

Claude Vivier



Claude Vivier photo © J A Billard

"I want art to be a sacred act, the revelation of forces, the communication with these forces. A musician should not be creating music, but rather moments of revelation, moments of forces in nature, forces which have existed, exist and will exist, as forces of truth." —Claude Vivier __An introduction to Claude Vivier's music__ _by Bob Gilmore_ The music of the French-Canadian composer Claude Vivier (1948–1983) inhabits a twilight realm between reality and the imagination. It is a world where human beings express themselves in invented languages more often than in real ones; they are seduced by the allure of distant cities and embark on journeys, often symbolic ones in search of love or companionship; and they are haunted by the omnipresence of death, which in Vivier's output holds dominion over everything else. All these themes characterize his largest works, the opera Kopernikus and his planned "opéra fleuve" project Marco Polo, as well as many smaller ones. Yet in the deepest sense the most frequently recurring subject in Vivier's compositions is himself: almost all his works are essentially autobiographical. Vivier composed, in part, in order to access an inner world: as a means of confronting loneliness, darkness, terror; of negotiating a relationship with God; of voicing an insatiable longing for acceptance and for love.

Born to unknown parents in Montréal, he was adopted at the age of two by the Vivier family and grew up in a working-class part of the city. From the age of thirteen he attended two boarding schools run by the Frères Maristes, a Catholic order that prepared pupils for a life in the priesthood. There, the young Claude showed considerable scholastic promise and discovered music in a moment of epiphany, singing in a midnight mass. His tastes quickly turned to the 20th century, and two Bartók-like organ pieces survive among his juvenilia. However, to his own disappointment, he was advised to leave the seminary at the age of 18, his teachers feeling that his temperament was too sensitive and excitable for a religious vocation. He turned to music and produced his opus 1, the Quatuor à cordes, during the first year of his studies at the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal under Gilles Tremblay.

The earliest works in Vivier's catalogue show him immersed in the avant-garde techniques of the 1960s. Hiérophanie is an exuberant venture into instrumental music-theatre, whereas Musik für das Ende is a more sober vocal ritual inspired by the suicide of a playwright friend. Vivier spent the years 1971–74 in Europe, where he studied electronic music for a year at the Institute of Sonology in Utrecht, and then composition with Karlheinz Stockhausen at the Hochschule für Musik in Cologne. His experiences with Stockhausen marked him profoundly.

Under his tutelage Vivier experienced what he described as a musical rebirth and produced a work that marked "the true beginning of my life as a composer": Chants, for seven female voices, a sort of requiem in which Catholic solemnity and childhood high spirits mix in a wonderfully personal idiom. The rigorously post-serial Désintégration for two pianos and six strings was performed at Darmstadt in 1974. At the end of his European studies he wrote Lettura di Dante, an avant-garde concert work for ensemble with a solo soprano who only becomes visible at the end when she gives voice to an ecstatic religious vision.

Vivier returned to Montréal in summer 1974 and began to make himself heard in his native city. The Société de musique contemporaine du Québec (SMCQ) conducted by Serge Garant gave the premieres of both Lettura di Dante and Liebesgedichte, an extended exploration of the many aspects of love, for four voices and ensemble. His orchestral work Siddhartha, however, was judged too difficult for the National Youth Orchestra of Canada, who had commissioned it; it is among the painfully long list of works that Vivier did not hear in his lifetime. This brilliantly imagined score, for large orchestra divided into eight groups, shows Vivier breaking free of his European influences and reaching towards a personal voice through an engagement with non-Western influences. The same is true of Learning for four violins and percussion, the most overtly ritualistic of his pieces, in which the violinists appear to be studying the art of melody under guidance of a mysterious teacher.

In autumn 1976, Vivier travelled to the East, and spent extended periods studying the musical cultures of Japan, Bali, and Thailand. Of these encounters, it was the weeks he spent in Bali that made the most profound impact. He was impressed both by the actual techniques he learned from his studies of Balinese music and by the role the music played in Balinese society. The influence is most audible in Vivier's Pulau Dewata for variable ensemble, whose metric rhythms and attractive melodic surface have inspired many choreographers. The Balinese influence has been digested more fully in his magnificent choral work Journal, originally conceived during his Asian sojourn as a sort of musical travelogue, but which emerged as a four-part exploration of characteristic themes in the greater journey of life: Childhood, Love, Death, After Death. Vivier wrote a number of striking instrumental pieces in the years that followed: the virtuoso piano piece Shiraz, one-of-a-kind chamber works like Paramirabo and Greeting Music and, for the Montréal Symphony Orchestra, the orchestral overture Orion. The 1970s ended with his chamber opera Kopernikus, an absorbing allegory in which a woman on a journey to the next world meets the great Renaissance astronomer and various other historical figures in a Lewis Carroll-like setting where nothing is quite as it seems.

In 1979–80 Vivier made a brief visit to Europe and encountered the musique spectrale of his friends Gérard Grisey and Tristan Murail. This had a profound impact on his thinking and influenced the music he produced during the remainder of his short life. The spectral influence can first be heard in Lonely Child for soprano and orchestra. Here a concentration on melody is uppermost; in combination with the bass line, the melody generates its own microtonal harmonies, precisely calculated sonorities that Vivier termed "les couleurs." These elements combine in music of great poignancy to create the most truly individual, as well as the most autobiographical, of his compositions.

The voice is also predominant in the works that followed. The majestic vocal/instrumental Prologue pour un Marco Polo uses five voices and a bright-sounding ensemble of clarinets, percussion and strings. There are three further works for female voice and ensemble: Bouchara, a love song, and one of his most overtly beautiful scores; the politically charged Wo bist du Licht!; and the emotionally intense Trois airs pour un opéra imaginaire, his penultimate work, and one that hints at future directions in which his music might have gone. Many of these later works were intended as component parts of the opera on the subject of Marco Polo that he was planning at the time of his death.

Vivier went to Paris in summer 1982 on a Canada Council grant with the intention of composing an opera on the death of Tchaikovsky. He was murdered by a young Parisian criminal in his apartment on the night of March 7–8 1983, at the age of 34. On his desk was the manuscript of an unfinished last work, Glaubst du an die Unsterblichkeit der Seele (Do you believe in the immortality of the soul), for singing and speaking voices and small ensemble on a text by Vivier himself. In it, a narrator (named “Claude”) tells of the powerful attraction he feels to a young man he meets casually on the Metro. After exchanging some pleasantries, the young man pulls a knife and plunges it deep into his heart. At that point the manuscript ends. Some of the composer’s friends have seen in this highly disturbing congruence of life and art the key to Vivier’s whole personality: in this view, Vivier was a man who lived dangerously, a man with a death wish who, having killed the “self” in his last composition, had now no further reason to live. Others view the relationship as an uncanny but finally meaningless coincidence, and Glaubst du... as a further compelling creation by a death-obsessed young artist who was cruelly denied the years of creativity that lay before him. Whatever the truth of Vivier’s life, the expressive intensity of his music, together with its compositional skill and innovation, make his oeuvre among the most compelling and distinctive of the late 20th century.

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