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A splendid Kopernikus

Chamber opera took its time reaching Toronto

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COLUMNIST

A woman cradling a teddy bear arrived at the front of the MacMillan Theatre stage last night. She sat the bear down, sat down beside it, smiled at the stuffed animal and then at the audience. Her name? Agni.

Claude Vivier had chosen the name of a Hindu god of light as the heroine of *Kopernikus*, the hour-long opera that has helped make him the posthumous toast of two continents and the Canadian composer currently best known in Europe.

Kopernikus has taken its time reaching Toronto. A chamber opera for seven singers and eight instrumentalists, the Montreal-born (in 1948) composer wrote it just over two decades ago and died before the score achieved its current cult status.

Died? To be blunt about it, he was murdered in his dingy Paris flat, stabbed 42 times and strangled with his own belt by a male prostitute he had picked up the night before. Vivier lived on the edge and composed there as well, in a style that has since come to be appreciated as one of the most original in Canadian music.

He hated rules. When he came to compose an opera he dispensed with a story line and produced a dream-like ritual instead, a "mystical fairy tale" as he described it, in which Agni (his alter ego) is carried along through a series of scenes "towards total purification and the attainment of a state of pure spirit."

As conducted by Pascal Roph* and staged by Stanislas Nordey, there was little action in this particular production of *Kopernikus* (actually a co-production by Autumn Leaf with the Banff Centre for the Arts, in partnership with the Montreal Opera). A line of six singers appeared from behind a guillotine wall at the rear of the stage to join Agni (alto Shaunaïd Amette) and moved little when singing.

The stage itself was almost bare, framed by set designer Emmanuel Clolus as a walled room, dramatically lit by Axel Morgenthaler. It was almost as if everything took place within Agni's imagination, including visitations by Lewis Carroll, who invited her into the land of magic, Mozart and Copernicus.

Why name the opera after the Polish astronomer? Because, wrote Vivier, "the piece's namesake was the first to realize that the Earth is not the centre of the universe. By virtue of this discovery, he charted the destiny of humanity: to strive continually for meaning in the endeavour to explore new horizons."

Vivier's opera is really a meditation on this endeavour, almost more of a concert piece than a chapter in the history of musical theatre. Though much of it is sung in French, to its composer's own text, some of it is also sung to an invented language of his own. Verbal intelligibility seems to matter less than the sensation of experiencing a spiritual journey.

And thanks to the special character of Vivier's music that sensation is easy to experience. Much influenced by his travels to Bali and fascination with the East, he has written a score that has little in common with the music of his Montreal contemporaries. It is full of meandering melodies, sometimes travelling parallel with each other, and colours that make dissonance sound almost consonant.

Meaning is deliberately elusive. An outsider to the end, Vivier wanted to be loved (I experienced personally his almost

childlike gratitude for being noticed) but he couldn't bring himself to play the traditional games of form and expression. As Haydn might have said, he had no choice but to be original.

With this splendid production, his originality finds vindication.

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