

On Lucia Ronchetti  
by Stefano Nardelli

Lucia Ronchetti's "Esame di mezzanotte" in Mannheim, on a libretto by Ermanno Cavazzoni

The night before the exam

Lucia Ronchetti's *Esame di mezzanotte* is the last accomplishment of a personal journey through various formal expressions of musical dramaturgy, experimenting with different spaces, dimensions and performers, to the point of including the audience as an active participant [of assigning an active role to the audience]. Her whole musical output, almost in its entirety, is fully realised in the theatrical gesture, even though often implicit. *Esame di mezzanotte* is her first large scale opera, a real "opera", commissioned by an opera house with a long tradition such as the Mannheim Nationaltheater. And, as is tradition with the *genre*, it is a work with a large cast of actors, singers, vocal ensemble, choir and orchestra, the largest cast ever used by the Roman composer.

For her latest work, Lucia Ronchetti has reunited with Ermanno Cavazzoni, writer and poet, after the inspired experience of their "comedia harmonica" *Anatra al sal*, a micro-opera on the culinary dissertations of five master chefs, and their fights to the last drop of sauce. Likewise, but on a larger scale, the heterogeneously woven text is made of verses, perfect rhymes, nursery rhymes, substantial prose monologues: no doubt a strong inspiration for an ambitious work, which is proposed as "summa" of Ronchetti's previous experiences especially in vocal music. Faithful to her compositional style, imbued with reflections of the past, Ronchetti chose Verdi – and more precisely his *Don Carlos* and the *Requiem* – as her master of music dramaturgy, even though, among her sources, we find Ravel as well, whose *Daphnis and Chloé* is the prototype for her treatment of the invisible choir.

As in operas from the past, the tale is told (in 15 scenes) of the sufferings of Giro Lamenti, the night before his high school diploma – a nightmare for generations of Italian students – that he is compelled to face once more because of a "Superior Decree". The laborious search, during the night, for the essential "*The Twentieth Century*", considered crucial for his success, takes place in the "Public Reading Library" during its unlikely opening hours, from 24 to 8 in the morning. There he meets his bizarre interlocutors: the director Rasorio, an unapologetic [shameless] bureaucrat, assisted by Santoro and Fischietti, his two "merry and noisy dogs", the typical comic couple of an old-time *variété*. The hours uselessly pass, and even Iris, an angelic librarian, is unable to help him, guiding him through a sort of descent to the underworld, through secret and obscure places, where he has strange encounters including with a hoard of writers turned beggars. Like Dante's Beatrice, Iris will help Giro *to see – once more – the stars*, on a redeeming airplane, waiting for him at the end of the night.

Although in a light and surreal tone - *Fellinesque* one might say, because of the grotesque traits of the secondary roles - literary references abound in Cavazzoni's writing, starting with the name of the protagonist: it is impossible not to think of his novel's Girolamo, a hermit in the Syrian desert, whose lively intellect is constantly and irresistibly tempted by books. For Giro Lamenti the library is a hostile and ominous place, a borgesian labyrinth where "books are found, only when they are not looked for", but there is no way to find the one we are looking for (where the hell went *The Twentieth Century*?). Behind the light and playful tone, behind the play of paradox, we sense the bitterness and the nostalgia of an

intellectual facing today's "upside down" values: writers are filthy clochards, chasing disjointed pages, the sign of a dissolving memory among the empty rules of a triumphant bureaucracy. The Public Reading library is a wealth of knowledge that lost its meaning, and is therefore destined to ruins.

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*Translation by Andrea Fontemaggi*