of his most famous works is called *The Lonely Child*; one of his last works, an eerie prefiguration of his death, is called *Crois-tu en l'immortalité de l'âme?* -- Do you believe in the immortality of the soul? (Vivier was the third murder victim of a male prostitute, who stabbed him 42 times and strangled him with his own belt. The killer was later apprehended and imprisoned.)

Kopernikus has no plot or narrative as such; rather, it's a dream-like ritual; a "mystical fairy tale," as the composer described it. In it, a woman named Agni -- named after a Hindu god of light -- encounters a series of mythic and archetypical figures, including Lewis Carroll, Merlin, a witch, the Queen of the Night, a blind prophet, an old monk, Tristan and Isolde, Mozart, his mother, and *Kopernikus*.

These figures, who are embodied in varying degrees by six singers (in addition to Agni), guide her through death -- an initiation that is both mystical and troubling. Vivier seems to have chosen *Kopernikus* as the central figure because it was he who made us realize that our world -- the world of the ego, symbolically -- is not the centre of the universe.

The French and German libretto, which Vivier wrote himself, has a childlike simplicity and poetry that clutches at the heart. Under the force of emotion, language frequently breaks down into a primal outpourings of syllables -- a kind of glossolalia, like an infant's urgent, pre-verbal attempts at speech.

The small instrumental ensemble is full of exotic Indonesian colouring -- the fruit of Vivier's lengthy visit to Bali in 1977. But Vivier absorbed plenty of other of musical influences: the Catholic chant that imbued his childhood (an orphan, Vivier was largely educated by priests); the rhythmically dense music of Olivier Messiaen, for instance.

But as Rophé pointed out, no matter what other music he absorbed, Vivier's personal voice remains overwhelming and unmistakable. What moves Rophé above all, however, is the "extreme lyricism" of Vivier's writing -- a taut, poignant lyricism that never fails, though an undercurrent of anxiety often runs through the piece.

"I think that in *Kopernikus*, Vivier is trying to capture that indefinable moment where you're dead, and the soul about to pass into new level of existence," said musicologist Ross Braes, who is writing a doctoral thesis on Vivier at the University of British Columbia. The mage figures, he suggests, are "perhaps showing her the afterlife -- playfully or in a sinister way ... That's why there's such an incredible emotional range for Agni: Sometimes the characters frighten her; sometimes they cajole her.

"I love that sense of ritual, as Agni gradually realizes what she's up against. You can hear it in the music, too, as it becomes more and more pure, until the measures, where it reaches an ethereal stillness."

Rophé, meanwhile, stresses that the opera's view of death is "absolutely not sinister. Pas du tout du tout du tout! ... On the contrary, it's a message of light, of humour," he said in his lightly accented English. "It's hopeful, fresh, naive -- it takes you back to what has been in your mind since your earliest years."

"Mon amie, n'aie pas peur" -- do not be afraid, my friend -- Vivier's mages sing repeatedly to Agni in *Kopernikus*. That's good advice for audiences wary of new opera: Don't miss these rare performances of a strange but searingly beautiful work by a visionary composer.

Kopernikus opens tonight and repeats Saturday at the Place des Arts in Montreal. Box office: (514) 985-2258 or (514) 842-2112. Plays at the MacMillan Theatre at the University of Toronto, June 21-23. Box office: (416) 872-1111.

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