

Lucia Ronchetti A new era at the Venice Biennale Musica

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A fresh wind is blowing across the lagoon: the Roman composer Lucia Ronchetti (1963), well known in France since her time at the Ircam Coursus, has succeeded Ivan Fedele as artistic director of the Venice Biennale Musica for a four-year term this year. She talks to us about the challenges of a programme where coherence is not compromised by the originality of the projects.

Michèle Tosi: Lucia Ronchetti, you are the first woman to be appointed director of the Venice Biennale Musica and for this inaugural edition you are focusing on choirs and vocal ensembles within the sound creation of the last fifty years. Do you feel that you have made any changes in the 2021 programme?

Lucia Ronchetti: Yes, absolutely! It is a radical change because it is the first time in the history of the Biennale that there is a theme. During the four years of my artistic direction, I have considered different themes, trying to give my own vision of contemporary music through them: this year with vocal ensembles and music linked to the dramaturgy of the text; next year with post-Kagel experimental musical theatre and the search for theatricality through music; the following year will focus on electronic music and more precisely on the idea of capturing sound through the microphone and re-broadcasting it through a specific device; the last year will give pride of place to what I call "absolute music", that is, the instrumental music of composers who work with no external reference to the musical object. And if I chose to start with vocal music, it is because I wanted to link the Venetian choral tradition to today's creation, the voice seeming to me the most obvious connection between the past and the present.

MT: We can already mention these appointments at 9 o'clock on Saturday and Sunday mornings, "music lessons", which will focus on the choral repertoire of past centuries.

LR: They are planned in partnership with the Italian radio's music channel (the equivalent of France Musique in Italy), which broadcasts a series of programmes every Saturday and Sunday in which composers come to talk about pieces from the repertoire or music of today. I thought it would be interesting to integrate the radio's resources with the Biennale by programming these "Lessons" on the origins of Venetian vocal music. They have been entrusted to the pianist Giovanni Bietti, who is an excellent passer-by and will talk to us about Willaert, Gabrieli, Vivaldi and Monteverdi, while building bridges with today's music. This is the first time we have had such an early appointment, but the venue (the Ca'Giustinian) where we welcome the public is one of the most beautiful palaces in Venice and a breakfast will be offered by the Biennale to the courageous ones who have come.

MT: *What about the concerts themselves this time?*

LR: Another novelty in this Biennial is my desire to put an end to concerts featuring a list of very short pieces by different composers whose thoughts the listener has neither the time nor the possibility of appreciating, if not deepening. This year, I wanted to give priority to large formats through commissions of works lasting an hour or covering half an evening; this is a way of making the composer responsible for the long term and at the same time of offering the public the possibility of immersing themselves in a universe that they will be better able to appropriate.

MT: *I also noticed the place given to experimental music and especially to performers/vocalists, Jennifer Walshe, Elina Duni, Zuli, etc.: an added value to this programme. An added value to this programme.*

LR: Indeed, this is another novelty that is fully in line with my theme: the voice as a means of communication. I realised that the sung text in contemporary music was most of the time difficult to understand and that the interpreter himself, faced with an often complex score, sometimes struggles to integrate the deep meaning of what he is singing; hence the difficulty of communicating with the composer and even more so with the audience. But today there are many vocalists, men and women, who have freed themselves from the score and express themselves through their own voice and body; take the example of Jennifer Walshe who composes music and also performs as a performer; her voice then becomes something completely different. So I started prospecting since October 2020 and I discovered about twenty fantastic personalities in the generic world of artists expressing themselves with their own voice, some in China, some in Africa... Unfortunately, they could not respond to my invitation because of covid. I had to stick to the four who could travel: very different profiles who use singular modes of communication: Zuli is an Egyptian DJ who used to live in Italy but who has now returned to his country where he is very active. Joy Frempong is more of a 'Spoken Words' performer, a kind of 'trouvère' who writes her own texts adapted to her voice. Elina Duni is a pop singer who is attached to the theme of exile. She makes collections of songs and arrangements whose dramaturgy is developed during the concert.

MT: *Three women for one man. That's more than respect for parity!*

LR: Let's be clear! I did not seek the presence of women composers at all costs in a purely feminist spirit. I chose from among the composers who fully responded to the projects that were launched for this edition, such as the San Marco project with Christina Kubisch, to which we can return. Then there were other proposals from outside organisations such as Accentus with the creation of Sivan Eldar and Kaija Saariaho, offering me a co-production that I naturally welcomed because it enriched my theme.

MT: *As soon as you arrived at the Biennale as artistic director, you introduced a kind of charter that was not the one of your predecessors...*

LR: Indeed, as a composer, I am committed to refusing commissions and concerts from the artists and ensembles that I programme during the four-year mandate that binds me to the Venice Biennale. This is to preserve the greatest transparency in my choices and to allow me to be more free and radical in my programming. I know that this makes leaders like Catherine Simonpietri very sad, as she would have liked to perform one of my pieces again in the coming months. However, she did not shun my invitation to Venice and it is she, with her vocal ensemble Sequenza 9.3, who will give the premiere of Marta Gentilucci's 'processional opera' on 23 September.

MT: Kaija Saariaho is being awarded this year's Golden Lion for her entire career and "the extraordinary technical and expressive level of her choral scores as well as for the originality of her vocal writing", as the press release states. Is she the first woman to win it?

LR: It is the second, after Sofia Goubaïdoulina who received it in 2013. I didn't want to nominate a woman at all costs, but if you look at the list of composers who have already won the Golden Lion and who can't win it a second time, Kaija Saariaho is the most recognised, most important and most renowned personality on the international scene today. Clearly, the Golden Lion was waiting for her. This award, which is now being given to a female composer for the achievement of an extraordinary career, is also a symbol of a (first) generation of women who have been able to train and carry out their work on an equal footing with the composer and who are a model for future generations. I am also thinking of Rebecca Saunders, who was the first woman to receive the Ernst von Siemens Prize, one of the most prestigious awards in the creative world. Today, first-class female composers are emerging on the international scene, and they are making their own mark on their peers, and sometimes beating them to it!

MT: An opera by the Finnish composer, *Only the Sound Remains*, is on the programme on Saturday 18 September, and many other works throughout the Biennial...

LR: It was important to have several pieces by Kaija Saariaho on the programme and for her to be able to stay throughout the festival. This was not the case in previous years, when the honoured composer only received one concert on the evening of the award ceremony. Kaija Saariaho will be here from 16 to 24 September and will be able to meet the public. I chose *Only the Sound Remains*, her penultimate opera, because in this work there is a vocal ensemble that takes on the role of the Greek chorus and I feel that we are very close to the experimental context of the 17th^e century Venetian. The opera will be given at the Teatro Malibran in the new staging by Kaija's son, Aleksis Barriere, also present in Venice. It is a co-production between Biennale Musica, Tokyo Bunka Kaikan and Palau de la Musica, an operation I would like to continue in the future to allow the house productions to tour and, conversely, for the Biennale to host other shows.

MT: A world premiere by the composer is also planned.

LR: On the same particularly intense evening of 24 September, there will be the world premiere of *Reconnaissance*, a piece for choir, percussion and double bass commissioned by the Accentus choir; there will also be a premiere by Sivan Eldar, *After Arethusa*, for choir and electronics and, for the same device, the Italian premiere of *Tag des Jahrs*, which Kaija wrote for her mother: a composition that gives us a glimpse of this reserved lady's life and her more intimate relationship with her family.

MT: The Silver Lion this year goes to the Neue Vocalsolisten Stuttgart, artists you know well and who have played your music before.

LR: Not only mine! They have commissioned and programmed so many Italian composers committed to vocal music, such as Filidei, Francesconi, Fedele, Sciarrino, Marta Gentilucci, Clara Ianotta, etc. All of them have had the opportunity to perform their music. All of them have had the opportunity to express themselves vocally thanks to this fabulous ensemble. And I would add that these are politically committed artists who, as soon as there is a serious problem in the world, such as that of the Belarusian artist recently, mobilise themselves. I think they are an example to follow and it is this

activism that I wanted to reward first. They too will be in Venice throughout the Biennale. Andreas Fischer is a tutor in the pedagogical sector (Biennale College music) and has participated during the year in the selection of composers/performers who have been able to work with the Neue Vocalsolisten beforehand. The latter will carry out the commission (*Amo* for five voices and electronics) given by the Biennale to George Lewis, a composer of African origin who is a professor at Columbia University, and they will perform Georges Aperghis' *Wölfli-Kantata* at the Teatro alle Tese. This is one of the composer's most impressive works, which is a must-see and which alternates between solo voices and the choir to bring us to a sensitive listening of an indecipherable reality.

MT: He is a composer who I believe will be at the heart of the experimental music theatre theme next year.

LR: In my opinion, he is one of the most representative personalities of musical theatre and I would indeed like to highlight his immense work in this field. I would have liked to give him a Golden Lion, but he has already received it, awarded in 2015 by my predecessor Ivan Fedele.

MT: Finally, I'd like you to tell us about Christina Kubisch's Travelling Voices, an example of a work that links creation very closely to one of the most emblematic Venetian locations. What is the nature of the project?

LR: This is the first time in the history of the Biennale that a concert has taken place in the Basilica of San Marco, with which we have been able to collaborate this year; it is also the first time that the Cappella Marciana, the San Marco choir, has been part of the festival. They are great connoisseurs of the music of Adrien Willaert and his pupils, but they have never performed contemporary music. I was looking for a composer who could smoothly build bridges between the two worlds, and I thought of the sound artist Christina Kubisch, who is already well known in Germany. She was able to establish a good relationship with the conductor of the Cappella Marciana, Marco Gemmani, right from the start. She recorded the voices of the choir in San Marco and then in other acoustic spaces to obtain a kind of counterpoint of recordings that gives this music of the XVI^e century a new resonance. This is a revolution for the place, which has never had this kind of experience, and I am delighted to be able to show the public the completion of this very original project.

Collected by Michèle Tosi