

A DIFFERENT KIND OF VOICE

LUCIA RONCHETTI TALKS TO NICK KIMBERLEY

Say the words ‘Venice Biennale’ and most of us will think of the art festival that, since the first ‘International Art Exhibition’ in 1895, descends on the city in alternating years. Formally, the Venice Film Festival (inaugurated in 1932) is also part of the Biennale, despite the fact that it takes place every year (including in 2020); and, since 2000, the art biennale has alternated with the architecture biennale. Between them, art, architecture and film get most of the attention in terms of media coverage and spectator numbers.

The Musica Biennale is much less well known, but it first sheltered under the Biennale umbrella as long ago as 1930. Despite the ‘biennale’ label (the festival’s formal title is Festival Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea della Biennale di Venezia), it has been an annual event, apart from a hiatus caused by World War II and its consequences. It has become an important celebration of contemporary composition, largely but by no means entirely by Italian composers.

Every four years, the Musica Biennale appoints a new artistic director. From this year until 2024, the holder of that post will be Lucia Ronchetti, a composer with impeccable credentials: studies in Italy with Sylvano Bussotti and Salvatore Sciarrino, and in Paris

The composer Lucia Ronchetti, the new artistic director of the Musica Biennale



with Gérard Grisey; a doctoral thesis on the music of Bruno Maderna; studies in computer music with Tristan Murail at IRCAM in Paris. All of that places her in a musical tradition not much favoured in the UK, and indeed Ronchetti’s music is rarely if ever heard in this country. In mainland Europe, on the other hand, she has plenty of performances, especially in Germany. There, her opera *Pinocchio’s Abenteuer* (‘Pinocchio’s Adventures’) was first heard in January in a new German-language translation (Italian and French versions had their first performances in 2018 and 2017 respectively); in June Oper Frankfurt will give the premiere of her opera *Inferno*, which draws on the life and work of Dante.

Usually, a composer who is also an artistic director will be expected to programme their own music. When I interviewed Ronchetti over Zoom in early February, the official announcement of the 2021 festival line-up had not been released, but Ronchetti was prepared to announce one composer whose music would definitely not be on the programme: 'I will cancel myself as a composer; I've asked everybody taking part in the festival *not* to perform my music.'

Our conversation took place on her 58th birthday—not a present that everyone would appreciate, but she proved a charming and willing interviewee. She's well aware that her role for the Musica Biennale places her in a distinguished tradition. 'It's Italy's most important festival for contemporary music. The artistic director is usually a composer, chosen because of their work. Before me there was Uri Caine, Luca Francesconi, Giorgio Battistelli, Ivan Fedele—all fine composers, all very different. As artistic director, I'm completely free to generate my own programme. I wanted to do something thematic so I came up with four possibilities. In the first season, in September this year, my theme will be Choruses, looking at the complex ways the voice has been used over the last 50 years, right up to recent a cappella compositions for choir and vocal ensemble.

'Then, in September 2022, the title is Out of the Stage, which will be concerned with experimental new theatre, some of it site-specific. In 2023 the focus will be on what I call Micro-Music: sounds captured by microphones and diffused by loudspeakers, in different conceptions, different sites, different aesthetics. And the theme for 2024, my last festival as artistic director, will be Absolute Music: written music, European music, music that speaks just to itself in an absolute and complete language which we can't verbalize.' A long-term plan does not go amiss; and Ronchetti's is open-ended enough to allow plenty of flexibility.

Despite the ravages of Covid, Ronchetti and Musica Biennale are hopeful that this year's festival will have live performers and audiences: as elsewhere, plans have to be made with a degree of optimism. Ronchetti also intends to take full advantage of the city in which the festival takes place; Venice offers a rich array of possibilities, in terms of musical history, performance spaces and, not least, performers. 'I'm very pleased that, for the first time in many years, the orchestra and chorus of Venice's opera house, La Fenice, will be part of the festival. That used to be normal but for the last ten years there has been no connection. And it will be the first time in the history of the Musica Biennale that the Cappella Marciana will participate with something that is contemporary.'

The Cappella Marciana, the modern name for the musicians—choral and instrumental—of St Mark's Basilica, can trace its history in an unbroken line back to the 14th century. The list of its *maestri di cappella* reads like a roll-call of great composers, especially in the Renaissance, when they included Adrian Willaert, Cipriano de Rore, Claudio Monteverdi and Francesco Cavalli. That Ronchetti has enticed the Cappella to perform contemporary music is no small achievement, and it lines up with her focus on Venice's place in musical history, and especially the development of opera. 'After the city's San Cassiano theatre became the very first public opera house in 1637, Venice was one of the most important centres in Europe for the first wave of opera production. The San Cassiano was where my favourite opera had its first performance, in 1649: Cavalli's *Giasone*, which was so successful that there are manuscripts of the opera in 12 different libraries around Europe. Nobody knows exactly where the San

Cassiano was, but now there's a British entrepreneur, Paul Atkin, who wants to rebuild a replica of the San Cassiano' (discussed in the November 2019 issue, pp. 1388-91). Atkin said in a 2019 interview with the *Financial Times* that his project could 'do for opera and Venice what the Globe has done for Shakespeare and the South Bank'. It remains to be seen whether his plans will ever be realized, but even if they are, it seems unlikely that the new San Cassiano will be completed before the end of Ronchetti's time with the Musica Biennale. Nevertheless, the prospect excites her.

While Ronchetti hopes to make an impact during her tenure as artistic director, she remains first and foremost a composer. Her work is well known in her Italian homeland, is often performed in Germany, less often but frequently enough in France (including as part of the Dior fashion house's spring/summer 2021 fashion show last October), but remains all but unknown in this country. That should not be taken as a sign of antipathy on her part; as Ronchetti says, 'Although my music never gets performed in London, I love the city. My son did doctoral studies at University College London so I visited him several times while he was there. I thought it was the most beautiful city. I get so many commissions from Italy, from France, from Germany, so I can't really say that I'm searching to do something in England. If someone calls me, good; but if nothing is happening, it's not a problem.'

Perhaps the time has come for the UK to investigate Ronchetti's works. Who could resist the opportunity to hear a performance of her 2009 piece *Narrenschiffe* ('Ship of Fools'), described on her website as an 'In-transit action for actors, soloists, amateur wind orchestra, amateur male choir, skateboarders and passers-by'? Her website divides her works into four main categories: Music Theatre, Choral Opera, Dramaturgie and Action Concert Pieces. As the Italian critic Stefano Nardelli has suggested, 'even when not programmatically conceived for the stage, almost all [her] compositions show some kind of strong and inner theatrical nature, as if theatre were an essential necessity for her'.

A search on YouTube uncovers several videos that suggest her unusual approach, not least in the 'action concert piece' *Lascia ch'io pianga*. An extract from a performance of the work by Duo ILLEGAL shows that it has little to do with Handel's *Orlando*. Marija Skender solemnly plays the piano while the soprano Alessia Park writhes within the body of the instrument, speaking and singing Katja Petrowskaja's text, which draws on testimony from refugees. Here, the piano stands in for the boat that carries an exhausted refugee across the Mediterranean. Another video shows IRCAM's Ensemble Intercontemporain rehearsing Ronchetti's *Le Palais du silence* on the day of its 2013 premiere. Two auxiliary 'players' draw a length of fabric across the piano strings while the pianist, not seated at the keyboard, hits the instrument's innards with two percussionist's sticks.

For some, such gestures no doubt represent the last gasp of a dying avant-gardism, but for Ronchetti, they amount to an extension of musical possibilities, and she makes them work for her. 'For the last 20 years or so, I've been working only in music theatre, in many different forms, some purely instrumental: theatrical works that are presented in the usual concert context, but so that the audience sees that the musicians don't only play, they may speak or make little movements, they interpret a "character". I've also written many works that I call Dramaturgie—a normal concert in which the audience can see that the people singing or playing also represent characters. And since opera companies ask me for opera productions, I've written many traditional operas.



Ronchetti's opera 'Esame di mezzanotte' at the Nationaltheater Mannheim in 2015

'Recently I started working on something different, what I call Choral Operas. That may be an absurd title, but for the moment, I haven't found an alternative. They are operas for voices, without costumes, without scenery but with a strong dramatic idea. I don't see this mass of voices as a choir, but as people who are saying something with different kinds of vocal production. For example, in my last choral opera, *Inedia prodigiosa* [a work described as 'a dramaturgical study of the concept of "anorexia mirabilis"'], which was commissioned by the Nouvelle Philharmonie in Paris, I had a large group of 90 or so multi-ethnic older women who had no formal musical education, alongside a small professional choir and a treble choir of young girls, all positioned in various places around the auditorium, each with a different kind of voice.'

That notion of a different kind of voice is a focal point for Ronchetti: she continues to work with opera singers, but she is eager to look beyond the 'traditional': 'There are vocal ensembles like Paul Hillier's Theatre of Voices, which offer a completely different vocal colour: subtle, not overpowering, no vibrato. Then there are all the vocal experimentations that you find in the pop world; for example, beatboxing—the technique and the rhythms it creates are so fantastic. Sometimes in my operas I find my own way to write with this rhythmic approach, although it's difficult without a microphone. And for me the spoken voice is a kind of gold mine which offers so many possibilities. For me, it's never finished, I can continue to explore for ever.'

Never-ending exploration: that is not a bad ambition for any composer, or indeed artistic director. Perhaps, eventually, audiences in this country will get the opportunity to explore Ronchetti's oeuvre. One thing is for sure, there is no shortage of material for us to investigate.

Oper Frankfurt is due to give the premiere of Lucia Ronchetti's 'Inferno' on June 27, c. Tito Ceccherini (see www.oper-frankfurt.de for details). Musica Biennale 2021 runs from September 17 to 26 (see www.labiennale.org/en/music/2021 for more information).