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June 25, 2001

Together, they are bewitching

Tamara Bernstein
National Post

KOPERNIKUS

MacMillan Theatre, Toronto

TORONTO - It took 21 years, but *Kopernikus* -- the only completed opera by Canadian composer Claude **Vivier** -- had its Toronto premiere over the weekend, in a Canada-France co-production presented by Toronto-based Autumn Leaf Performance. Toronto was the last stop of a run that has taken the show to Banff, France, England and Montreal over the last year. So the first thing that must be said is that it was a rare treat to hear such a seasoned performance of a contemporary opera. The ensemble of the seven singers and eight instrumentalists was brilliant; the conductor - France's Pascal Rophé -- clearly knew the score inside out.

Kopernikus poses unusual challenges for a director. Described by **Vivier** as a "ritual opera of death" and "a mystical fairy tale," it has no plot and no normal dialogue. It takes place in an unspecified dream time and space -- and **Vivier** provided almost no stage directions.

Agni, a contralto and the opera's central character, encounters a series of mage figures from history and from her imagination -- among them, Merlin, Lewis Carroll, the Queen of the Night, a blind prophet, Mozart, Tristan and Isolde, and *Kopernikus*. The title figure of the opera appealed to **Vivier** because he was the first to realize that the Earth is not the centre of the solar system -- just as, by extension, the individual ego should not be the centre of consciousness.

The only action of the opera takes place in the soul, as the mages, through their bewitching singing, carry Agni toward "total purification," and "a state of pure spirit" (**Vivier's** words again).



Don Lee

SINGERS MOULDED INTO A STRONG TEAM: From left, Simon Fournier, Ian Funk, Isabel Soccoja, Shaunaid Amette, Patricia O'Callaghan, Patricia Green, and Michiel Schrey.



Don Lee

PLAYFUL: Shaunaid Amette, left, as Agni and Michiel Schrey.

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Vivier wrote his poetic libretto in French, with a few excursions into German and English. (This production provided English Surtitles.) But its language constantly breaks down into a glossolalia that evokes a child's first, primal attempts at speech.

The intense, wrenchingly pure lyricism of the vocal parts is complemented by the glittering, metallic sounds of the eight-member chamber ensemble, which contains one violin, but otherwise consists solely of woodwinds, brass and percussion. The resulting sonority reflects **Vivier's** fascination with the Indonesian gamelan.

I liked many things in French director Stanislas Nordey's staging: the bare stage, the physicality of the acting, the playfulness. I especially liked the unsentimental ending, where the rear wall of Emmanuel Clolus' set rose to allow the entire cast to walk into darkness, then closed, leaving us in a large, empty room that could have been a prison cell.

I did not like Nordey's interpretation of Agni as a literal child, complete with teddy bear. Childlike is one thing; infantilization is another: Nordey's Agni, played by British contralto Shaunaid Amette, never attained the dignity or pathos of a mature person facing literal or symbolic death.

In the first part of the opera, the remaining singers wore bulky, sequined costumes that suggested 18th-century courtiers, clowns and extraterrestrials -- all at once. I found myself tempted to giggle; still, it was a big improvement over the costumes of the Netherlands Opera production I saw a year ago, where everyone looked like Teletubbies. And in the Toronto production, I loved the transparent suitcase-lanterns that costume designer Raoul Fernandez gave the singers in Part II.

Nordey's and Rophé's emphasis on ensemble turned a group of decent but unexceptional singers into a strong team. Soprano Patricia O'Callaghan was not vocally up to the coloratura part; she and Canadian mezzo-soprano Patricia Green remained emotionally dissociated from their parts. But Michiel Schrey's elastic body and athletic energy made this Canadian tenor a magnetic presence, in the part originally written for high baritone.

Though I salute its polish and sophistication, this production left me unmoved. In fairness, there's a lot of emotional ambiguity in **Vivier's** opera, and even a certain coldness -- the glittering coldness of starlight -- in parts of the score. One wonders where **Vivier's** obsession with the themes of death, love and loneliness would have taken him musically, if they had not led him to his death at the hands of a male prostitute in 1983, a month before his 35th birthday.

At the same time, I think Nordey and Rophé took the playfulness of the opera too far. There's always an element of mystery and fear in initiations -- and that, for me, was missing from this production. I'd also like to see what a more luminous cast of singers would make of the piece.

Still, the remaining members of the production -- mezzo-soprano Isabel Soccoja, Canadian baritone Ian Funk and Canadian bass-baritone Simon Fournier; lighting designer Axel Morgenthaler; Autumn Leaf artistic director Thom Sokoloski and the excellent instrumentalists -- deserve our thanks for presenting this long-overdue Toronto premiere with such finesse.