

A curious detour for a Quebecois opera.

(Translated from the feature article that appeared April 22, 2001 written by Francois Tousignant.)

*For two evenings only, the Opéra of Montréal presents *Kopernikus*, by the Quebecois composer Claude Vivier. A first for the company, certainly, but also and finally, the arrival on our "official" music scene of a music avoided here, applauded everywhere else.*

To draw a portrait of Claude Vivier is not that impossibly strange here. In the little world of contemporary music, numerous are those who have yet to go beyond the anecdotal. Between the situation of being an orphan and that of his murder, the part ripe for legend, one awaits musicological biography that really seizes the character of this man. One thing is certain: upon his return from of an extensive trip in the East, the particular character of Vivier's music subtly exploded into a stream of new works which, if they remain relatively few, have extraordinary importance. So as Harry Halbreich does not hesitate to say, when speaking of Vivier's creativity at this time, the aesthetic labels or schools of music did not figure in: "It was simply a case of brilliant music."



The unique presentation of the only opera finished by Claude Vivier, *Kopernikus*, at the Opéra of Montréal (OdeM), remains a curious bridge in the work of this composer. If the music of Vivier always lived here in certain select circles, it had better fate somewhere else. There are many musicians who fell under his charm, the composer Gyorgy Ligeti and conductor Reinbert of Leeuw to start with. While here a part of the public was still afraid to hear a music called "contemporary," Vivier's work was receiving public success and critical praise from San Francisco to Berlin, from Amsterdam to the Gulbenkian Foundation (based in Lisbon but which shines everywhere) and by concerts in Paris, London, Strasbourg, Lyon, Vancouver...

This time, the event comes to us from Banff. There is a very active centre of arts there - one will remember Berg's *Wozzeck*, that we saw in Montreal some years ago, one of their productions, among others - and now they dive into this co-production of *Kopernikus*. Success in the Rockies, then in London and in Strasbourg, it is a lauded production which, for two short evenings, OdeM dares, if rather shyly, to propose to their public before it takes to the road for Toronto.

The story of the opera is not a new one. It is more akin to a rites-of-passage-fable where the central person, Agni in this case, leaves the terrestrial world in order to reach a world of pure spirituality (in brief who navigates from misery to happiness). On route, Mozart, Tristan and Iseult, Lewis Carroll, Merlin (to name only a few) and a small chamber ensemble. In two short acts, Agni sees the characters who inhabited her childhood, with her mother, the Master of Water and astronomer Copernicus until, and in the same way as Parsifal, rises up and liberates herself.

Thérèse Desjardins, head of the Vivier Foundation, hesitantly relates several thoughts: "The production has an incredible purity. For *Kopernikus* to work, it is necessary for this kind of quality, this kind love for the music. In this production, Vivier is given all the balance to be given, in a simplicity, as disarming as pure [this word, is often cited during the conversation], not only theatrically, but also through musical inspiration."

That does not prevent her from wondering out loud.” How is it that such a music is so appreciated everywhere else but here in Quebec, one has to wonder? People want to make Vivier a Dutch or French artist, but nowhere in Québec is there interest on behalf of the cultural officials for his music. It’s no longer about organizing a small reception to promote the work, it is about investing money so that his music can be played, and played well.”

Here then is the bet placed by OdeM: to promote *Kopernikus*. The recipe worked in Banff, Strasbourg and in England. It is quite simple: quality singers, high-level musicians, a conductor with a musicality as large as his understanding of the score and a scenic conception that one can talk about - and from which it has received echos - as artistically successful

The “grands periode”

What is fascinating about this opera is not only what it is in itself, but that it has a privileged status in the work of Vivier: it indeed opened the doors onto what one can call the “grand periode” of the composer, a time period which was sealed by a violent and premature death. The melodic personality of Vivier never displayed itself with so much happiness as originality. Amateurs of bel canto, you are going to discover here another way of treating the voice which seduces more than it shouts out. Lover of theatre, you are going to live the evocative beauty of the purity, not without “strong feelings.” Because the genius of *Kopernikus* lies in exactly what the opera makes us imagine rather than what the opera makes us feel, the force of Vivier’s intuition is irresistible.

Faithful to his practice, the composer uses French, German and especially an ‘imaginary language’ which he invented and, which is all about sound, carries his intent without any verb acting as an obstacle to its understanding, registering itself as a necessary part of the entire score’s sonic world without any linguistic garnishing. It diverts and calls out. It stimulates a kind of chessboard of the senses which the listener can compose based on what he (or she) receives.

The danger, with the presentation of any "contemporary" music, lies in an aphorism thrown out one day by Schoenberg and which continues to hold true: “My music is not modern: it is simply badly played.” So, here is the chance to bet on this production: the music of Vivier here offers up a loving artistry that by now is very well broken in.

The conditions are ideal to get in touch (or, for some that had the chance to see its creation at the Monument National in the early eighties or to hear the various concert versions which took place since, to resume contact) with a work which one wants to see and finally presented with merit. One often forgets that opera is a gate to the quasi-religious, if not mythic, by which feelings were propelled by musical innovation. Claude Vivier stands on the perch; to us the chance to follow him in his flight.

Kopernikus, an opera in two Claude Vivier's with a libretto by the composer. Opera of Montreal, Théâtre Maisonneuve, April 26 and 28, 2001. Produced by Autumn Leaf Performance in co-production with the Banff Centre for the Arts.

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Translated by Thom Sokoloski