

***Claude Vivier: A Composer's Life***. By Bob Gilmore. Rochester and Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press and Boydell & Brewer, 2014. 295 pp. ISBN 9781580464857.

The biography of a significant Canadian artist by a prominent non-Canadian author is usually a noteworthy event and *Claude Vivier: A Composer's Life (1948-1983)* by the late Northern Irish musicologist Bob Gilmore (1961-2015) is no exception. Inspired by the composer's music (ix-x) and well versed in the music of North America (see his writings on Harry Partch, Ben Johnston, James Tenney, among others), Gilmore has done a fine job, carefully taking us through the meandering trail of Vivier's career, never shying away from the more controversial aspects of the composer's life and work and always remaining admirably non-judgmental. This first book-length work devoted to a Quebec composer whose music remains better known in Europe than in many places west of the Ottawa River is well written and makes excellent use of a broad range of source material,<sup>1</sup> as well as providing a detailed work list and an up-to-date discography. Gilmore's work is an important first step. More will doubtless follow. However, these next steps should address three issues in particular.

First, Gilmore's biography contains no musical examples. The omission is all the more inexplicable because the author devotes considerable space to introducing Vivier's music. For example, Gilmore (166-67) takes great care in explaining how Vivier employed spectral compositional techniques to write the orchestral colours of *Lonely Child* (1980) for soprano and chamber orchestra. When Gilmore presented the same analysis of Vivier's work in an article published in *Tempo*, he also provided a score excerpt and a page from the composer's sketches.<sup>2</sup> Both of these documents are more than helpful visual aids, they are critically important for understanding the author's analysis. These sorts of examples would also have been useful for other sections of the book where Gilmore dwells on specific works, such as *Journal* (1977) for four soloists, SATB choir and percussion (131-35) or *Samarkand* (1981) for piano and wind quintet (191-92). Why the author or the publisher decided not to include these documents is mystifying. Perhaps their decision echoes those unfortunate proposals, made some fifteen years ago, according to which writers on music should refrain from using musical examples for fear of alienating musical illiterates.<sup>3</sup> Adding musical examples would take nothing away from the book as it stands, but would add much more for those interested and capable of checking Vivier's scores.



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1. Notably the Archives Claude Vivier of the Université de Montréal and Archives of the Fondation Vivier, also in Montreal.

2. Bob Gilmore, "On Claude Vivier's *Lonely Child*," *Tempo* 61 (2007): 7 and 9 respectively.

3. Susan Fast, "Same As It Ever Was? Musicology Continues to Wrestle with Rock," *Canadian University Music Review* 12, no.1 (2000): 50.

The second issue concerns Vivier's identity. Throughout the book, Vivier is described as a French Canadian composer, an old-fashioned term we formerly used to lump together all Canadians whose mother tongue is French: *les Québécois, les Acadiens, les Franco-Ontariens*, etc. The term is not merely inappropriate, it is a distortion and symptomatic of the author's lack of interest in the place that constitutes the primary locus of the Vivier's career, notwithstanding his numerous sojourns abroad during the 1970s and early 1980s. As short as it was, Vivier's life maps almost exactly that tumultuous period during which Québec emerged as a vibrant, forward-looking, thoroughly modern society. He was born in 1948, the same year that Paul-Émile Borduas deposited copies of his pamphlet entitled *Refus global* in a Montreal bookstore. The manifesto eventually contributed to transforming Quebec (think *la Révolution tranquille* during the 1960s, and the election of the Parti québécois in 1976) and also set the stage for two referenda (1980 and 1995) on sovereignty-association with Canada. Vivier's untimely death occurred within a year of the repatriation of the Canadian constitution. In the relatively short span of thirty-five years, Quebec and Canada changed in ways that would have been unimaginable before World War II. These chronological correlations between the political and social events of nations and the biography of a creative artist are of course coincidental. Relations that can be drawn between a composer's work and the social/political contexts in which they took place are usually indirect, but even indirect relationships should not be ignored. They can tell us a great deal about what we are endeavouring to understand.

With regard to the *Refus global*, Gilmore does note that the document is "a celebrated page of Quebec's cultural history, but one practically unknown outside its borders" (25); all the more reason, then, to provide more detail on the cultural and political contexts of Vivier's career. Gilmore does occasionally hint at connections. He notes for example the curious aspect of the title of *Musique pour une liberté à bâtir* (1968-69) for women's voices and orchestra, "which seems to be a response—unique in Vivier's output—to the political climate of the times" (41). Vivier's work on this composition coincided with the founding of the Parti québécois. If it was unique to Vivier's output, one wonders why it occurred only once. Gilmore then quotes Martin Foster (who took Gilles Tremblay's composition courses at the Conservatoire de Montréal with Vivier during the 1960s), who notes that "Claude was a fervent separatist in those days" (42). If this is true, then how did Vivier react to the *Crise d'octobre* (1970) during which Pierre Laporte, a provincial cabinet minister, was kidnapped and murdered, and James Cross, a British diplomat, was kidnapped and subsequently released? No one would want to treat Vivier's work as merely a cipher of Quebec's political and social history, but more information is needed if we are to take true measure of the man and his work.

The third lacuna is Vivier's relationship with France in general and the spectralist composers in particular. Vivier was never a member of *l'Itinéraire*, the group of composer-performers that came together in the early 1970s and eventually engendered spectral music.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in a moving

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4. Eric Drott, "Spectralism, Politics and the Post-Industrial Imagination," in *The Modernist Legacy: Essays on New Music*, ed. Björn Heile (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) 39-40. [39-60]

statement made just after Vivier's death, Gérard Grisey noted: "The exaggerated lyricism of Claude Vivier, which has no equal in its emotional and affective weight other than the prosody of Janáček, was however in many ways the absolute opposite of the preoccupations of the musicians of *l'itinéraire*" (231). Yet, the biography presents compelling evidence that the compositional techniques pioneered by Grisey and Tristan Murail transformed Vivier's late work, beginning with *Lonely Child* (163). In a lecture given in Paris in November 1982, Vivier observed that he was employing "a very classical system that Murail uses: a system of *addition des fréquences*" (163). Vivier's statement begs questions that the book does not answer: when did he come into contact with this "system" and how did he make it his own? Gilmore notes that Vivier and Grisey met at the Darmstadt International Summer Courses in 1972, where they became "beer buddies" (71). Beyond that first encounter, we are left with speculation. For example, on his return from Asia in the first part of 1977, Vivier spent time in both Cologne and Paris, where, as Gilmore suggests, he may have met Grisey (128). The biography richly documents the time Vivier spent in Holland and Germany during the 1970s, when he studied with Karlheinz Stockhausen. The impact of these studies on Vivier is well known.<sup>5</sup> More research needs to be done to better understand the relationship of Vivier's music to the spectralist movement and with the time he spent in France.

Bob Gilmore has provided a finely delineated portrait of Claude Vivier and an informed introduction to his music—for this, we should all be grateful. In many ways, the book reminds me of Otto Friedrich's biography of Glenn Gould.<sup>6</sup> This too was a very good first step, brilliantly overtaken by Kevin Bazzana.<sup>7</sup> I can only hope that a more complete assessment of Vivier's life and work will be forthcoming (*cette fois-ci, en français SVP*).

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5. Jean Lesage, "Claude Vivier, *Siddhartha*, Karlheinz Stockhausen : La nouvelle simplicité et le rûgû," *Circuit : Musiques Contemporaines* 18, no. 3 (2008): 107-20; recently republished under the title "L'influence de Stockhausen: la nouvelle simplicité et le rûgû," *La création musicale au Québec*, ed. Jonathan Goldman (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2014).

6. Otto Friedrich, *Glenn Gould: A Life and Variations* (New York: Lester & Orpen Dennys, 1990).

7. Kevin Bazzana, *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005).