

Claude Vivier (1948 – 1983)

Trois Airs pour un opéra imaginaire

Born in Montreal to unknown parents Claude Vivier was adopted as a child, later entering a religious seminary where he began to express himself in musical composition. The distinctive and personal nature of his writing however soon manifested itself in a deep sense of dislocation from society (he spent much of his adult life in searching for his parents, in particular his mother). After studying music at the Conservatoire de Musique de Montreal he won in 1971 a Canada Arts Council award enabling him to attend classes in electro-acoustics under Gottfried Koenig at the Institute of Sonology, Utrecht.

After completing this course, Vivier moved to Cologne working with Stockhausen and Hans Ulrich Humpert. Still working in electronics he experimented with various compositional techniques: quantification of parameters, permutative structures and ring modulations. This last process, involving the multiplying of two different wave forms, had a particular appeal for Vivier and the resulting tonal spectrum is imitated in the harmony of his later compositions. An awareness of this newly-developed language in *Change* from this period, was referred to “as the first moment of my existence as a composer”

In 1976 Vivier undertook a long period of travel through Asia. The influence of the Indonesian Island of Bali turned his thoughts in a new direction giving his music a new simplicity in the form of affirmative rhythmic patterns and monodic textures. From this period a new soulful beauty emerges in Vivier's music: without conventional harmony, and employing very little counterpoint, he creates 'layers' of sound, shaping and sculpting these into an expressive whole.

In 1981 a further Canadian Arts Council grant enabled him to move to Paris. It was here that *Trois Airs pour un opéra imaginaire* was composed. Using an imaginary language written by himself (an opening phrase of the singer is “Ko no rè cha Ko eux wo bist du o Lie-be moy ou-o-a-è”), Vivier employs a diversity of vocal accomplishments, playing with syllables, rolling consonants, even vibrating selected vowels. Only two real sentences are heard, in German: “Where are you my love” and “where has love gone?”. A air of tragedy and lament pervades the piece and this is intensified by the dream-like effect of the imaginary text.

Harmonically constructed from many different modes, the instruments accompany the prominent vocal line in a mass of fast-moving scales, lifting and goading the singer to an emotional ecstasy. In a strange switch of emphasis, it is only through musical events such as changes of texture or clear percussive gestures that the narrative element of *Trois Airs* is perceived. The highly-personal atmosphere of these later pieces has led to many observations on the link between these and the strange and tragic nature of Claude Vivier's death. In a still unsolved crime, the composer was murdered at the age of 35 in Paris.