

## THE SECOND LIFE OF CLAUDE VIVIER.

(Translation of feature article appearing in L'Actualité 15 April, 2001, written by Hélène de Billy)

*Murdered in Paris in 1983 by a one-night stand, the Montréal composer, posthumously, is enjoying one of the greatest international successes ever.*

**Creation, sex, violence and glory** posthumously: the itinerary of composer Claude Vivier, murdered in Paris in 1983 by a one night stand, looks like a “roman noir”. One of the most original creative spirits Québec ever produced, a man considered by many as ‘one of the masters of contemporary lyric art’ successfully melted his life into creation and into a complete tragedy that went beyond all musical boundaries. Vivier was more than a composer. He was a personality, a saint, a martyr, a “maudit!”

During twelve years of his professional life, he composed forty-nine works having titles as strange as the sonorities he incorporated. He was part of a music “avant-garde” that often had a hard time finding its public. Nevertheless, in Europe, where he’s been regularly performed since his death at the age of 34, he occupies a choice position among the 20<sup>th</sup> century’s greatest composers. The only riddle for the experts resides in his late appreciation, which everybody attributed to the solitary life in which he evolved. It is true, Vivier did take his time before entering the community of contemporary music. Nevertheless, the composer’s good friend, Thérèse Desjardins, the head of the Vivier Foundation, has worked non-stop for the last 15 years to promote his work.. ‘My efforts are being rewarded,’ said the woman who is still the guardian of Vivier’s legacy, his godmother and good fairy.



In June 2000, consecration came at the Holland Festival. For the occasion, Pierre Audi, artistic director of the Netherlands Opera, and conductor Reinbert de Leeuw realised Vivier’s six principal vocal pieces. Lasting three and a half hours, the ‘opéra-fleuve,’ entitled *The Dreams of Marco Polo*, required 18 months of rehearsal and more than a million dollars in investment! Sixty-eight singers participated in the event, including ten soloists. An old gas reservoir, selected for its acoustics, was specially converted for public performances. On stage, the author’s revolutionary music, his text sometimes incomprehensible combined with the singers’ unusual gestures (i.e., his desired tapping of the mouth with their hands like kids do when playing ‘cowboys and Indians’) did not seem to baffle the well-attuned public. On the contrary ‘It was a total success,’ recalls Thérèse Desjardins.

Christopher Lyndon-Gee, the critic of the *International Herald Tribune*, goes even further. “To qualify this performance as a triumph,” he wrote in an article on June 17, “might underestimate its importance on numerous levels. With this production,” he goes on, “Claude Vivier surpasses being a composer for specialists and becomes a major force in music at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. No other composer has expressed so much truth, naivete and originality in his own despair for redefining the anguish of his times.”

Claude Vivier was born in April 1948 in Montreal, parents unknown. Placed in an orphanage, he was adopted at the age of three by a very catholic working family. Until the age of six, he did not speak, and for a long time people thought he was deaf and dumb. Haunted by solitude and loneliness throughout his life, he searched for his natural mother, but in vain. Hoping to make him a priest and to give him a chance to go to school, his adoptive parents sent him in the cloister

of St. Vincent-de-Paul. It is there, during a midnight mass, listening to a song (a strong believer at the time), that he had the revelation of his life. Vivier was an orphan of the controversial Duplessis era, saved *in extremis* by the music and by God.

In 1967, he left the college for the conservatory. He frequented Gilles Tremblay's composition class, the author of many major pieces, including *Fleuves* and *Les Vêpres de la Vierge*. Tremblay noticed in Vivier an immense curiosity. "He was eager to know." Did he recognize in him a Mozart? "Not at first, his work was not really convincing. But he was the most relentless of my students."

From Tremblay, Vivier learned music. Stockhausen, on the other hand "taught me composition," he often recalled. In 1972, he went to Cologne to study with the great German master. The influence was immediately felt, yet what Vivier gained was ultimately a clearer path toward his inner self. Again, transformation came about under a revelatory sign. One night, he describes in a 1979 text, he saw his life unfold before him, "It allowed a glimpse of a little kid with a sad face who wanted to express something important but who was never capable." In his memoirs he recounts one dream in which he saw three graves. From one of them flew a white eagle who seized him in his claws to then travel around the world. The genius attributed to Vivier was born that night, between dream and childhood, death and eternity.

After returning to Montreal, he frequented the *counter-culture* milieu. He went to the cinema regularly, read Hermann Hesse and Marguerite Yourcenar, and even danced with Marguerite Duras during an evening-party. All the people, who met him, remember his monumental laugh, his electric hand-shake, his outgoing personality. Conscious of his talent, he would proclaim that his music was unique. "It was not a case of vanity on his part," explains the poet Paul Chamberland, "Claude had a strong feeling for his legitimacy." Besides, Vivier was not a snob or an upstart. If he could express himself in many languages (Italian, German, English, Balinais, etc.), then his French 'joual' would be garnished with blasphemes. As Giacometti, he could not sleep with the light on. All his life, he was like a lonely child who was afraid of the dark and death.

Stockhausen thought that as a composer he should defend his music. Vivier was never reluctant to speak out, sometimes with anger in the newspapers. He felt misunderstood. And he likened himself to André Mathieu, Saint-Denys Garneau, Émile Nelligan and Claude Gauvreau. "It is for them that I speak," he wrote in 1978 concerning all those artists who disappeared prematurely in their lives due to tragic circumstances. "It seems that one can die easier in Quebec," he added. But Vivier refused to ever feel sorry for himself.

His posthumous recognition was almost immediate. In spring 1983, the eminent Hungarian composer György Ligeti was seized by the imaginative sonority of this Québécois, by the sumptuousness of his timbres. "This man is a genius," he simply stated. Ligeti spread the good news. Little by little, always with the help of Thérèse Desjardins, the music of Claude Vivier appeared in the contemporary *avant-garde* scenes in London, Venice and Paris. One of the most defining moments of his renaissance was the launching of the 1996 Philips' recording of his pieces, specifically the astonishing *Lonely Child*, "A work," writes the *New York Times*, "that is as simple as a child's story, yet as tragic as an adagio of Mahler and as solemn as Nô Theatre."



Autumn Leaf & Banff Centre

In Montréal, because of the *Nouvel Ensemble Moderne* and the *Société de musique contemporaine du Québec* (SMCQ), Vivier is regularly performed. But with major budget restrictions their whereabouts seem clandestine. Thus, we need to thank the initiative of *l'Opéra de Montréal*, who will present in April at La Place des Arts, *Kopernikus* directed by Stanislas Nordey and produced by Autumn Leaf Performance in co-production with the Banff Centre for the Arts.

The chamber opera, *Kopernikus* doesn't tell a story as we know it, but evolves through an array of characters among whom we find Agni, named after the Hindi divinity of fire. "Agni is me," explains Vivier in an interview to the artist Robert Racine in May, 1980 in the magazine

*Virus Montréal*, now out of print. As in many of his vocal pieces, almost all the text was written by him in an invented language (*o ze a a a a è ma ya se a-on Agni*), where throughout surface literary reflections and imprecations.

The music of Claude Vivier is not easy. Yet for those who stay with it, they come away deeply moved by his music. Vivier did not really like comfort, even less indulgence. He invites us into a confrontation with ourselves. A kind of astonishment results. "The first time I listened to him, I thought, here is a friend as profane as I am, it was the same shock I felt when hearing Bach for the first time."

His work is seen by many as a reference to his childhood and his religious upbringing. Is this the reason for his work's relative accessibility? We find in his sonic landscape, passages which, without being totally familiar to us, remind us that something's missing, like the uncovering of buried memories. He was very influenced by his travels in Orient and as a result his music possesses a kind of bewitching power that "makes you want to return a second time," explains Walter Boudreau from SMCQ. Vivier conjures a silence that reaches into the deepest parts of the soul: stifled screams, some gongs, a child sighing ("I'm scared.") from which tears are drawn from each of us. Contrary to the gurus of contemporary music of post-war Europe, Pierre Boulez, for example, Vivier searched to express his emotional world before the intellectual.

Having chosen to devote his life only to his music, he found some income through commissions received from the Canada Council of the Arts. Save his collection of books and his old piano, he owned nothing, not even a stereo. In the seventies, he was seen regularly in the bars. He was a motormouth, confided some of his friends, who never hesitated to talk about his sexual life. Vivier frequented the saunas. Never wanting to hide his homosexuality, he would share every impression of these 'nocturnal ballets' that eventually lead him to his own death.

One night, he took his friend Robert Racine to a tavern on the Boulevard Saint-Laurent, where transvestites, tramps and homeless were found. In the back of the room, there was a terrible looking man who looked like he just walked out of Dante's *Inferno*. This man, said Vivier to Racine, was with me at the orphanage. "My music is here," as he pointed out the room being filled with "the drowned."

Not long after this incident, he went to Paris. In November 1982, in his apartment close to the cemetery of Père-Lachaise, he completed *Trois Airs pour un opéra imaginaire*. Immediately, he began another vocal piece, *Glaubst du an die unsterblichkeit der steele?* (Do you believe in the immortality of the soul?). At this same time, his life seemed to take an uncontrollable turn. Vivier lived dangerously. He became addicted to violent sex, frequented bars, pimps and prostitutes. His friends became worried by his imprudence. In the book of *Glaubst du ...*, the Tenor recounts: 'You know I always wanted to die of love.' Followed by, 'But I never knew it.' 'Knew what?' asks the Contralto. 'I never knew how to love.' concedes the Tenor. The Narrator then finds himself in a Parisian subway car. On the seat closest to him, he observes a young man at whom he cannot turn away his eyes. They exchange a few words. After a moment, 'From his dark black vest, he pulls out a knife, probably bought in Paris, and stabs [the Narrator] directly in the heart.'

Vivier was murdered a few weeks later on, March 7, 1983, under the same circumstance that he had himself described in his opera. With the difference that the murder did not happen in the subway, but in his apartment, where he had invited his murderer, a young prostitute. Before this terrible scene degenerated into a seance of death, Vivier gave a cheque to the nineteen year old boy. It was that cheque that lead to his arrest. He was then judged and sentenced to prison for murder. As for Vivier, he had just written his most heartrending and masterful work. In this work, thought to be unfinished, is now said, according to specialists, to be missing nothing except maybe a note. And even then, there is a chance that this absence may have been wanted. The score finishes completing a liaison terminating in emptiness. Whatever price Vivier had been to pay, it was not that art should imitate life but rather life imitate art.

*Translated by Thom Sokoloski and Michelle Plante.*