



Photo: Vincent Pontet

Kopernikus

Opéra-rituel de mort

2020 TEACHERS RESOURCE

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New Zealand
Festival OF THE ARTS

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CAST AND CREATIVES

Composed by **Claude Vivier**

Directed by **Peter Sellars**

Dancer-choreographer and collaborator of Peter Sellars **Michael Schumacher**

Dramaturge **Antonio Cuenca Ruiz**

Roomful of Teeth roomfulofteeth.org

Soprano Estelí Gomez

Soprano Martha Cluver

Mezzo-soprano Virginia Kelsey

Contralto Abigail Lennox

Baryton-Martin Dashon Burton

Baritone Thann Scoggin

Bass Cameron Beauchamp

Ensemble L'Instant Donné instantdonne.net

Oboe Sylvain Devaux

Clarinet 1 Mathieu Steffanus

Clarinet 2 Nicolas Fargeix

Clarinet 3 Juliette Adam

Trumpet Matthias Champon

Trombone Mathieu Adam

Violin Saori Furukawa

Video Actor **Pauline Cheviller**

Costume **Sonia de Sousa**

Lighting **Seth Reiser**

Stage Manager **Pamela Salling**

Technical Coordination and Tours **François Couderd**

Sound Engineer **Randall Squires**

Production Festival d'Automne à Paris

Co-production KunstFestSpiele Herrenhausen, Théâtre de la Ville (Paris), Théâtre du Châtelet, Nouveau théâtre de Montreuil et Théâtre du Capitole (Toulouse)

ABOUT THE SHOW

Visionary director Peter Sellars resurrects the rarely staged opera of the Québécois composer Claude Vivier, *Kopernikus*. Sellars, renowned for his radical and creative productions, has described this intimate work as a "mind-blowing" mix of *The Magic Flute*, *Tristan and Isolde* and *Alice in Wonderland*. In *Kopernikus* Vivier abandons linear storytelling, telling the story about the journey of Agni to the afterlife with sound, ritual and symbol.

Performed by the Grammy Award-winning Roomful of Teeth ensemble and instrumentalists Ensemble L'Instant Donné, this "unimaginably beautiful" opera (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung) takes audiences on a journey of reconciliation and transcendence following loss and death, guided by the genius of Mozart, Wagner and Lewis Carroll.

"The main character is Agni. Mystical beings borrowed from stories (represented by the other six singers) gravitate around her: Lewis Carroll, Merlin, a witch, the Queen of the Night, a blind prophet, an old monk, Tristan and Isolde, Mozart, the Master of the Waters, Copernicus and his mother. These characters could be Agni's dreams that follow her during her initiation and finally into her dematerialization." Claude Vivier

GENRE

Kopernikus is an opera, a genre of performance that can simply be described as a play that is sung and set to music. The Western version of opera has been around from around 1600, there are many different styles of opera performance today from traditional to the contemporary. You can find a useful glossary of terms and introduction to opera on the [Victoria Opera website](#).

PRODUCTION AND TECHNIQUES

VOICE

In the score and libretto for *Kopernikus* Vivier uses different effects made by the voice to create a strange and surreal atmosphere.

- Beating the hand against the mouth when singing a note
- Singing a word with a long interval between the beginning and end of the last syllable
- Whistling
- Glissandi – the voice glides from one pitch to another, gradually becoming higher and higher or lower and lower

These techniques combine with the language Vivier invented to become an otherworldly chant performed by Roomful of Teeth. The ensemble have studied with some of the world's top performers and teachers in Tuvan throat singing, yodeling, Broadway belting, Inuit throat singing, Korean P'ansori, Georgian singing, Sardinian *cantu a tenore*, Hindustani music, Persian classical singing and Death Metal singing – and have used these skills to interpret Vivier's score.

LIGHTING, SET AND COSTUME

The set is minimal, allowing the sound, ritual and symbolic movements of the performers to take centre stage – using chairs, a table and desks for the musical ensemble. The performers are all dressed in shades of white, evoking angels or medical professionals both which can be associated with death. The coloured lighting gels reflect off each performer, imbuing them with red, green, blue light, creating different atmospheres and representing events in the narrative. The performers each hold glowing iPads with the libretto, a contemporary layer to the otherwise otherworldly production.

TEXT AND CHARACTERS

“To ké mo si gna nè ya ko nè mo ni na ko dè ko”

The text is written in both French, German and an imaginary language – the meaning unknown. The libretto has been translated into English for the performance, to help the audience follow what the artists are saying. Vivier's imaginary language is unable to be translated, as the meaning was unknown at the time of his death. When writing the opera, Vivier imagined this language to be one that transcended the living and the dead – that future generations, everyone, everything, could communicate in. The libretto draws characters from fictional texts who speak in multiple languages, sometimes directly quoting the original texts.

CLAUDE VIVIER

The composer of *Kopernikus*, Claude Vivier is one of Canada's greatest composers. He created 49 compositions including opera, orchestral works and chamber pieces before his sudden death in 1983 aged 34. Adopted aged two, he didn't speak till he was six. “I am and I will always be undyingly and eternally a child” he says. His work is often biographical touching on the composer's obsession with childhood, imaginary languages, dreams and fantasy characters.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND READING

WATCH

The ensemble Roomful of Teeth on NPR Music's Tiny Desk concert series making "sounds – some sweet, others alarming – that you probably haven't heard from a group of humans.":

youtu.be/iKuFujJq6zU

Peter Sellars describes *Kopernikus* in discussion with the Ojai Music Festival:

youtu.be/jutPjSgSOV4

Find out about the different roles in an opera production. Read and watch the Victoria and Albert Museum's series *Opera: The Total Art Form*: vam.ac.uk/articles/opera-the-total-art-form

Watch a full staging of *Kopernikus* at the Ojai Music Festival:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhugEOI2vug&t=2107s

READ

A review of Peter Sellars's production of *Kopernikus* at the Espace Pierre Cardin in Paris:

operacanada.ca/review-le-festival-dautomne-paris-kopernikus/

Find out more about Claude Vivier and his body of work: musiccentre.ca/node/37312/biography

DO

Download a lesson plan written by composer Eric Champagne that plunges you into the magical world of Claude Vivier: smcqeducation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Champagne_Vivier_Berceuse-pour-lenfant-solitaire_ENG.pdf

An Opera Glossary

The six voice types

Soprano – the highest sounding female voice

Mezzo-soprano – the lower sounding female voice

Contralto – the lowest sounding female voice, but not common in opera

Countertenor – the highest sounding male voice

Tenor – a high sounding male voice

Baritone – the middle sounding male voice

Bass – the lowest sounding male voice

Act – a component of the total work, consisting of its own partial dramatic arc

Aria – an elaborate composition for solo voice with instrumental accompaniment

Choreographer – the person who designs and creates the movement of the performance, usually in dance form

Composer – the person who writes the music

Crescendo – getting louder

Libretto – the text of an opera or musical theatre work

Principal – a main part

Score – the notation showing all the parts of a work, both instrumental and vocal. Each instrument or vocal line has its own stave.

Surtitles – a translation of the words being sung on stage projected onto a screen above the stage

Find a full opera glossary and FAQ from the Victorian Opera [here](#).

PROVOCATIONS AND ACTIVITIES

PRE-FESTIVAL

What do you know about opera? Talk about the features of an opera, the score, libretto, set and costume. Discuss the key cast and creatives and what their role entails. Take a look at the glossary on the previous page and click through to the Victorian Opera theatre's website for more.

Read the information you have available on *Kopernikus*, what do you think it is about? What type of performance and music are you expecting?

AT THE FESTIVAL

What sense of energy do I feel in the space? What do I notice about the theatre space before the performance has even begun?

What captures my attention during the piece? The performers? The set? The music? Why?

What questions do I have about the production? What is the meaning of the opera?

AFTER THE FESTIVAL

Did you enjoy this style of music? Why?

How did the performers portray the different characters? What did the performers do to create stage presence?

What moods and feelings did the performance evoke?

Did the performers express a range of emotions through their music making? How?

What was your favourite part of the performance? Why?

Was there anything you didn't like about the performance? Why?

How does this compare to other operas, musicals or performances you might know of or have seen? What was different? What was the same?

How did you feel not being able to understand the language being sung? Was having the libretto and surtitles useful?

Have you ever heard singing like that before? What did it remind you of? Research some of the influences Roomful of Teeth state such as yodelling, Persian classical singing, Tuvan throat singing, and Death Metal singing. Can you see how these were integrated into the performance?

The way *Kopernikus* is staged was created by director Peter Sellars. It is not set by the composer Claude Vivier. If you were to direct the show, what would your approach be, how would you stage it?

“To ké mo si gna nè ya ko nè mo ni na ko dè ko”

This is a line from *Kopernikus* in Vivier's imagined language – how would you sing this? Try singing this phrase in a range of different ways whispering, shouting, chanting, in different keys...How does this change the line's feeling and meaning?

Need something more? Contact your SchoolFest team with any questions about the performance.

schoolfest@festival.co.nz | (04) 473 0149