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Inventing Kopernikus

A Retrospective Journal

Guillaume Bernardi

L'enracinement est peut-être le besoin le plus important et le plus méconnu de l'âme humaine.

[To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.]

Simone Weil

Montreal, 26 April 2001

Opening night of Claude Vivier's opera *Kopernikus* at the Théâtre Maisonneuve, Place des Arts. We have been performing it in a few Canadian and European cities since August 2000.¹ This is by far the biggest and most prestigious hall in which we have performed: it seats nearly 1,200 people. Probably way too big for a chamber piece like *Kopernikus*. By now the performers and the technical team know the piece very well. It should be an easy remount.

It's not. Pascal Rophé, the original conductor and music director, couldn't make the Montreal dates. He has been replaced by another French conductor, Olivier Desjours. Their temperaments are very different: Pascal very clear, with a strong sense of authority, his tempi quite fast; Olivier, softer, more lyrical, but also a bit indecisive; his tempi are slower and tend to vary. The singers hate that. They have already had to adapt to a much larger stage. The set, the mysterious dark room imagined by Emmanuel Clolus, so small when adapted to the tiny stage of the Huddersfield Festival in England, has had to be enlarged here and looks monumental. Much of the blocking has had to be readjusted in just a couple of rehearsals. The singers are very stressed out by these changes.

For the Montreal-based performers, tenor Michiel Schrey and bass-baritone Simon Fournier, the tension is even greater. That can be good. Stanislas Nordey, the director, always encouraged Simon to keep improvising in one of his duos with the central character, Agni. During the tour, some acting habits settled in. Here in Montreal, Simon really does improvise; he wants to show his best. It's thrilling to watch him, but his partner, alto Shaunaid Amette, looks a bit overwhelmed by his exuberance. She is jet-lagged. She flew in from England just a couple of days ago and has a cold.



Kopernikus has come home. Shaunaid Amette, Michael Shrey and Ian Funk in Autumn Leaf Performance's production of Claude Vivier's opera *Kopernikus* in Montreal, directed by Stanislas Nordey.
Photo: Yves Renaud

Technically, the show is in very good shape. The delicate flying in and out of the back wall, the quick change of costume for all singers between Acts One and Two run very smoothly. The Opéra de Montréal technicians are excellent and by now our production team knows the piece very well. Richard Gravel, the production director, and Caroline Dufresne, the stage manager, have often worked in this theatre. For me, the assistant director, there is only one big change to work on, a new set of bilingual surtitles. Apart from some small adjustments (the French and English versions must have the exact same font size, and the French must come first), not much to worry about. For all of us, though, the opening night feels challenging and important. Thérèse Desjardins, president of the Vivier Foundation, reminds us how special this occasion is. Never has Vivier's work been performed in his hometown in such a prestigious venue and to such a large audience. Thérèse, who has been with us at nearly every stop of the tour, is concerned about the audience's attendance and response. She needn't be. The show gets a standing ovation. One can feel that this audience has a deeper, more intimate rapport with Vivier than in any other venue.

But at the opening night reception, I better understand her nervousness. Gilles Tremblay, to whom Vivier dedicated *Kopernikus*, is here, as well as some of the singers who participated in the creation of the piece, relatives and friends of Vivier, and simply audience members who remember the first performance of *Kopernikus*, more than twenty years ago, at Monument National. Talking with them is very inspiring. Through their narratives and anecdotes, the man Claude Vivier is alive again, beyond the mythical figure of the orphan, the artist who travelled to Asia, the homosexual who was murdered in Paris. In Montreal, *Kopernikus* has come home.

Two days later, the reviews come out. They are all excellent. Cast and crew are elated. Many journalists, though, point out a few paradoxes. They all underline the fact that Vivier's work is so seldom performed in Canada, whereas it is performed regularly in Europe.² In 2000, for instance, a lavish production at the Holland Festival attempted to recreate a dream of Vivier, his "opéra-fleuve." *Rêve de Marco Polo* is a kind of collage of

many of his vocal pieces, including the one-hour-long *Kopernikus*. This much-praised production will go to New York in 2002 as part of the Lincoln Centre Summer Festival, but there are no plans to bring it to Canada.

Our production of *Kopernikus* has a few paradoxes of its own. Nearly all the key players in the artistic team – conductor, director, set and costume designers – are French. *Kopernikus* should be an ideal piece for any Canadian opera company: it is Canadian and, by opera standards, small. Yet no opera company has ever produced it in this country. The Opéra de Montréal, who presented *Kopernikus* at Place des Arts, is in fact a relatively minor participant in this project. It was up to a small, independent Toronto-based production company, Autumn Leaf Performance, to take the initiative to produce this work and tour it nationally and internationally. These two facts, the importance of the French participation and the leadership by an independent English-Canadian producer, call for some explanations.

One can only admire first the vision, then the persistence and cleverness, of Thom Sokoloski, Artistic Director of Autumn Leaf Performance, to achieve his goal to produce and perform *Kopernikus*. His production strategy deserves to be analyzed. For many years now major North American theatre artists, like Robert Wilson or Robert Lepage, have relied heavily on the generous European funding of the arts to develop their work. In the present context of arts funding in Canada, Sokoloski had to go to Europe to produce *Kopernikus*. Nearly ten years ago, Sokoloski established contact with the French Cultural Attaché in Toronto, who was very interested in raising the profile of French artists in Canada. Sokoloski went to France to meet a number of French artists. He discovered real affinities with Stanislas Nordey, the Artistic Director with an important “Centre Dramatique National,” and Pascal Rophé, a former assistant of Pierre Boulez and a conductor specializing in contemporary music. With two major French artists on his team, Sokoloski could count on the financial support of the French Government through one of its powerful agencies, the Association Française d’Action Artistique.



French director Stanislas Nordey made a real ensemble out of a varied group of Canadian singers by inspiring trust and respecting their individualities. Shown here are popular cabaret singer Patricia O’Callaghan and alto Shaunaid Amette.

Photo: Yves Renaud

The commitment to *Kopernikus* of Nordey and Rophé, artists well known in Europe, certainly facilitated the negotiations with two major European festivals, Musica in Strasbourg and the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival in England, who decided to present Vivier’s opera. At that point, the Canadian Department of

Foreign Affairs and International Trade and other Canadian institutions in Europe (Canada House in London, for instance) became supportive of this Canadian product. The European cachet of the production, in turn, probably facilitated bringing Kopernikus back to Canada. The two major Canadian co-producers, the Banff Centre for the Arts and the Opéra de Montréal, were certainly sensitive to the prestige and exposure of being associated with such a project.

Sokoloski's brilliant strategy allowed the production of Kopernikus to happen; yet its complexity generated many formidable challenges for Autumn Leaf Performance. It is easy to imagine the practical problems of managing a production and touring an opera, even a small one, over two continents. The financial costs are substantial, the practical details to be looked after countless. Opera houses engage in international co-production on a regular basis, but they have the personnel, the expertise and the financial clout to deal with the typical problems of those ventures. At the beginning, Autumn Leaf Performance struggled considerably with those challenges, and the first few weeks of the production were plagued with organizational problems. Opera productions bring together artists from different countries all the time, but most of the participants belong to what can be called "the opera culture." Sokoloski's vision of a Canada/ France co-production meant bringing together from both sides of the Atlantic artists and technicians who knew each other only slightly or not at all, and whose backgrounds were widely different. Conductor Pascal Rophé chose mainly French instrumentalists for the orchestra. Stanislas Nordey, until recently mainly a theatre director, brought with him his long-term collaborators, set designer Emmanuel Clolus and costume designer Raoul Fernandez. The majority of the singers were Canadian but from different musical styles, and the tour production team was predominantly from Quebec. On the first day of rehearsal at the Banff Centre for the Arts, one could really wonder how the cultural and language differences between the Europeans and the Canadians, the French and the Québécois, the Anglophones and the Francophones, were going to be resolved. And, more importantly, how this mixed team of artists and technicians was going to create a production respectful of Vivier's work and of their own identities.

Banff, July 2000

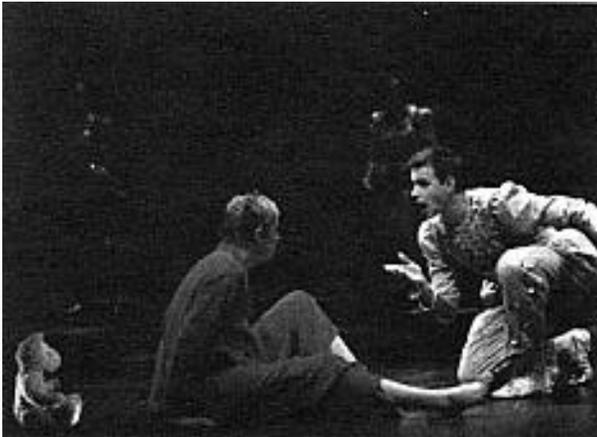
The first week, Pascal Rophé, the conductor, takes charge of the rehearsals. He is very clear and has an enormous amount of energy. His task is considerable. The score of Kopernikus is challenging and isn't properly edited. Apart from shaping the piece, he also has to make substantial editorial choices. The singers struggle with Vivier's unusual vocal writing and with his libretto, half of it written in an imaginary language. Nordey and his team attend all music rehearsals and absorb all they can. The piece feels very different played live than when heard on CD; the personalities of the performers affect the sense of the music. Pascal guides the singers through the dense score. At this stage, there is no storyline, hardly any character; most of us feel lost. It is very difficult to find points of reference.

The production is very late. On the first day of rehearsal there is neither set nor costume design. Nordey and his team are used to working in that way at the Théâtre Gérard Philipe in St. Denis, where he is the Artistic Director. Here, this is unheard of, and the Banff Centre production team is getting nervous. They are dealing with many other shows for the Banff Summer Festival and can't wait much longer to buy materials and start building the set and costumes. Everybody is working very hard. After the standard six hours of rehearsal, the performers work with the vocal coach, Rosemary Thompson, to learn their parts. Nordey and his team have long design meetings that last until late at night.

The Banff Centre for the Arts is turning out to be the perfect location for this kind of production. All the players are together and are isolated from the rest of the world; all practical needs are taken care of. Kopernikus gets everybody's undivided attention. And when we get out of the rehearsal hall, the views of the Rocky Mountains are breathtaking. For the Parisians the culture shock is intense. They love the place and they hate it.

Soon the issue of the set becomes a major crisis. The French way of doing theatre is very distinct, little known outside France and not so easy to communicate. Canadian theatre technicians are often highly skilled but can forget that their practice has been developed to respond to specific forms of theatre. Those two worlds struggle to communicate. Language itself can be an issue. In any case, by now the deadlines are too tight to buy material and build. The French team is rather calm: Nordey certainly knows of the aesthetics of the "objet trouvé." One evening, John Avery, the Banff Centre Director of Production, Emmanuel Clolus and I as an interpreter go to Calgary to the storage space of the Banff Centre. Big white panels, the legs of the set of Don Giovanni, will be recycled. Painted black, completed with new similar panels, they become the high walls that define the mysterious space in which the opera takes place. We don't know yet that these panels are too big

to fit standard containers. A new set will have to be built in Europe, adaptable to the various stages where Kopernikus will be performed on tour.



Kopernikus starts with Alice in Wonderland. In the opening scene, shown here, Shaunaïd Amette brings a childlike quality to her meeting with a mysterious stranger, Michiel Schrey. She is haunted by the teddy bear she brings on stage and by the other characters' clown costumes.

Photo: Donald Lee



The last scene of Kopernikus: Agni and "the friends of her dreams" depart.

Photo: Donald Lee

The problems of the tour become a priority and a significant source of tension. A couple of weeks before opening night in Banff, a tour production director, Richard Gravel, and tour lighting director, Martin Gagnon, join our team. Both Québécois, they have worked with Robert Lepage and have the necessary knowledge to tour a show in Europe in a wide variety of conditions. It's great luck that they are available: in English-speaking Canada not many people have that kind of expertise.

Fortunately, the rehearsals are going very well. However, Nordey's challenges are considerable. Kopernikus is a difficult piece. He is working in a context that is foreign to him. He has to create a show that can appeal as much to the specialized audience of a contemporary music festival as to the "abonnés" of the Opéra de Montréal, a notoriously conservative lot, fed on a steady diet of Aidas and Toscas. During these six weeks, Nordey manages to create a luminously sensitive show with the material at hand. His first source of inspiration is Vivier's music, as shaped by Pascal Rophé.³ The two Frenchmen are in deep agreement, the result of a shared culture rather than personal affinities.

The French taste for clarity and elegance serves Vivier's work brilliantly. Rophé works first on the main musical structures of the opera, the ever-changing relationships between the solos and the ensembles, the contrasts in volume and texture of the music. Nordey is very methodical and imaginative at the same time in his approach. He translates into spatial distribution the various sound planes. When the singers are silent, they stand against the upstage wall; when they are singing in an ensemble, they inhabit the middle range of the stage; when they become full characters, they move downstage. In the second act, Nordey imagines a very simple physicalization of the music. The singers sit when they are silent and stand when they are singing. These simple movements shape the whole piece and make the dense score very legible. Truly, the ear sees.

Nordey shows the same receptivity towards the performers as towards the music. He inspires in them a great trust. He has managed to make a team, a real ensemble, out of this varied group of singers. Rather than imposing his vision, he brings out of them the qualities that he is searching for, with a deep respect for their individualities. Within structured movements, he encourages them to explore and improvise. The result is a very organic acting style in which the performers always look comfortable.

Little by little, the show acquires a very distinct, unique personality. For sure one recognizes the "Nordey style," but its physicality is very different from Nordey's shows performed by French actors. In Act One, for instance, there is a short trio for men. Quite spontaneously, the singers devise a kind of Broadway routine for this moment. A fragment of American popular culture finds its way into the cooler, more formal world of the French director. It is indeed a co-production.

The major challenge in *Kopernikus* for a director comes from its libretto. Vivier summarized it in this way:

Le personnage central est Agni ; autour d'elle gravitent des êtres mythiques (représentés par les six autres chanteurs) tirés de l'histoire : Lewis Carroll, Merlin, une sorcière, la Reine de la Nuit, un aveugle prophète, un vieux moine, Tristan et Isolde, le Maître des Eaux, Copernic et sa mère. Ces personnages sont peut-être les rêves d'Agni qui l'accompagnent dans son initiation et finalement dans sa dématérialisation.

Il n'y a pas à proprement parler d'histoire, mais une suite de scènes faisant évoluer Agni vers la purification totale et lui faisant atteindre l'état de pur esprit. Ce sont les personnages même de ces rêves qui l'initient. (Vivier 95)

[The central character is Agni; around her gravitate mythical beings taken from history, represented by the six other singers: Lewis Carroll, Merlin, a witch, the Queen of the Night, a blind prophet, an old monk, Tristan and Isolde, the Lord of the Waters, *Kopernikus* and his mother. Agni perhaps only dreams of these characters as she undergoes her initiation and finally dematerializes.

There is no actual story, but rather a series of scenes, which carries Agni towards total purification and the attainment of a state of pure spirit. In fact she is initiated by the characters of her own dreams!]

Again Nordey, instead of drowning in Vivier's wild imaginary world, shows a great respect for the libretto and follows it literally. He finds, with his designers and the singers, simple ways of embodying Vivier's images.

Kopernikus starts with a long spoken quote from Alice in Wonderland, a letter from Lewis Carroll to the child Alice about death. This initial moment generates a crucial series of images for the rest of the show: the childlike quality of Shaunaid Amette's interpretation of Agni; her childish world, haunted by the teddy bear she brings with her on stage; the clown costumes that the other characters wear; and so on. Simple props and costumes, developed with method and refinement, create a succession of strong images that any audience member anywhere in the world can read and relate to.

Nordey pays much attention to the "legibility" of the show. The surtitles are very important to him. He insists on having them even for a French-speaking audience. They become part of the set, as wide projections on the upstage wall. Similarly, at the beginning of the show and during the short pause between the two acts, relevant quotes of Vivier's writings and one of his early poems, "The Clown," are projected on a scrim. They guide the audience through the show. The success of *Kopernikus* certainly also depends on Nordey's great desire to communicate with his audiences.

Two weeks before opening we move from the rehearsal hall to the stage of the Margaret Greenham Theatre. This will allow Nordey, the cast and the technician to experience performance conditions. By now the show is very strong. Nordey works very closely with the lighting designer, Axel Morgenthaler, to create intensely evocative images. The eight instrumentalists have arrived, four of them from France. The team is now complete.

We finally move to the Eric Harvey Theatre for the final week of rehearsal and a low-key opening night. The experience is slightly surreal. For most of us, a premiere can't really happen in a theatre in the middle of the woods. The stressful opening nights will come later, in Strasbourg, Huddersfield, Montreal or Toronto. In each of those cities the stakes will be high for some of us, and in each of them some substantial adjustment of the show will be necessary. Yet the production will keep its identity because of those intense six weeks at the Banff Centre. There, under the guidance of Nordey and Rophé, each participant made the opera of Claude Vivier her or his own. So that in this diverse group of people, *Kopernikus*, the child of an orphan, could find a home.

Notes

1 *Kopernikus* was performed at the Banff Summer Festival, 16, 18, 19 August 2000; at the Musica Festival, Strasbourg, 29–30 September 2000; at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, 18 November 2000; at the Opéra de Montréal, 26, 28 April 2001; and at the Macmillan Theatre, Toronto, 21–23 June 2001. Special thanks to John Avery, Thérèse Desjardins, Michiel Schrey, Isabel Soccoja and Thom Sokoloski, who gave me important information needed to write this article.

2 Tamara Bernstein wrote in the National Post that

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 in concert programs in Paris, where the composer was murdered in 1983, shortly before his thirty-fifth birthday. But *Kopernikus* has yet to receive its first professional performance in Toronto.

And the following appeared in Montreal in *Le Devoir*, 21 April 2001:

Pour deux soirées seulement, l'Opéra de Montréal présente *Kopernikus*, du compositeur québécois Claude Vivier. Une première à la compagnie, certes, mais aussi, enfin, l'arrivée sur nos scènes "officielles" d'une musique boudée ici, applaudie ailleurs (Tousignant). [For two nights only, the Opéra de Montréal presents *Kopernikus*, by Quebec composer Claude Vivier. A premiere for the company, certainly, but also the arrival, at last, on the mainstream stage, of a musical work snubbed here, applauded elsewhere.]

3 "When Vivier writes, 'there is no actual story,' the director of the work feels vulnerable, anxious, without guidance. He must therefore adhere to the musical structure of the work, and with the utmost care bring it to life" (Nordey).

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