

THE MUSIC OF THE PRESENT THAT LOOKS INTO THE MIRROR OF THE PAST

An artistic biography of Lucia Ronchetti

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I.

Born in Rome on 3 February 1963, the second child of a large, unprivileged family, the three year old Lucia Ronchetti is adopted by an elderly couple of neighbours. Thanks to them, she is initiated to the world of sounds: Mario Bevilacqua, an unsuccessful opera composer and violin player, become watchmaker for living, and his wife, a Swiss musician. Thanks to them, she experiences the first contacts with music instruments but especially absorbs their belief in the salvific power of music language. The scene where she learnt the first rudiments of music education – Bevilacqua's little and dark flat, full of broken clock mechanisms, music instruments and music boxes – became in 1988 the object of the vivid musical portrait *La stanza degli orologi in frantumi* (*The room of shattered clocks*) for instrumental ensemble. It is also a lasting experience, marking her imagination and flowing into various compositions until recently. *Les Aventures de Pinocchio* (2015), the first commission by the Ensemble Intercontemporain of a piece intended for a young audience, reflects vividly that childish fascination and transfers the theatrical and imaginative power of instruments and their sounds into a “comédie instrumentale”, in which five musicians as well as an actor embody the many characters invented by Carlo Collodi and music instruments are the only props of the ideal stage where the adventures of the wooden puppet take place.

However, her interest to become a composer sparks from listening by chance a radio broadcast of Bruno Maderna's *Aura*, a score that she studied in depth as a “*virtual composition teacher*”, as she once said. Her formal studies of Composition took place first in Rome at the Accademia di Santa Cecilia and later in Paris, where she attended seminars with the composer Gérard Grisey, the co-founder with Tristan Murail of spectral music, and the annual courses at the IRCAM in 1997. In 1999 she obtained a PhD in Musicology at the École Pratique des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne University, under the direction of François Lesure, one of the most brilliant specialists of Debussy's music. “*At that time, I did not know exactly why I decided it was necessary to spend so much time and effort to analyse the influence of Wagner's music into the French orchestral music in late 19th century and the origin of Debussy's thought on music*”, Ronchetti said. At least, until she was commissioned *Le Palais du Silence* by Joséphine Markovits, artistic director of the Festival d'Automne in Paris, to give a personal interpretation of Debussy's music in a concert with the Ensemble Intercontemporain conducted by Matthias Pintscher in 2013.

Despite many working experiences with some of the most prominent composers of the past century such as Hans Werner Henze and Sylvano Bussotti, along with the already mentioned Grisey and Murail, she has been often associate to Salvatore Sciarrino for the bond with the tradition of Renaissance “*madrigale*” and baroque music and for a refined literary taste for their compositions as well as for their common interest in the human voice, heritage from the tradition of their native country, rather than for stylistic analogies. “*In my opera projects, I explore different possibilities of working with human voice. In particular, I am interested in analysing continuity/discontinuity between speaking and singing voice and to transform the sound of a text into a voice to create a melody identifying and transcribing sounds present in spoken words (in other words, its “image acoustique”, acoustic image). This melody should also be “cantabile”, perceptible and communicable through the monumental stage space of traditional operas*”, she said.

Although a classification of Lucia Ronchetti's music is hard to give, an aspect that stands out is the strong link with the idea of the theatre to the point that, as somebody said once, "*she is able to make theatre with the sole sounds*". As a matter of fact, in her "opus" the works explicitly classified as "music theatre" represents only a minor, though significant, share of her production. However, even when not programmatically conceived for the stage, almost all compositions show some kind of strong and inner theatrical nature, as if theatre were an essential necessity for her. One might even go so far as to say that the whole production that all her musical production becomes fully accomplished when expressed through a scenic gesture, sometimes evident only at a conceptual level.

II.

Her music theatre works can be classified according to various formal typologies, depending on stage space and performers. Apart from purely instrumental music (orchestral music and chamber music), a recent classification of her compositions include music theatre, choral operas, "dramaturgie" (dramaturgies) and action concert pieces as well as soundtracks and tape music. However, every project is a *pièce unique*, each one with different origins and specific characters, hardly classifiable according to codified or traditional genres as is her conception of music: "*a trans-border entity, abstract, untranslatable, but communicable and identifiable in very different cultural contexts*" as she once declared. They should be rather read as devices to reveal dramaturgical strategies, to stress the definition of a character or a form, or to drive the listening process into some particular direction.

In other cases, it is the rather the particular place where a project that defines its form through the performance. It was the case of the action concert pieces such as *Narrenschiffe (The Ships of Fools)* composed in 2010 for the Münchner Opernfestspiele, taking place in the streets of Munich and drawing a parallel between real life and the satirical and visionary book by Sebastian Brant (1494). But also of *Prosopopeia*, composed also in 2010 for the Heinrich Schütz Music Festival in Kassel, and taking place in the Martinkirche hosting the funeral of Count Heinrich Posthumus von Reuss in 1636 for which Heinrich Schütz composed his *Musikalische Exequien*. In the same vein, *3e32 Naufragio di terra [3:32. Landwreck]* was conceived in 2013 as a sort of requiem in the Basilica di Santa Maria di Collemaggio in L'Aquila and written for non-professional choirs, all made of witnesses of the disastrous earthquake occurred four years before. The latter work is also an example of Ronchetti's attempt to abolish the border between performers and audience (or, at least, to make it almost imperceptible). In *Albertine* (2007), inspired to the character appearing in various novels of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In search of lost time), the female voice embodies both the eponym character (described through Proust's text fragments) and the lake where she meets her secret lover, *la petite blanchisseuse* (the little laundress), whereas the male voices in the audience whisper short excerpts from the Proust's novel to create a subliminal space representing the fragmented voice of Proust's narrator. The separation between the space destined to the performer and the audience is used in dramaturgical sense to recreate the narrator's painful impossibility of establishing a contact with the woman. In other cases, it is the conventional border between orchestra and performers to be broken, as in *Sei personaggi in cerca di autore* (Six characters in search of an author) (2013). Luigi Pirandello's most famous play breaking the classical boundaries between the fixity of the characters and the dynamic process of their creation is translated by the composer into a complex plot involving actors, audience and orchestra to recreate multifaceted layers involving representation and act of creation.

Defining a space through sounds is an expedient often used by Lucia Ronchetti, especially in her "dramaturgie", a kind of music theatre in concert, generally for small-scale ensembles, often resorted to in order to develop experimental forms between Musiktheater and instrumental piece with

precise dramaturgical indications. *Hombre de mucha gravedad* (2002), a “drammaturgia” for vocal quartet and string quartet, is presented as a study in music from *Las meninas* by the Spanish baroque painter Diego Velázquez, in which every presence in the painting is assigned a musical presence (a voice and an instrument) and the spatial distribution of interpreters reflects the famous spatial cage devised by the painter around the Infanta Margarita. In *Hamlet’s Mill* (2007) for soprano, bass, viola cello the Nordic myth of the Maelström is evoked with an extreme parsimony of music means, in a parallel between a water landscape assigned to the instruments and the bass voice of the narrator/Hamlet progressively moving from a calm and meditative state to the dramatic epilogue of the text by Eugene Ostashevsky. And even more parsimonious are the means employed in *Helicopters and butterflies* (2012), a solo percussionist, who plays a percussion set organised on different levels alluding to the hotel described by Dostoevsky in *The Gambler*, with the roulette wheel on the upper level.

III.

In her constant refusal of conventional dramaturgy and quest for new forms, Ronchetti’s interest for the baroque is not surprising. “What interest me are the freedom and the experimental attitude typical of this period and the special treatment of human voice”, she said about baroque and added: “The very concept of opera was at its very beginning and projects were mostly left to the composer and the librettist. Many new theatres and spectacular scene-machineries were built, but the “theatre” effect was principally sought through the compositional and literary work.” The lesson from baroque dramaturgy translates not only in the attitude to refuse the many *clichés* afflicting some contemporary Musiktheater, too often relying on a stereotypical conception of musical language and its connection to the text, but also on the constant need of a reflection (in all possible meanings) onto the past. In this respect, “mise en abyme” is not only the title of one of her most recent stage works but reflects an attitude of the composer to establish a connection with musical experiences from the past.

Such attitude materialises in a tendency to draw from pre-existing compositions and assign such material a dramaturgical function. In this sense, she is not too far from the idea of employing also in music “ready-made” objects such as in modern visual arts. For instance, in *Pinocchio, una storia parallela* (Pinocchio, a parallel story) (2005), the always running wooden puppet of Carlo Collodi’s children book is characterised musically by fragments from the *4th String quartet* by Bela Bartók in a free elaboration for four male voices. In *Neumond* (New moon) (2011), a chamber opera for a young audience commissioned by the Nationaltheater Mannheim for the Mannheimer Mozartsommer, the references to *Die Zauberflöte* in the text by Kristo Šagor in which the protagonist is a Pamina of our times, are revealed by sometimes clear, sometimes more indirect references to Mozart’s music in a sort of dialectical counterpoint to the text. And also Lucia Ronchetti’s most recent effort, *Forward and downward, turning neither to the left nor to the right* (2017), a labyrinth-inspired composition for cello solo, has its roots in *L’Arianna*, Monteverdi’s lost (and ghost) opera.

In other cases, the baroque “teoria degli affetti” (doctrine of affects) and its scenic implementation are reflected through the deforming mirror of her contemporary sensitivity. In this sense, *Lezioni di tenebra* (2010) represents the most clear example of “analytical adaptation” (according to Ronchetti’s definition) of a work from the past, in this case Francesco Cavalli’s *Giasone*. The original text by Giacinto Andrea Cicognini, a genius of the Italian baroque theatre, is largely untouched while the original score is quoted but the “continuo” is re-composed and new music added with the declared aim to emphasise the dramatic tensions and complexity of the plot. Similarly, the three volets of the projects dedicated to Pietro Metastasio (*Contrascena*, *Sub-plot* and *Mise en abyme*), commissioned by the Sächsische Staatoper Dresden, interweave the esthetic reflections of

the „Theatermacher“ Metastasio with a modern exercise on opera buffa and opera seria, a century after the sublime “double bill” of *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Strauss and Hofmannstahl. And *Rivale* is the most recent incursion in the baroque realm or rather in its battlefields and enchanted forests, which are those described in the French “tragédie en musique” *Tancredi* by André Campra and Antoine Danchet.

For Lucia Ronchetti the interest for the past is never a rejection of modernity but rather the ground of her quest of a sense for our time. In *Esame di Mezzanotte* (2015), her largest scale music-theatre work so far (and best “Uraufführung des Jahres” in 2015), the protagonist Giro Lamenti is frantically looking for his “Twenties Century” in the ramshackle shelves of a library falling into ruin. The “Biblioteca di Pubblica Lettura” (Library of Public Reading) is a sinister place, a labyrinth as in a Borges’s tale where “i libri si trovano solo quando non li si cerca” (“books are to be found when one is not looking for them”) and what is sought after cannot be found. In this world, intellectuals live in the darkest depths like filthy tramps trying to catch the disordered pages from ran-down books: a powerful metaphor of a world that is slowly losing its memory, while an obtuse bureaucracy is taking over. The “Biblioteca di Pubblica Lettura” is a universe of knowledge that has lost its sense and is thus doomed.

Also in *Inedia prodigiosa* (2016), her fourth “choral” opera composed for 150 voices, an exploration of the past is once again the trigger for a reflection on the present. A product of Ronchetti’s “musical and social theatre” according to her own definition, the work investigates anorexia as a historical, religious and anthropological phenomenon with an inevitable projection onto our time. Female self-starvation as pathology is not the focus of the work. It is rather the strength to develop free and independent thinking and behaviour or, to use Ronchetti’s words: “*la loro determinazione si trasforma in un progetto di vita che implica autostima e capacità di controllo*” (Their determination turns into a life project implying self-confidence and self-control ability). This is what attracts the interest of the female composer Ronchetti, who looks at the traditions of religious processions and at the deep religiosity of an atheist composer as Luigi Nono to compose a timeless and composite medieval painting with woman performers embodying Catharine of Siena, Margaret of Hungary, Joan of Arc, Lidwina of Schiedam, Beatrice of Nazareth and other famous mystics as well as famous anorexic women as Engeltje van der Vlies, Mollie Francher, the “Apostle of Hunger” Clare de Serval and Christina Georgina Rossetti, Dante Gabriele’s sister and model, and disembodied male speaking voices, commenting, condemning and speculating as doctors, priests, judges, who try to explain the causes of this condition.

Lucia Ronchetti’s music always speaks the language of our time, but constantly looks into the mirror of the past in a relentless quest for the truest nature of our cultural identity.