

# My Opera Experience

## Lucia Ronchetti

*The award-winning Italian opera composer is one of the world's leading composers working today, and is especially celebrated for her vocal works. She has recently been appointed artistic director of the Biennale Musica in Venice.*



### What was your first opera?

The first time I heard a live performance of an opera was *Opera* by Luciano Berio, produced by the Opera di Roma, on 13 May 1981. I was 18 years old, a student of composition at the Conservatory of Music Santa Cecilia in Rome and I went there with other students of my class. We were all shocked, astonished, enchanted, not able to understand, and yet captured. It was something too new and undecodable for us all.

The scenes by Gae Aulenti, the direction by Luca Ronconi, two stars, the so many sung and spoken voices evoking the sinking of the *Titanic*, Monteverdi's *Orfeo* and many other reflections on death – everything was supreme. It was an accumulation of sounds and text information which gave me a very wide and powerful idea of what an 'opera' could be. I was not able to fully understand the complexity of the music and the dramaturgy Berio conjured, but this was a very seminal experience for me as a future opera composer.

### What was the last opera you saw and where?

The last live performance of an opera I saw was *Usher* by Annelies Van Parys on 16 January 2020 at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden in Berlin. It was a fantastic production, with refined, penetrating music, an elaboration of the unfinished opera by Debussy, which was based on the short story 'The Fall of the House of Usher' by Edgar Allan Poe. The work of the director Philippe Quesne in collaboration with the dramaturgy of Roman Reeger made the new opera post-symbolist, suspended and exotic. Debussy's original music and the revision by Annelies Van Parys were so coherent and fascinating to become for me the best new opera I have ever seen.

### What is your favourite opera and why?

My favourite opera is Francesco Cavalli's *Giasone*, composed in 1649, represented at the Teatro San Cassiano in Venice, the first public theatre. In *Giasone* the drama is primarily represented through musical conflicts. The dramaturgy is based on the counterpoint of very peculiar vocal styles, defined for each character, and the *fabula* is just a shadow behind the strength of the musical representation.

The principal characters are identified by Cavalli with the help of a different timing of communication and emotional expression and a different organisation of harmonic sequences. The result is a very rich theatre of timbre patterns, a ferment of various and distinct compositional ideas, where the organisation of sounds clarifies the dramatic action and the plot.

### How did you get into opera?

From 1981 till 1985 I was a student of Sylvano Bussotti at the Scuola di Musica di Fiesole. He was a very influential, original and charismatic person and was the artistic director of the Festival Pucciniano in Torre del Lago. He invited me to follow the festival in 1982 and I saw a memorable production of *Turandot*, under Sylvano Bussotti's direction (he designed set and costumes too).

For the first time, I had the impression that the new production and interpretation of an opera from the repertory, could be a radically new sign and could open new dramaturgical roads.

### What opera would you recommend to a newcomer and why?

I would always recommend *Pélleas et Mélisande* by Debussy. I think it's the opera of the future, an inclusive opera, a cathedral-opera. Inside this score we can find everything we are searching for, like the magic forest by Torquato Tasso: the mythologisation of characters, the dramaturgy based on light and darkness, the music of waters, the nature seen as an intimate enemy, generated by the characters themselves, and the text, quasi parlato, a meta-historical way to explore the music of the text in itself. Everything is a new and fertile territory for future new opera.