

Jonny Silver's  
**Lonely Child**

**T**he subject matter of Jonny Silver's docudrama *Lonely Child: The Imaginary World of Claude Vivier*, makes for incredible fiction. A young Québécois composer, originally schooled to enter the priesthood, develops into one of Canada's most original contemporary classical composers.

Flamboyantly individualistic, iconoclastic and greatly talented, the young Claude Vivier receives a grant to write an opera on the death of the composer, Tchaikovsky. Leaving behind strong friendships and a bevy of admirers, Vivier departs for Paris. His work proceeds brilliantly – but the unexpected takes a tragic turn. The news reaches home: Vivier is found murdered in his Paris flat. Dead at age 34.

An apology is in order. I only demonstrate how these kinds of facts lend themselves easily to melodramatic fictionalization. The problem is how to recount, beyond narrative or documentary/biographical cliché, the story of a man who was, indeed, known for mocking the pretence of the academic composition world, who did once live above the infamous beer, souvlaki and drug dive, The Skala, who was known to act a little like a wacked-out six-year-old in the presence of his dog. And who was found murdered in his Paris flat. Dead at age 34.

I am told by a friend of Vivier's, that Silver has done his homework well. The character of Claude Vivier at 26, living and working in Montreal, excellently cast and acted by Denis Forest, is the *enfant terrible* of contemporary classical composition, without being an *enfant gâté* or an *enfant prétentieux*. He is portrayed as being naturally iconoclastic, innocently 'crazed' and, as Vivier is said to have confessed, a loner and a bastard (in the original sense of the word). But a happy bastard. Silver's Vivier is the artist as child, with an imagination which is both disciplined and exploratory, wild and responsible. He may drink with friends, with fellow composers, Michel George Bregent, Walter Boudreau and Denys Bouliane, but it's clear, too, that when it comes to his craft, he works like hell. Apparently, Silver and Forest have even got the derisive cackle and holler of Vivier's laugh down pat.

As for Vivier's musical or philosophical aesthetic we learn through interviews that Vivier was stimulated by his experiences of other cultures, that Love and Death were thematic preoccupations, as were ideas of imaginary cities and imaginary cultures. Silver gives us a hint as to the elements which fed into Vivier's imagination and hence, into his work. To Silver's credit, too, is the fact that *Lonely Child* most aptly accomplishes the task of matching Vivier's music to the visual narrative.

But overall, a film which proposes to offer a



Germain Houde as the mature Claude Vivier in Paris

"collage of film elements that parallel, structurally and artistically the music of Claude Vivier", seems mostly to be focused on the linear, (albeit fragmented line of) the events of Vivier's life. And death.

Although *Lonely Child* may be described as an experimental documentary and Silver has chosen a difficult topic in the life and work of Vivier – which is fundamentally a documenting of a Grand Imagination – the film falls short of equalling Vivier's own innovative form and style.

Granted, the aesthetics of Vivier's work are probably still rather eclectic and inaccessible to the general film-going public. And, within budgetary limitations, Silver cannot be expected to include dramatized footage of Vivier's developmentally important years in Germany, or of Vivier's travels in Asia or to other cities from which he was stimulated to create his imaginary, synthesized version of those cultures – not in a "post-modern" syncretic manner, but from passion, from reverent curiosity and with imagination, Vivier's imagination.

There is a humorously untraditional sequence in Silver's direction of the camera, panning from one side of a Paris flat wherein actor Germain Houde as the older Vivier, is supervising a rehearsal of one of his works, to a couch across the room, upon which sits composer Gilles Tremblay, who immediately launches into a frontal address to the camera: a monologue on Vivier's ideas on his art. Otherwise, interviews appear staged and often too conventionally staged.

The dance segments, choreographed by Julie

West, may contain *Lonely Child's* most evocative and dreamy cinematography but the segments view like filler. Unlike cuts from the filmed production of Vivier's Alice in Wonderland-esque opera, *Lonely Child*, the question arises, what is the purpose of these passages in the film?

The weakest scenes in Silver's docudrama are the near melodramatic depictions of Vivier's last days in Paris. Is it possible to shoot footage of Paris, and Paris at night, which is visually unattractive? Yes. Germain Houde is badly miscast and the dramatized details leading up to Vivier's murder (which, of course, are fictionalized deductions) are overly sensational. Yes, the man picked up men and brought them home. Yes, maybe, even in his thirties, he might have been known to enter churches and light candles beneath the altar. But as the earlier segments of the film subtly and adeptly demonstrate, Vivier's religiosity was driven by an interest in the mystical and mythical, not in the grounded rites of the Catholic church.

Again, as Silver adeptly, if not lovingly portrays, Vivier's sexuality was probably integrated with his overall childlike – that is, pure – passion and desires. So what's with the pseudo-leather Paris pick-up scene?

Docudrama can be filmed in an experimental manner without abandoning all sense of storytelling. One of Agnes Varda's latest films, *Jane B. par Agnes V.*, manages to succeed at this; reshaping the definitions and representations of "fiction" and "fact". (Although perhaps Varda had an easier time working directly with her subject, Jane Birkin.)

With *Lonely Child*, Silver has excelled in

factually documenting the work and, in parts, the life of an artist whose existence was dramatic, inventive, extraordinary, insightful, and experimental. But Jonny Silver's capability in fictional dramatization leaves us with the story of a young, maverick composer, tragically murdered in his Paris flat, away from home and friends. Dead at the age of 34.

Clea Notar •

**LOVELY CHILD** p. Jonny Silver, Michael Macina d. Jonny Silver sc. Jonny Silver, Owen Burgess d.o.p. Dennis Pike cam. Pier Giorgio Bottos cam. asst. René Daigle, Denis Forcier key grip Paul Tremblay grip Mario Dumont gaffer Eloi Deraspe hair Antoine Bergeron makeup/hair Lucille Demers cont. Jean-Marie Robillard stills photo Lise Charlebois addn. photo Jean-Claude Labrecque, René Daigle craft Carlos Vidosa ed. Jonny Silver sd. David Millar mus. Claude Vivier asst. ed. Marguerite Cleinge, David McGroarty sup. sd. ed. Karl Konny re-rec. mix Daniel Pellerin Foley Maureen Wetteland graphics Dennis Pike, Rosie Bailey p. man. Christian Vidosa, Suzanne Kiesel Toronto: cam. Robert Fresco cam asst. John Hobson key grip Paul Tremblay grip Eloi Deraspe gaffer Jim Plaxton best boy Sam Ylect. Brad Lemee, Duncan English stills photo Tom Robe Paris crew: a.d. Wendy Orde cam. asst. Nara Keokosal cont. Agnes Fierobe key grip Pierre Sim gaffer Olivier Reverdy p. coord. Marc Hébert Montepulciano/Vienna crew: cam. asst. Gianni Xias key grip Mario Brega gaffer Salvatore Rupert mixer Eugenio Rondani p.a. Nura Silver p. coord. Mario Donati l.p. Germain Houde, Denis Forest, Yvan Beaulieu, Christian Bernard, Attila Bertalan, Claude Sandoz, Dino Oliveri, Pauline Vaillancourt, Jacques Drouin, Violette Chauveau, Anik Bergeron, Yves-André Bergeron, François Beaugard, Monika Haim, Véronique Robert, Michel Grenville, Bora Bulajic, Pascal Queroy, Xavier Galy-Acme, Julien Dubois, Chantal D'Arcy interviewees Walter Boudreau, Denys Bouliane, Michel-Georges Bregent, Gyorgy Ligeti, John Rea, Gilles Tremblay w. voices of David Fox, Serge Garant, Pierre Granger, Robert Sunter, Claude Vivier dance sequences Julie West Dance Company, Julie West, Cathy Kavanagh, Louise Parent. project admin. Mother Corporation. Produced by SILVERFILM INC. dist. les films du crépuscule.