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Brave new opera

Mystical work *Kopernikus* gets local premiere

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In the photo of Claude Vivier found in the hefty *Encyclopedia Of Music In Canada*, he looks the way we've come to expect our composers to look - respectable, studious and serious-but-trying-not-to-be.

He's balding, needs glasses and looks decidedly underfed. At the moment the photo was snapped, he's reacting to something said off camera. It made him smile broadly. Of what the joke was about and who made it, there's only mystery.

But the mysteries are layered deeply around Vivier's life and death, both of which are threaded through the production of *Kopernikus* at the MacMillan Theatre, University of Toronto, tonight through Saturday.

In this shadowy 70-minute-long chamber opera, Agni, the central female figure, is the on-stage representation of the composer. In most references, Agni is the Hindu God of Fire. But Vivier evoked Agni's feminine side, too. He/she's also the Christian Lamb of God, the innocent in a dark never-never land.

Vivier, an orphan taught hard love by priests, found ways to reinvent childhood and a child's dreams for something wonderful. (*Lonely Child* is one of his loveliest, and most performed, pieces.) *Kopernikus'* namesake, Nicolaus Copernicus, the Renaissance Polish astronomer, "was the first to realize that the earth is not the centre of the universe," Vivier wrote. Copernicus made it possible to dream of the great beyond.

In *Kopernikus'* pulsing, musical dreamscape, Agni's psychological cabaret is visited by a host of historical figures - Lewis Carroll, Mozart, Tristan and Isolde and Copernicus, the philosopher - all looking to party with her. But this is her party and she can die if she wants to.

He/she even has Lewis Carroll's word that death leads to a place much better than real life.

But there is no silence with this lamb. Almost 20 years after his March, 1983 murder from multiple stab wounds in his Paris flat, Vivier may well be the country's most sought-after composer. His music featured in last year's Holland Festival, and remains available on a variety of CDs. *Kopernikus* itself, even with its German spelling, is the only Canadian opera to be heard internationally or to tour Canada.

But it's only in part responsible for keeping alive his memory. Reflecting on his death in the hands of a psychopathic gay prostitute, former friends and colleagues now put it down to some gay misadventure gone terribly wrong. "He lived in a little garret in Paris. He had no money," says *Kopernikus'* producer, Thom Sokoloski, of Autumn Leaf Opera & Performance. "He worked, he composed and when he had free time, he partied. He partied hard.

"We're pushing *Kopernikus* in the gay community a little because they should be proud of it. But I wouldn't call it a gay piece. Vivier was a man who liked other men. But he was a man. When you listen to his work he doesn't do anything beside get inside what's him. His sexuality drove his creativity. But it didn't define his creativity."



KOPERNIKUS: Claude Vivier's opera can be seen at U of T's MacMillan Theatre tonight through Sat.

Sokoloski feels Vivier had a foreshadowing of his death. Others have the same sense. Vivier, one fellow musician points out, was deeply influenced by Pier Paolo Pasolini, the gay Italian film writer-director whose battered body was found in 1975 on a stretch of wasteland outside of Rome. "Pasolini always thought he was going to be killed," says the musician. "He had a premonition. So did Vivier. *Kopernikus* is that premonition."

Vivier arrived in Paris in 1982, riding high on success back in Canada but low in funds. But he knew things were picking up. *Kopernikus*, written in 1979 following Vivier's ear-opening sojourn in Bali, had its premiere in 1980 in Montreal, a rare enough event for a young Canadian composer.

Named Canada's composer of the year in 1981, Vivier's Paris trip had been funded by a Canada Council grant, and he was hard at work on his second opera. Just 34, he had no end of new ideas. He'd completed *Trois airs pour un opéra imaginaire* - it would eventually be performed posthumously in Paris - and was trying to finish a piece called, prophetically enough, *Crois-tu en l'immortalité de l'âme?* (*Do You Believe In The Immortality Of The Soul?*)

But he was living life in the extreme, says Sokoloski. "When you are in the subterranean sexual world, that John Rechy world, you are in the world of the *maudit*, the cursed. To me Vivier was the *artiste maudit*. It was as if he was cursed. In this world, you could feel you're going to be fantastic, but you're still cursed. And you know there's nothing you can do about it. When you are in the world he lived in, it requires a great deal of perseverance.

"He always persevered. He had to. Look at his background. He was not only an orphan, but he couldn't speak until he was 6, for some reason. Then they tried to make a priest out of him. That didn't work out. With all that as a background, something's got to happen, something's got to whack your brain."

Kopernikus is "like a burial," says Pascal Rophe, who conducts the seven singers and eight instrumentalists. Yet it's also vivid with life. "About 60 per cent of the text is an invented language. It's like the language kids use before they start talking. But it *is* a language. It is not nonsense."

Vivier's own musical language was drawn from just about everywhere. His teacher in Montreal was Gilles Tremblay whose own work covered a lot of stylistic ground. Both in turn were part of that remarkable generation of post-'50s Quebecois composers, with the likes of Pierre Mercure and Serge Garant, who grabbed inspiration from their own traditions as well as from the latest thing coming out of Europe.

Vivier's own interests took him even further afield than his contemporaries. In the early '70s, he went to study at the Institute for Sound Research in Utrecht, Holland, and with Karlheinz Stockhausen and Hans Ulrich Humpert in Germany. In the later '70s, he was in southeast Asia and the Middle East. To Vivier, Copernicus showed humanity its destiny was to "to strive continually for meaning in the endeavour to explore new horizons."

But these varied, rich and exotic influences were burned off like calories in the consuming rhythmic immediacy that rushes through much of what Vivier wrote. It's this neediness-made-music which provokes the most immediate response - what's "perturbing" about his music, as a London Times review noted following *Kopernikus*' staging at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival last November. This followed its European premiere last September at the Strasbourg Musica Festival in France.

The opera's Canada-France co-production status owes as much to Sokoloski's five years of studies in France as Vivier's own stay in the country. Sokoloski knew that Vivier's reputation in France would get him the production team he wanted, including director Stanislas Nordey. The Banff Centre for The Arts was then brought in to provide six weeks of rehearsal time and space.

The Autumn Leaf *Kopernikus* had its world premiere at the Banff Summer Arts Festival last August.

Sokoloski was nearly terrified of bringing the opera to Montreal last April. "Think of it, some Anglos and some French doing *their* hometown composer," he says. The critic at Le Devoir swooned, however. "We have never heard Vivier as well played as it is here," went the review.

Toronto is proving to be even more nerve wracking. Since 1992, Sokoloski and Autumn Leaf have dealt with a Who's Who of new theatre and music, from R. Murray Schafer to filmmaker Peter Mettler. In short, they've got a track record.

"Still, this is our home town," says Sokoloski, nervously. "Everything's got to be right. Everything's got to be tight."

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