

Theater from the Spirit of Music
Four “Drammaturgie” by Lucia Ronchetti
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There are composers who are easily comprehensible and can be artistically pigeonholed without much difficulty. Such composers are geographically, as well as stylistically, easy to pinpoint; their themes are to a great extent recognizable.

Lucia Ronchetti, born in 1963 in Rome, however, is not one of these composers. She eludes quick characterization and sweeping categorization - she is not easy to pin down, especially, not in words. Her music rejects concrete, stabile stylizations, and she understands that one does well to hide one's idiosyncrasies behind charm, temperament and incredible kinetic energy.

Understandable, because Lucia Ronchetti is always moving, constantly searching for new sources of inspiration and stimulation. She enjoys a myriad of artistic friendships and is open to congenial partners, who expand her horizons and open new paths for her. She searches for border crossings, in the geographical sense, as well as exchange with other artistic and scientific disciplines.

Ronchetti is a composer with a diverse and extensive education. A simple glance at her work catalogue hints to a tour d'horizon through the intellectual history of the West. She begins in antiquity with the poets Lucretius and Pindar, from whom she borrowed the concept “Anakyklosis” for the title of an ensemble piece, which signifies the movement of the planets as well as the cyclical change of forms of government. Two titles for orchestral pieces (*Die Sorge geht über den Fluss* and *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer*) come from the German philosopher Hans Blumenberg. She has engaged with the painter Paul Klee in a musical fashion and has set texts from such diverse poets as Ludovico Ariosto, Nicolai Gogol and Adolf Wölfli.

Most importantly, however, Lucia Ronchetti works closely with the 20th century Italian avant-garde literature. The poet Ermanno Cavazzoni was for a period of time something of a writer in-residence for her. Not only does the blueprint for *Anatra al sal*, one of Ronchetti's most performed works, originate from him but also the libretti for two operas. The text for the vocal work *Pinocchio, una storia parallela*, comes from Giorgio Manganelli, one of Italy's leading avant-gardists. Recently, she has collaborated most notably with the Russian-American poet Eugene Ostashevsky, whose psychologically dense and poetic language shaped, among others, *Hamlet's Mill*.

However, Lucia Ronchetti also draws inspiration from the natural sciences; she never accepted the old division between “two cultures.” In an ensemble piece, she deals with the questions of balance from Ieoh Ming Pei, the architect of the glass pyramid in the courtyard of the Louvre in Paris. She titled a series of works *Xylocopa violacea*, which is the scientific name for carpenter bee. And in an approach to Schubert with the innocuous title *Opus 100*, she occupies herself with cryptomnesia, the unconscious appropriation of foreign thoughts.

Lucia Ronchetti's compositional consciousness reacts to external stimuli with untiring curiosity. Be it literature, philosophy or physics, Ronchetti finds inspiration for her music in all of these disciplines. Her artistic fantasies are ignited by confrontations with extra-musical phenomena, to which she compositionally reacts and which she translates into musical procedures. This, however, all occurs un-cryptomnetically, acutely and consciously. That being said, he or she who thinks it is difficult to listen to Lucia Ronchetti's music in the face of such intellectual charge, is grossly mistaken. While her music may not affectionately present itself, it is accessible for the listener. Laughter also plays an important role in this. Humor and at times even palpable comedy lends Ronchetti's music an extraordinary vitality and affect. Ronchetti's music both cultivates polyphonic communication and is comprehensible at the highest compositional level, so that, in the end, she may free herself from any commitment to unambiguity – for Lucia Ronchetti loves complex systems full of puzzles and ambivalences.

Real and Imaginary Theater

In the course of the last few years, theater has taken an increasingly central position in Lucia Ronchetti's composing. Here, unlike anywhere else, the opportunity to allow one's own voice to sound in various roles and to speak through these figures presents itself. As the composing subject, she retains mastery over the development but at the same time remains in the background. Additionally, contemporary musical theater arises chiefly from the combined efforts of various art forms, from collaboration with directors, set designers and librettists. And this suits Ronchetti's work process quite well.

Whether in *Last Desire*, a variation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, or in *Der Sonne entgegen*, whether in her recompositions of baroque operas or the monodrama *Albertine*, Lucia Ronchetti searches for the experimental on the opera stage. She is not particularly interested in traditional narrative theater with a linear progression, rather, she is spurred on by artificiality, challenge and also puzzling complexity, behind which the actual “story” disappears.

However, Lucia Ronchetti's theater is not dependent upon the real stage. Many of her vocal (and some instrumental) works do entirely without external "scenery" and staging and play entirely on the stage of the imagination.

These works were written primarily for the Neue Vokalsolisten Stuttgart, who have for their part very seriously pursued the development of an a cappella musical theater beginning a few years ago, a genre that they as "researchers and discoverers" actually invented. Over the course of many years, a truly extraordinary artistic collaboration has developed between the composer and the ensemble, and the four works on this CD form a representative core of a wide-ranging mutual work catalogue.

None of these works is a "dramatic work" in the typical sense of the term. And yet, they are all approaches to the theater. They play with scenic elements and give the singers dramatic contours and, in the literal sense, a space in which to playfully move about. The historical model of the *madrigale rappresentativo*, which experienced its heyday in the 16th and 17th centuries, shines through the work. However, Lucia Ronchetti goes further. An elemental "musical theater" arises: theater from the spirit of music, and not simply theatre with musical accompaniment. The music forms the basis, from which the theater of these four "dramaturgie" unfolds.

„Drammaturgia“

Next to "studio", "drammaturgia" is the most frequently appearing subtitle in Lucia Ronchetti's oeuvre. Both terms indicate precisely the almost scientific self-understanding of the composer, who understands her compositions as "attempts," as results of an analytical manner of working, which penetrates through the surface of the sounds and exposes the structures buried underneath.

There is no "drama", "no "play" to experience, coupled with a compassionate and fearful Aristotelian empathy, but rather a greatly distanced, intellectual "dramaturgy", a process of handling material, an etude at the theater.

All four dramaturgical pieces on this CD owe it to this criticalanalytical stance, which instead of merely delivering up its "theme", illuminates it in a refined manner. As different as they may be in their concrete gestalt, they share a complex play with fragments, quotations and meta-levels, with interleaving and a highly virtuosic play with manneristic details, a game of deception with diverse perspectives - a house of mirrors.

Mirroring/Reflections:

Hombre de mucha gravedad (2002)

The idea of the mirror as formal means (and deceiving instance of the substantiation of reality) is driven to the extremes in the double quartet from 2002, *Hombre de mucha gravedad*. It is a clever undertaking of a musical adaptation of *Las Meninas*, probably the Spanish painter Diego Velasquez' most famous and also mysterious work, the meaning of which countless generations of art historians have conjectured.

"The attempt to allow the characters of *Las Meninas* to speak is the same as if one wished to place a mirror in front of speech," says Andrea Fortina, Ronchetti's librettist. "The deceptive image of the people is namely the substance of countless reflections, which distinctly proceed from the portrayed persons, from the artful rendition of their relations to one another and their characters to the pure illusionism of the royal couple's presence in the mirror located in back."

Ronchetti renders Velasquez' refined play with mirrors, visual axes and different points of view into a musical parameter, beginning with the mirror-forming instrumentation of a vocal and string quartet. Indeed, the eight interpreters on the concert stage should also mirror the spacial division of the people in the painting, but above all they are, as Ronchetti explains, held to presenting the image, "in that they express several of the aesthetic ideas by means of an articulated network of literary quotations, which are connected to Velasquez' style and his sophisticated artistic search."

Like the baroque painter on his canvas, Ronchetti develops in her music a theater of musical gestures out of the painterly template with a finely developed sense for rhetoric and the world as *theatrum mundi*.

Thus, each person in the painting is represented for his or her part through one of more interpreters. There is, however, superimposition and multi-attribution. Velasquez, the painter, is "played" by the first violin, the infanta by the countertenor, and the court dwarf by the baritone and viola. Similarly, the royal couple requires the entire string quartet, the mirror the entire vocal quartet. The bass plays a special role as the incarnated allegory of time, the furtive master of ceremonies of the events, initiating a highly learned discourse on the theory of painting and alchemy, but most importantly on the past, which emerges as the actual theme of the piece.

Infinite Parallels:

Pinocchio, una storia parallela (2005)

Three years later, Lucia Ronchetti tackled a pronouncedly popular material with *Pinocchio, una storia parallela*. However, it is not Carlo Collodi's story, which forms the basis, but instead a version by the poet Giorgio Manganelli.

Manganelli, one of the most important contemporary Italian writers, is known as a puzzling, difficult author. He steadfastly rejected Neorealism, which dominated Italian literature in the 1950s and '60s. The literary scholar Andreas Gelz, calls Manganelli's work "autoreferential stagings of metaphor and allegory".

Thus, it's no wonder that Manganelli created a thoroughly complex and fictive construct out of Carlo Collodi's story. He conceptualized his book, which was published in 1977, as a "parallel-book", a literary genre that he invented. Such a "libro parallelo" ramifies, to the point at which it finally, according to Manganelli, "completely unintentionally becomes the quintessence of all possible parallel-books, which in the end are again nothing other than all possible books period." Manganelli's *Pinocchio* is, therefore, not just a "parallel-book" to Collodi's famous model. It is, finally, a parallel-book to each and every book, and thus, the only book period: all other books are contained therein.

Like Manganelli's "parallel-book", Ronchetti's "parallel-story" is also manifoldly interlaced. The nine scenes distinguish themselves through rapid changes and abrupt cuts. Although the concrete assignment of roles is only partial, the characters are markedly different from one another. The countertenor Daniel Gloger as *Pinocchio* stands for eccentricity and fantasticality, the tenor Martin Nagy in various roles from *Geppetto* to *Delfino* represents lightness and friendliness, the baritone Guillermo Anzorena as *Maniafuoco* or *Lucignolo* embodies darkness and peril, while the bass Andreas Fischer as voice "ex macchina" (Lucia Ronchetti) also assumes the voice of the author, the authoritative narrator.

Out of the poetic design and the possibilities of the voice arises a complex musical theater for four male voices, in which the original *Pinocchio* story is still recognizable but transformed into a dark, mysterious sphere and an autonomous musical work of art.

A Complex Psychogram: *Hamlet's Mill*

Two years later, in 2007, the dramaturgia *Hamlet's Mill* appeared, the newest of the four works on this CD, which Lucia Ronchetti described as a "soundopera about memory."

The title goes back to a book by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Deckend from 1969, which defined myths as translations of scientific and, above all, astronomical discoveries. The old Nordic saga of *Hamlet*, as told by Saxo Grammaticus in the 12th century, plays an important role thereby. In the good old days, *Hamlet's mill* produced wealth and peace, before the decline, when it began to produce only salt. Today, it has sunk to the bottom of the sea and mills sand and stone, producing a great eddy, the "maelstrom."

Lucia Ronchetti's work draws a long connection from *Amlodhi* of the Nordic saga, through to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, into the present day. *Hamlet's* memorable traits, his sharp intelligence but also his internal strife between heroic duty, melancholy and procrastination-inducing doubt remain remarkably constant throughout. The bass embodies this *Hamlet*, however, the finely balanced parallelogram of all four interpreters makes clear the complexities of this character: as played by the soprano, he becomes "sister, friend and lover" (Lucia Ronchetti) but also *Hamlet's* vocal shadow, which listens to but cannot follow him. However, the viola and cello also accompany and comment on *Hamlet's* grumbling and in addition, stand for the fictitious world of *Hamlet's mill* on the sea floor in a highly unique manner. They assume the musical material of both of the vocalists and convey it as a strangely psychedelic, perspectively contorted underwater tonality, or like *Hamlet's mill*, turn their material into a continuum of sand and dust.

This continuum is embedded in a great escalation, which leads out of a calm beginning into the highest level of excitement. A "crescendo, which knows neither resistance nor boundaries", as Lucia Ronchetti names her piece, a "development into a disaster and unbearableness."

Travesty of a Cooking Show: *Anatra al sal* (1999)

At the end of the four dramaturgical pieces stands a „classic.“ With *Anatra al sal* in 1999, the collaboration between Lucia Ronchetti and the Neue Vocalsolisten began.

"Comedia harmonica" is the caption for this "dramaturgia." Just as with *Pinocchio*, the model for this piece is the baroque madrigal comedy. The plot in five scenes is the travesty of a "cooking opera," an indiscreet look into the kitchen of five master chefs. The chefs then discuss verbosely what they should cook. Finally, they agree on duck in salt. The details of the preparation are depicted at length, however, the discussion over a suitable sauce (sauce tartare or tomato sauce or then again maybe blueberry sauce?) then escalates into a quarrel filled with reciprocal insults. As the duck comes out of the oven, smelling delicious, the squabble comes to an end.

and all forgive one another.

In contrast to the later works on this CD, the six roles in *Anatra al sal* are perspicuously defined and predetermined as typicalities or stock characters. Each of the five chefs has his own (musical) style, which is also why each one only sings on a single vowel sound. One figure is exempted from this constraint: the assistant to the master chef, who is as much revered as feared, played by the bass. Because he only expresses himself in Latin, she must act as a translator.

The plot, the conflicts and the reconciliations, the comedy of the events: all of this is developed out of the music itself - it requires no scenes or scenery. As with *Pinocchio*, the dark sister work, the compositional process also grows in this light comedy directly out of the dramatical idea, out of the dramaturgical configuration. How exactly Lucia Ronchetti managed her compositional cuisine, lets one surmise from her commentary: she describes how the voices of the six soloists were subjugated to various spectral analyses with the goal of substantiating "the subharmonic implication of the use of various vowel sounds in connection with various consonants; the voices will then produce several of the fundamental overtones".

Thus, there is no longer anything to anticipate seeing on stage. However, the exactness of the musical construction is indispensable for its "functioning". *Anatra al sal* is great fun, as rousing as it is highly artistic, with the result that all cooking shows on television appear to be stale TV dinners. It served as a model (or more precisely, a springboard) for the development of a musical theater, which became increasingly complicated and enigmatic in the following years, but continued to retain its ability to directly communicate. To come to the beginning at long last: this has its own logic in Lucia Ronchetti's often paradoxical disposition.

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