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MUSIC | CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Canadian Composer's Death-Obsessed Search for Connection

By ZACHARY WOOLFE OCT. 29, 2017

TORONTO — Death-haunted, drawn to danger and desperate for connection, with his ceremonies in sound charting transitions from life to something beyond it, the Canadian composer Claude Vivier should be the great downer of modern music.

But so shimmering are Vivier's drones, so sweetly childlike his invented languages and mystical geographies, so energetic his need to communicate his cravings and insecurities, that the effect is one of warmth rather than dread. He's not trying to scare or sadden us; he wants to be our friend.

Beginning in 1971, when he wrote "Music for the End," Vivier created a series of solemn yet quirky rituals of passing on, the core of his output. This is Halloween music, not in the jack-o'-lantern-and-candy sense, but harkening back to the ancient observance of the time when the line separating our world and those beyond momentarily blurred.

Not performed until 2012, "Music" is now being presented under its original title, "Musik für das Ende," through Saturday, Nov. 4, at Crow's Theater here by the new-music organization Soundstreams, in what is said to be its first full staging.

It is a rare opportunity to encounter the theatricality of Vivier's vision, its seductive showmanship. Though performances of his music have increased since his oeuvre was taken over, in 2005, by the influential publisher Boosey & Hawkes, he remains more heard about than heard. His single completed opera, an abstract

chamber spectacle called "Kopernikus" (1979) but related only obliquely to the great astronomer, had its American premiere just last year.

Vivier's life and work have become inescapably linked to — and retrospectively darkened by — the circumstances of his death. In March 1983, as he was developing a piece called "Do You Believe in the Immortality of the Soul" that includes a spoken text about being stabbed by a man he is cruising, he was killed by a stranger he invited home from a bar in Paris. He was 34.

It says much about Vivier and his music's preoccupations that such a tragic coincidence has been assumed to have been more than an accident — that it was somehow preordained or even asked for, a kind of suicide. When Bob Gilmore, the conscientious author of a 2014 biography of the composer, presented at a 2008 conference the opinion that Vivier was "a wholly unwilling victim who did not in any way actively seek his own death," it was met with resistance from even some of the composer's friends.

The intimate, in-the-round Soundstreams production — which pairs "Do You Believe," Vivier's final pages, with "Music for the End," some of his first — doesn't suggest his complicity in his own murder. But it leans heavily on the foreboding that was undoubtedly an element of his final days: A little over a month before he died, soon after writing the "Do You Believe" text, Vivier was assaulted and robbed by another man he'd brought home.

This is the attack described in the prelude that the playwright Zack Russell and the director Chris Abraham had affixed to the production (whose music director is John Hess), a monologue featuring the actor Alex Ivanovici as Vivier, complete with hyena laugh, wire-rimmed glasses and a perpetually stinking sheepskin coat.

Mr. Russell's words give a sense of the composer's anxiety in the wake of the January assault, coupled with his struggle to finish "Do You Believe," which may have been connected to an opera he was mulling about the death of Tchaikovsky.

"How do you end an ending about the end?" this Vivier asks, over and over. The lights flicker; the sound system rumbles.

It is a charged, not to say apocalyptic, introduction to "Do You Believe in the Immortality of the Soul," with its eerily hovering electronic and choral drone. The performers here wear ashen-tone black, gray and brown, like the anonymous denizens on the outskirts of our lives. The work's impassioned central tenor, who performs a kind of stylized love song with a vocalizing soprano, recedes for a final spoken narration.

Here, as at the end of "Music for the End" — when the score indicates that someone enters the space, asking repeatedly, at increasing volume, "where am I, who am I, where am I going" — the speaker in the Soundstreams staging is Mr. Ivanovici's Vivier. While Vivier's works do often seem to be his mouthpieces (the narrator at the end of "Do You Believe" even states his name is Claude), this is a bit of a blunt solution, erasing what seems to have been intentional ambiguity between his avatars and Vivier himself.

But it's dramatically potent, as is this premiere staging of "Music for the End," a shadowy, otherworldly rite, almost medieval in its soberly overlapping incantations, with drone layered on slow babble. A haze of stage smoke is broken by filament bulbs hanging from the ceiling. Ten live performers sing and play percussion instruments, also hanging.

Their deliberate, enigmatic movements around the space physicalize Vivier's complex notation of the musical relationship between the singers, who sometimes come together — in pitch, syllable and rhythm — sometimes separate and sometimes remain solitary. The performers tie the hanging bulbs together, swing them and gather around them — treating them both as playthings and as sources of energy.

At points Vivier indicates that the performers should sing and speak material from their own memories, "evoking the most beautiful moments in their past." Another small chorus — recorded, here in Toronto — sings a fragmentary bit of a Requiem mass. The seating in the round brought some of the performers startlingly close by; this wasn't the unified statement available on a recording, but a piece visibly and audibly constructed simultaneously by individuals and the group they form together.

After Mr. Ivanovici's Vivier shouted his climactic existential questions and

screamed, the group slowly proceeded out of the space. A little girl was left onstage singing on her own, perhaps a symbol of the isolated youngster who Vivier — who was adopted at 3 years old and never knew his birth parents — always felt he was, and for whom he composed. (The lustrous, longing "Lonely Child," from 1980, is one of his finest works.)

"I have to refine everything," he wrote to a friend a few months before he died, "find the voice of the lonely child who wants to embrace the world with his naïve love — the voice we all hear and want to inhabit together."

'Musik für das Ende'
Through Saturday at Crow's Theater, Toronto; soundstreams.ca.

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