

MISE EN ABYME: AN ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHY OF LUCIA RONCHETTI

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by [Stefano Nardelli](#)

I

The rudiments of Lucia Ronchetti's musical education took hold in the residence of her childhood neighbors, the Bevilacqua—a small, dark apartment full of loose gears and the wreckage of broken clocks. The second child of a large family of modest means, the composer was born in Rome on February 3, 1963, and was three years old when the Bevilacqua, a rather elderly couple, took her in. Mario Bevilacqua, an amateur violinist and composer, had made watchmaking his profession out of necessity. His wife Leny Hanh, a Swiss national, was also a musician, and it was at their encouragement that little Lucia experimented with the sounds produced by different instruments while absorbing the faith the couple held in the redeeming power of music.

In 1988, Ronchetti dedicated a vivid compositional portrait—*La stanza degli orologi in frantumi* (*The room of broken clocks*) for instrumental ensemble—to the place that had provoked a strong sense of fascination in her. Those childhood impressions deeply marked her imagination and can be perceived in numerous compositions throughout her career, not least *Les Aventures de Pinocchio* (*The Adventures of Pinocchio*, 2015), which was commissioned by the Ensemble Intercontemporain and performed with great success in many French venues before arriving in Italy as part of the 2018 Romaeuropa Festival. The piece showcases Ronchetti's childlike enchantment with music, and draws on the theatrical and imaginative power of musical instruments and their peculiar sounds to create an “instrumental comedy” in which five musicians and a vocalist-performer personify the many characters enlivened by Carlo Collodi's pen.



From a staging of Lucia Ronchetti's *Les Aventures de Pinocchio* © Jacques Vitacolonna

The idea of becoming a composer was sparked after Ronchetti happened to hear Bruno Maderna's *Aura* on the radio, and started studying its score in detail—a score she celebrates as “a veritable lecturer on composition.” Her formal studies were initiated in Rome, at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, and then in Paris, where she attended lectures by Gérard Grisey, co-founder (with Tristan Murail) of spectral music, and in 1997 she enrolled at IRCAM. Two years later, she earned a PhD in Musicology at École Pratique des Hautes Études at the Sorbonne under the guidance of François Lesure, a foremost specialist of Debussy. “At the time, I didn't know exactly why I had decided to dedicate myself to analyzing Wagner's influence on nineteenth-century French orchestral music,” Ronchetti recalls, “or the origins of Debussy's reflections on music.” One answer presented itself later when Joséphine Markovits, artistic director of the Festival d'Automne in Paris, commissioned a personal interpretation of Debussy's music, and Ronchetti responded with *Le Palais du Silence* (*The Palace of Silence*), which premiered in 2013 with the Ensemble Intercontemporain under Matthias Pintscher.

Lucia Ronchetti - Le Palais du silence



Since completing her studies, Ronchetti has worked with many of the most significant composers of the last century, including Hans Werner Henze, Sylvano Bussotti, and above all Salvatore Sciarrino, who has left enduring traces on her music. Beyond stylistic similarities, Ronchetti and Sciarrino hold affinities with the traditions of Renaissance madrigal and Baroque music, as well as a refined literary taste that inspires many of their compositional pursuits. Above all, they share a strong interest in the human voice, an unquestionable legacy of the Italian music tradition. “In my opera projects, I explore different possibilities for vocal treatment,” Ronchetti says. “In particular, the continuity or discontinuity between spoken and sung voice as well as the vocal realization of textual timbres. I’m interested in creating a melody that isolates and transcribes the sounds inherent to the spoken word, its *image acoustique*, and that is singable, perceivable, and communicable in the monumental scenic space of traditional works.”

Classifying Lucia Ronchetti’s compositions is a very hard task. Her music production affirms a strong bond with the theatre, to such a degree that she manages to create theatrics even through a single sound. The works classified as “music theatre” represent only a small, albeit significant, part of her overall catalogue, but nearly all of her compositions exhibit an intimately theatrical nature, even those not intended for the stage. We could further argue that her musical enterprise is most fully realized when it is expressed through scenic gesture, a truth that is sometimes evident only on a purely conceptual level.

II

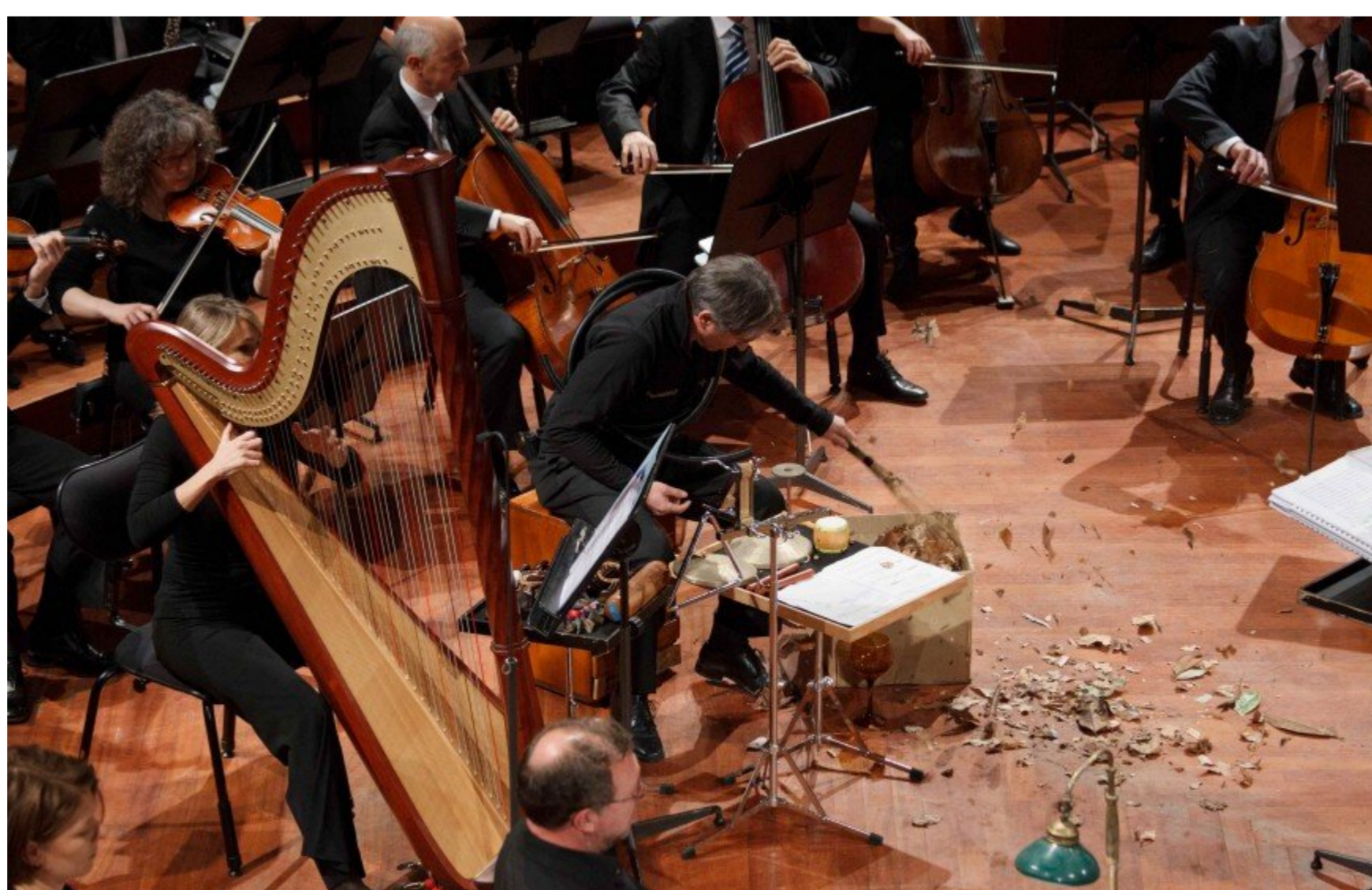
Ronchetti’s works of music theatre assume a wide variety of forms, often reflecting the kind of space or the set of performers for whom they are conceived. Disregarding the purely instrumental works (chamber or orchestral), her compositions are classified into “music theatre,” “choral works,” “dramaturgies,” “action concert pieces,” and “soundtracks and music on tape.” Despite attempts at classification, each of her projects is unique, each with a particular origin and defining set of features, and can be sorted according to traditional genres only with great effort. As the composer herself describes it, Ronchetti attempts to imbue her music with “a trans-border entity—abstract, untranslatable, yet interpretable across very different cultural contexts.” Her compositions define their ideal space which, in turn, helps define her characters and re-define musical forms, often through the active participation of the audience.



A performance of Lucia Ronchetti’s *Narrenschiffe* © Sara Innamorati

In some cases, it’s a particular geographic location or landmark that lends form to a piece through its unique performative possibilities. It is in this light that we should consider her “action concert pieces.” *Narrenschiffe* (*The Ships of Fools*), commissioned in 2009 by the Munich Opera Festival, for instance, is performed in the open streets of Munich and draws parallels between real life and the satirical allegory that Sebastian Brant wrote in 1494. Likewise, *Prosopopeia* (2009), a commission of the Heinrich Schütz Music Festival, was composed for the Martinskirche, Kassel, the church where Count Henry II, Count of Reuss-Gera’s funerals were celebrated in 1636, the occasion for which Heinrich Schütz composed his *Musikalische Exequien*. Similarly, *3e32 Naufragio di terra* (*3:32 Shipwreck on dry land*) was imagined in 2013 almost as a requiem to the Basilica of Santa Maria di Collemaggio in L’Aquila, Italy, and written for choirs made up of

witnesses to the devastating earthquake of 2009. An interesting aspect of this piece is its attempt to eliminate the boundary between performer and audience, or at least to make it nearly imperceptible—an effect Ronchetti has achieved in other compositions. *Albertine* for solo female voice and whispering audience (2007) takes inspiration from the most elusive *être de fuite* of Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*; here, the female voice represents both the eponymous character (described using Proust’s text) and the lake where Albertine meets her secret lover, “la petite blanchisseuse” (the young laundress), while male voices in the audience whisper excerpts from the novels to create a subliminal space in which Proust’s voice redounds in fragments. The separation between the realm of the performer and that of the audience is used in a dramaturgical fashion to recreate the painful impossibility of reaching Albertine. In other works, it is the boundary between orchestra and performer that is tested, notably in *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (*Six characters in search of an author*, 2011). Luigi Pirandello’s acclaimed play of the same name broke down the classic separation between characters’ immutability and the dynamic process of their creation. This is reinterpreted by Ronchetti into a complex plot involving actors, the audience, and the orchestra, each of whom creates a surface of sound that overlap, superposing one another to build the performative dimension as part of a shared creative act.



From a performance of *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* © Stefano Corso

Defining a physical space through sound is a method often used by Ronchetti, especially in her “**dramaturgies**,” a kind of music theatre-in-concert generally written for small-scale ensembles and often used to experiment with new forms bridging “Musiktheater” and instrumental music, though with precise theatrical direction. *Hombre de mucha gravedad* for vocal and string quartet (2002) is presented as a musical study of the Spanish Baroque master Diego Velázquez’s celebrated painting *Las meninas*. Each character in the painting is assigned a musical role (either a voice or an instrument) and the placement of the performers on stage mirrors the enclosure famously imposed by the entourage around the young Infanta Margaret Theresa. *Hamlet’s Mill* for soprano, bass, viola, and cello (2007), meanwhile, evokes the Norse myth of the maelstrom through a marine landscape, represented by the instruments, that is met by the bass vocals of the narrator (Hamlet, whose text is provided by Eugene Ostashevsky), the tension between the two forces progressing from a state of meditative calm to that of dramatic agitation by the epilogue. Even more parsimonious means are employed in *Helicopters and Butterflies* (2012), in which a percussionist plays various instruments arranged on several tiers on the stage, alluding to the hotel rooms described by Fyodor Dostoevsky in *The Gambler*, with the roulette table inhabiting the top floor.

Christian Dierstein performing *Helicopters and Butterflies* © Kai Bienert

III

Lucia Ronchetti’s attraction to the Baroque world, then, will not surprise those familiar with her dismissal of conventional dramaturgical methods in favor of a search for new forms. “What I find interesting is the freedom and experimental attitude of that era, in addition to the special treatment of the human voice,” she has stated, adding, “The very concept of opera was then in its infancy—projects that were entrusted to composers and librettists. New theatres were being built, many bedecked with spectacular scenographic machinery, but the theatrical effect was mainly rendered through the work of composition and literature.” The lessons of Baroque dramaturgy are found in Ronchetti’s tendency to reject the clichés that characterize much of contemporary Musiktheater; in particular, Ronchetti refuses declamation (*declamatio*) in her treatments of the human voice, preferring to recover the Baroque *recitar cantando* and reinvent it in a contemporary fashion. Likewise, her frequent use of mirrors affirms an almost compulsive instinct to reflect on the past in musical, social, and linguistic dimensions. In this sense, *Mise en abyme* (2014) is not only the title of one of Ronchetti’s works for the theatre but also an encapsulation of the composer’s commitment to summoning and building upon musical experiences of the past.

Michele Marco Rossi performing *Forward and downward, turning neither to the left nor to the right* for solo cello. Courtesy Stefano Nardelli

Ronchetti often borrows material from existing compositions and reassigns them a fresh and precise function within new dramatic contexts. This practice is not far from Marcel Duchamp’s idea of “readymades,” though applied to music composition. For instance, in *Pinocchio, una storia parallela* (2005), Collodi’s restless puppet is associated with fragments from Bartók’s *String Quartet no. 4* in a free reworking for male voices. *Forward and downward, turning neither to the left nor to the right* (2017), a composition for solo cello that is inspired by the Greek myth of the Labyrinth of Knossos, is well rooted in *Arianna*, the lost opera by Monteverdi. And in *Neumond* (2011), a chamber opera for a young audience, Kristo Šagor’s libretto makes reference to *The Magic Flute*, extracting quotations and re-purposing Mozart’s music as a kind of dialectical counterpoint to the texts, thereby recasting the main character as a sort of Pamina for our times.

In other works, the Baroque doctrine of the affections and its theatrical execution are reflected through a funhouse mirror of contemporary sensibility. *Lezioni di tenebra* (*Tenebrae Readings*, 2010) is the clearest example of an “analytical adaptation” (Ronchetti’s term) of a work of the past, in this case of Francesco Cavalli’s *Giasone*. The seventeenth-century libretto by Giacinto Andrea Cicognini, a true genius of Baroque theatre, is left largely intact, while the original score is quoted now and again, and the basso continuo is composed from scratch, with this new musical material intended to amplify the dramatic tension and complexity of the plot. In a similar way, the

three panels of the project dedicated to Pietro Metastasio, *Contrascena* (*Reverse scene*), *Sub-plot*, and *Mise en abyme* (staged at the Semperoper in Dresden between 2012 and 2014), intertwine aesthetic reflections of the theatrical Metastasio with a contemporary exercise in “opera buffa” and “opera seria,” a century after the sublime *mise en abyme* of *Ariadne auf Naxos* by Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. *Rivale* (*Rival*, 2017) is also one of her most recent forays into the Baroque realm—or rather its battlefields and hostile forests. As in Schoenberg’s *Erwartung*, a symbolic nocturnal environment absorbs the anguish of awaiting Clorinda before the battle with her beloved rival Tancredi, according to the “script” of the *tragédie en musique Tancrède* (1702) by André Campra and librettist Antoine Danchet. The duel between Clorinda and Tancredi, an allusion to the clash between different cultures, Christian and Muslim, has lasted for centuries and will likely last for centuries to come, as tragic and senseless as ever.

A passion for the past is never a refutation of the present, but rather the foundation for Ronchetti’s search for meaning in our contemporary world. In *Esame di Mezzanotte* (*Midnight Examination*, 2014), a commission of the Nationaltheater of Mannheim and Ronchetti’s largest music theatre work to date, the protagonist Giro Lamenti is frantically searching for the book *Secolo Venti* (*Twentieth Century*) among the ramshackle shelves of a disintegrating library. The Library of Public Reading, the set for the story, is a sinister place, a Borgesian labyrinth where “books can be found only when you don’t look for them” and what one seeks can never be found. In this world, intellectuals live in the darkest depths like filthy tramps trying to recover the pages of decomposing books: a powerful allegory for a world slowly losing its memory and spurning culture, while bureaucracies consolidate their control. The Library of Public Reading is a universe of knowledge that has lost its meaning, and is doomed to ruin.



From a performance of *Rivale* © Thomas Jauk

In *Inedia prodigiosa* (*Prodigious Hunger*, 2016), Lucia Ronchetti’s fourth choral work, written for 150 voices, the exploration of the past is once again an opportunity for reflection on the present. This piece of “social and musical theatre” (Ronchetti’s term) examines anorexia as an historical, religious, and anthropological phenomenon, one with unmistakable consequence for our time. The act of self-starvation is not the focal point of *Inedia prodigiosa*; rather, women’s free and independent thought is given expression through the affliction, and through the performance of the bodies on stage. To quote the composer, “women’s conviction is transformed into a live, performative project that demands self-determination and a right to control.” Ronchetti draws inspiration from the deeply religious sensibilities of atheist composers like Luigi Nono and funnels it into the creation of a sort of Medieval fresco on stage, with performers embodying mystics Catherine of Siena, St Margaret of Hungary, Joan of Arc, Lidwina, Blessed Beatrice of Nazareth, among many other historical figures such as Engeltje van der Vlies, Mollie Fancher (“the Brooklyn Enigma”), Clare de Serval (“the Apostle of Hunger”), and Christina Georgina Rossetti. Surrounding these performers, disembodied male voices—projecting as doctors, priests, and judges—subject them to flurries of disapproval, speculation, and explanations of their condition.

Even when expressed through voices, musical forms, and landmarks of the past, Lucia Ronchetti’s music always speaks the language of our time. Her fix upon the mirror of the past is part of an unremitting search for the most authentic expression of our cultural identity.

Translated from the Italian by the author

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Banner: Lucia Ronchetti, center, with Catherine Simonpietri in Paris, 2019 © Marco Innamorati

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