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# CONVERSATION WITH LUCIA RONCHETTI

April 27, 2021

by Eugene Ostashevsky

*This conversation between the poet Eugene Ostashevsky and the composer Lucia Ronchetti took place in Berlin on January 25, 2020. It discusses their collaborations, where Ronchetti was responsible for the music as well as the narrative and dramatic aspects of each production, while Ostashevsky provided the words.*

*Their most recent collaboration, the musical theater piece The Pirate Who Does Not Know the Value of Pi, premiered at the Biennale della Musica in Venice on September 28, 2019, with the soprano Esther Elisabeth Rispens as the Parrot. The libretto for the piece is based on Ostashevsky's poetry collection of the same name.*

*Other collaborations discussed are Ravel Unravel, an action concert piece for cello and piano based on the Concerto for the Left Hand by Maurice Ravel (premiered in 2013); Prosopopeia, a study of the Musikalische Exequien by Heinrich Schütz (2010), and Hamlet's Mill, an action concert piece based on an essay by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechen (2009).*

**Ostashevsky:** *How was it different to work on The Pirate Who Does Not Know the Value of Pi as opposed to Rivale, your recent chamber opera for female voice which plays with Baroque music and Baroque poetry?*

**Ronchetti:** It has been very important to me—this episode of my life that involved your book—because my work is divided, in general, between new pieces that are, let's say, explorations of still unknown realities and pieces that I consider analytical. An example of my analytical pieces are *Lezioni di tenebra*, which is my analysis of the manuscript of a baroque opera by Francesco Cavalli, *Il Giasone*. When I find myself in front of a text as complicated as your *Pirate* poem, in both prose and verse, in a language that is very complicated for me, not because it is English but because this English is extremely elaborate, I can say that my composition is more like an analytical investigation of my reading of the text. This approach is part of my work: even the pieces for solo viola are analyses of something that I don't understand.

Of course, given my experience and my contact with you, I knew that I could do a piece that was both a comic opera and an analytical work that was faithful to my idea of theater of instruments. But at the root of all this was the desire to climb a mountain: for me, reading the whole poem was incredibly complicated, not to say impossible.





*From a 2019 staging of The Pirate Who Does Not Know the Value of Pi. Photo: Lucia Ronchetti.*

*But what do you mean by “analytical work”? What makes a work analytical?*

The work is analytical on various levels. I tried to set the text to music by saving its proper musicality. In fact, many parts of the score are spoken simply or in rhythmic speech, so the text is itself music. It was a text that I had to decode semantically in its poetic implications, but then it was too difficult for me to add a further level of elaboration: the melody.

I wanted to leave some parts of this text only spoken, because they were interesting to me as music, as sound. But other parts of the text I thought I could transform into song. In that sense, I was already conducting an analysis of the text, because there are parts that rhythmically could never be transformed into music. But there were others where I felt a simple fundamental rhythm that allowed me to search the huge repertoire of music related to the sea, to piracy, to the loneliness of the sailor—pre-existing pieces of music through which this text could, in some way, be experienced anew. So I first read your text. It also contained quotations and references to the past, which led me to try to understand what, in the history of music, whether classical or popular, could be connected to this image of shipwreck, loneliness, and abandonment in the water. I therefore carried out an analysis of the text which, although not written, was very important for me mentally. Then I made a choice between the texts which would remain spoken and the texts that are associated with pre-existing pieces of music which seem compatible to me.

It's also analytical because the text has two characters, the Pirate and the Parrot. This Parrot is incredibly philosophical and analytical and the Pirate is incredibly animalistic. So for me—again as concerns analysis—it was important to try to understand to what extent the Parrot was able to analyze his own being and his own language and to what extent the Pirate was able to forget and not act according to, say, cultural instructions, how much he was a person free from this cage, while the Parrot seemed more and more “caged.” And also in this sense—it is difficult to explain line by line—the text has influenced the very rhapsodic form of the musical piece and also the fact that it is

made of small fragments; its form is made up of many small episodes that are piled up one after the other, apparently disconnected.

There is a kind of general plot because the Parrot and the Pirate initially are together and together with other people, then they suffer a shipwreck and arrive on the island. In the end, on this island they decide not to talk to each other: each of them self-isolates on the island, *si isolano sull'isola*.

*Can we take one of the numbers in The Pirate and talk about that? For example, when the Parrot starts singing the “Does this island”? This is the piece that my daughter kept singing after the performance; she was singing it for weeks.*

I don't remember the exact words right now. (*Laughs.*) Because there was someone else on this island, that was the gist of it...

*I rewrote it completely in the libretto. It's the one where he starts asking whether there are any other parrots on the island. And it starts very melodically.*

In this section I wanted to try an imitation of a sixties or seventies pop tradition, with a very warm, very persuasive voice, because I wanted to somehow demonstrate the absurdity of singing something that is intended for someone else when that *someone else* doesn't exist or isn't there. In the context of this piece, this musical fragment is like a prayer, the prayer of someone who is completely isolated and who hopes that a higher presence, a god, can make other fellow beings appear. I was able to do this song because the text, at that particular moment, is very narrative, very simple, very clear. For a moment, the Parrot seems to relax and say something that is actually natural to say and to hope for something that we all hope for. It is not an anthropomorphic parrot right then, because even animals surely hope to find their fellows, without whom they cannot survive. So it's a fundamental need: the need for another, one's other who does not exist, whom one nonetheless always hopes for.

In that sense, the pop melody, with the piano that becomes a laboratory for percussive accompaniment, where everyone helps the Parrot in his prayer, could only be tonal, so it is written in a simpler and more persuasive language.





*Soprano Esther Elisabeth Rispen as the Parrot in a 2019 staging of The Pirate Who Does Not Know the Value of Pi. Photo: Antonio Viola.*

*How is this different from working on Hamlet's Mill?*

I have to say that the experiences I've had with you were always absolutely special. *Hamlet's Mill* was unique. First, I read a long and complex book by Santillana that referred to so many things I didn't know. It was like an island in the sea for me. I can read a book about physics but I don't know the references and I don't know everything that would be needed to understand that book. But my experience with *Hamlet's Mill* was extraordinary because the authors are so inspired and so vivid in their observations that even those who cannot not follow all the references feel that there is a stream of thought, feel that there is the creation of a new idea. It was beautiful because this book served as a pretext for the libretto but then the book is missing from the libretto. But it was the book that created the connection between us. I had underlined some fragments in the book ...

*I actually read the whole thing! Maybe even twice!*

... and I asked you to write a libretto from this book that I hadn't understood and that contained some things that really shocked me! For example, the whole reconstruction of the story of Hamlet, the pre-Shakespearean Hamlet. It was beautiful because

through your libretto I could understand something more of the book which remained a mystery to me.

*So, in that instance, you used the libretto to do the analytical work?*

Yes, but I can't talk about analysis because in this case there was no control on my part, only suggestions, spots of color. I was very happy that you were able to develop some moments taken from this book into something that was part of your poetic experience and also of your personal experience. The first part of the libretto is full of chance throws, arrows shot into the void, several fragments that talk about different Hamlets and speak about them in very different languages. It is only clear that Hamlet is a total madman and that all Hamlets had been alone, desperate, that all Hamlets had thought about suicide, or were at any rate at the end of their wits, on the edge of mental suicide, as it were. But then there is the second part, which is incredibly poetic: the dialogue between Amal and Amlodi. At that moment, it is as if all the suggestions of *Hamlet's Mill* went disregarded and unheard and a new Hamlet was born.

*For me, to do something creative with the source, you have to forget the source. You have to know the source but then you have to forget the source. But musically you are also working in a very similar way with the libretto for Hamlet's Mill, because Hamlet's Mill is a very beautiful thing musically but you don't need to understand the words. With The Pirate, you need to understand the words. It's beautiful that the words are there, but—maybe because Hamlet is mad—the whole thing could have been done in a completely different language.*

In the first part, I experimented with the use of these fragments of language that are so different from each other without giving any importance to their meaning. That's why I also wanted to have a cello and a viola that are the alter-egos of Amal and Amlodi, because many things are clearer in the writing for instruments, which becomes very agitated, very aggressive, or very submissive, very melancholic. This was the one time when I was able to realize my desire to compose absurdist musical theatre. And it's no coincidence that it came about in collaboration with you. And then I've never been able to do something like that again, although I did do theater for instruments, as in *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, but in this case I had much more basic and prosaic motivations for the instrumentation.

But in the second part, you have the beautiful dialogue, which I wanted to leave as an understandable text, so I wrote just the musical accompaniment to it. So it is a piece made of a first part that is very theatrical, absurd, and where the text has no meaning and you can only understand the tension that is created between these two people who recognize each other as siblings, recognize each other as lovers, recognize each other as enemies, while the second part is like a scene of a traditional opera where the interpreters speak and the music only carries the function of scenery, of accompaniment.

*What about Ravel Unravel? Just as with Hamlet's Mill, Ravel Unravel was your idea. You came up with the whole dramatic scenario, you came up with specific textual passages that I had to react to, and then you were reacting to my reaction.*

Yeah, but I don't remember anything about *Ravel Unravel!* I don't know, I must have erased it... Even though now at the Hochschule in Frankfurt they will play a lot of concerts with my music, including *Ravel Unravel*.



*Pianist Emanuele Torquati and cellist Francesco Dillon from a 2014 performance of Ravel Unravel. Photo: Stefano Corso*

*I want to go to that!*

I don't remember anything about how the composition process went and how we collaborated. But I do want to say something else.

Actually, when I think of all the collaborations we have had, I always think that the most important one was the collaboration on *Prosopopeia*. You will surely disagree. I wrote it as my first choral opera, that is, an opera where the choir, not the soloists, are the protagonists. It was for the church of St. Martin in Kassel. It was a composition based on Heinrich Schutz's *Musikalische Exequien*, a unique piece in the history of music because the man who commissioned it—the prince of the state where Schutz worked—worked for ten years with the composer. He wanted a Requiem for his own death and he wanted to know everything about the moment and the ceremony. They chose a text from Luther, but the choice of this text is incredibly philosophical, it hardly seems a religious text. I wanted the choir to open up some “wounds,” some “gashes,” some moments when it could jump from Schutz's seventeenth century to our day. I asked you to comment on some words and you decided to choose poems from the same period that employed the same words in different ways.

*Metaphysical poems. I remember. There was Donne and others.*

And since the text chosen by Schutz and his king was in Luther's German, you also decided to look for poems in four languages—German, French, English and Italian—that were not religious but not openly anti-religious either. And they could provide an interpretation of what these two people might have secularly thought. Their key words were “blood” or “sin.” At the beginning, you prepared me a fantastic collection and I must say that reading these poems was one of the most beautiful experiences of my life because I didn't know this literature at all. Then I composed this piece in which the parts with Schutz's text are coloristically orchestrated in my own way, but they are faithful to the original. Every time a poem is introduced, a very different chorus piece is generated: very ferocious or very delicate music based on these poems. And this has been an extraordinary experience that I cannot forget. Then, unfortunately, since each piece is one of a kind, since my commissions for operatic works often apply to particular situations, I never had the chance to work in this way again: that is, to illuminate and amplify a pre-existing text with other texts. But I nonetheless think that project was really a pilot project of a new way to create librettos and I think that it would be an enormous pleasure to try again such a project in the future. But it's very



difficult and it can only be done by a person who is not only a poet but also an incredibly educated person, a super reader.

But, with *Ravel Unravel*, I remember that I wanted to introduce Paul Wittgenstein in his role as a one-armed pianist and *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand*, the work that Ravel wrote to him reluctantly, this absurd situation in which the composer is forced to work for a war-hero pianist.

*For me, that was the project that was really important. Because again I read what you gave*

...

I thought you invented that whole plot. I don't remember giving you any books.

*You gave me a biography of Ravel ...*

Echenoz? I thought you made up that plot.

*Not at all. You gave it to me. And then I went to the library and I remember there were books in different languages. So I read and read, but I had no idea what to do. It was really stressful. But then I went on vacation with my mom and my family—Una was four then, it was upstate New York—and one time I was taking a walk with them and I just started making up lines in my head. And in fact that was the beginning of my new method of writing, when I work not just with English, but with English that borders on other languages.*

I remember you kept trying to bring in Wittgenstein, the philosopher, and I told you it was too complicated, too much based on an analysis of language. Of all our collaborations it's the one I remember least and where I must have understood least...

*Well, for me it was really important.*

But you, on the other hand, remember very little of *Prosopopeia!*