

PIANO WORKS OF LUCA LOMBARDI

Luca Lombardi is mainly known for his operas (*Faust: Un travestimento*, *Dmitri, oder Der Künstler und die Macht*, *Prospero*, and *Il re nudo*), oratorios and cantatas (e.g., *Lucrezio: Un oratorio materialistico*, *Vanitas?*, and *Italia mia*), as well as orchestral works (including three symphonies, the third being a symphony-cantata). No doubt, he is a composer inspired by literature, by texts, by the “word” that helps him in his efforts to communicate with clarity, honesty, humanity. But time and time again, during a creative career that has lasted for more than five decades, he has written for the piano, the instrument he studied when he was young and that, in a way, is the foundation of his musical endeavors. Fifteen of the nearly 150 works listed in the *Catalogo delle opere di Luca Lombardi* edited by Gabriele Becheri (Rome: Rai Trade, 2005) are for piano. True, some of them are youthful compositions, but, among the piano works, especially those written in the 1970s, can be found some of the composer’s most poignant musical statements. (In addition to his solo piano works, there should be mentioned Lombardi’s *Klavierduo* of 1978-79—a work full of virtuosity, wit, and charm—gratifying for performers and audiences alike.) The piano music performed by three eminent Italian pianists on this disk provides an attractive sampling of the composer’s keyboard music: ranging from relatively early (*Divertimento*) to his formative years (*Albumblätter*, *Wiederkehr*, and *Variazioni*) to *Saluti*, the most recent manifestations of Lombardi’s love for his instrument.

Divertimento per pianoforte (Rai Trade)

- 1 Mosso
- 2 Marcia funebre
- 3 Vivace

Lombardi began composing at an early age; in fact, his first “work”, a *Valzer*, was penned on his tenth birthday. Waltzes in various manifestations and transformations have shown up since then in Lombardi’s oeuvre (e.g., in the piano trio *Addii*, in the cantata *Vanitas?*, in one of the *Saluti* performed on this disk) as brief moments expressing an unbounded *joie de vivre*. The *Divertimento* may be considered representative of Lombardi’s youthful works written prior to his formal studies of composition and before his encounter with the European avant-garde north of the Alps. Composed in 1963, the work shows Lombardi skillfully adopting conventional forms and imbuing them with life along neoclassical practices. The first movement (Mosso) is a toccata framing a contrasting, perhaps dance-like middle section; motoric rhythms and ostinato patterns reveal the influence of Stravinsky and Bartók. The second movement, *Marcia funebre*, is a five-part arch form (ABCBA), whereby the outer sections constitute a funeral march with an expressive melody, perhaps a poignant lament proceeding by chromatic steps, superimposed on the stern processional gait of chordal blocks, while the toccata-like materials, reminiscent of the first movement, dominate the internal sections. The last movement (Vivace) rounds off the *Divertimento* with another ternary design. The middle section (Tranquillo, grazioso) gives predominance to two brief melodic

formulas, perhaps of folksong origin, repeated over and over again (as often happens in the works of Stravinsky's Russian period). In the outer sections (the third section is little more than a foreshortened coda), toccata-like materials return with driving rhythms, ostinato passages, and meter changes.

Albumblätter (Edition Moeck, No. 5156)

The seven-minute *Albumblätter* composed at the turn of the year 1967-68 is worlds away from the *Divertimento*. The piece (and Lombardi has given it a special status by calling it "the oldest of my newer compositions") reveals, in no uncertain terms that, by then, the composer had encountered the sonic world of the European avant-garde (perhaps in the form of some of Stockhausen's *Klavierstücke*); it was an encounter that would prove fateful for his future development, a reference point of attraction and "distraction" that would both nourish and challenge him in the years ahead. *Albumblätter* is not a serial piece, but in quite a number of sections it makes use of the entire gamut of the chromatic scale in rapid succession (blotting out any "tonal" orientation); such segments are juxtaposed with sections of relative stasis in the form of repeated clusters or long-held notes. Amazing is the surefootedness with which the composer explores different pianistic sonorities and textures, using a great variety of modes for playing the piano, including plucking of strings, knocking on wood, clustering pitches in extreme registers, and letting sounds reverberate through their overtones. Even Cage's piano preparations make an appearance in the form of a marble rolled over and dropped onto the strings of the piano exactly when, as if from a distance, a few measures from a Bach prelude in E flat minor (WTC I, viii) emerge from a thick chordal cluster—only to be submerged again in another cluster animated by trills (a *Verfremdung* of sorts). To some extent, the gesture and quotation anticipate the Lombardi of later years, who often uses most heterogeneous stylistic layers in order to realize his compositional vision. But here the dropped marble adds a more forthright "alienating" effect (to borrow a term from Brecht's aesthetic writings on theatre) than Lombardi would generally adopt later.

Wiederkehr (Edition Moeck, No. 5157)

During the early 1970s Lombardi was intensely occupied, as a socialist activist, with the problem of contributing with a politically-engaged music toward critiquing and improving society. At times his efforts to be politically relevant even led him to forego the possibility of composing music. (His radio play "Von Gastgebern und Gästen"—Of Guests and Hosts, dealing with the problem of migrant workers in West Germany, marks such an extreme position.) An enclave within such politically motivated activities is *Wiederkehr*, composed in 1971 (almost with a guilty conscience, as the composer admits, "because I just wanted to compose"); the piece owes its *raison d'être* entirely to the relations established among a limited number of purely musical materials. The work is prefaced with a quotation from Theodor W. Adorno's *Ästhetische Theorie*: "Unresolved is the issue of the simultaneous in [contemporary] music as a whole, a dimension which has been degraded to being merely a result, something irrelevant and virtually

accidental.” Indeed, Lombardi tackled in *Wiederkehr* a problem that Adorno identified as needing attention by contemporary composers—the issue of harmony and harmonic control. Since a technical discussion and analysis would not be appropriate in these introductory notes, the following may suffice: Fifteen chords of different degrees of density and complexity are stated in the introductory section of the piece; they constitute the basic material that keeps returning (*Wiederkehr* means “return”) within changing harmonic fields. The second section is characterized by glissandi, the third by trills, the fourth by sustained chords, and the last by cascades of repeated chords establishing a finale (perhaps not that far removed in expression from the fighting nature and battle cries of Lombardi’s “political” compositions). The characteristics of each major section are anticipated or reverberate (“return”) as short segments in the respective other sections. The concern for harmony and harmonic control (even triads “return” occasionally) that is evident in the piece may also have something to do with the composer’s growing recognition in those years that in order to communicate he needed to strive for comprehensibility and formal clarity in his music. These characteristics can indeed be found in Lombardi’s oeuvre in general. *Wiederkehr* is dedicated to Giancarlo Cardini who also premiered the piece in Frankfurt/Main, Germany, in 1971.

Variazioni su “Avanti popolo alla riscossa” (Edition Moeck No. 5179)

Comprehensibility and formal clarity are achieved in a different way in *Variazioni su “Avanti popolo alla riscossa”*. The work, composed in 1977 and dedicated to Frederic Rzewski, who premiered the piece in the same year in Reggio Emilia, Italy, is based on an Italian workers’ song “Bandiera rossa” (Red Flag)—a song that was “in the air,” as it were, in the 1970s. (Armando Gentilucci uses it in the epilogue of his wind quintet *Cile*, 1973, and Rzewski himself quotes it in his monumental variations on “El pueblo unido” of 1975.) Lombardi’s tack on the song is quite different. The song is never stated in its original form as a theme or in any of the nine variations. (The composer hopes that, ideally, the listener knows it—for that reason, its first phrase is cited here.

[Musical Example]

The first few variations are based on the song’s first four tones arranged as simultaneities (i.e., chords) and then subjected to transformations (inversions, transpositions, register changes, arpeggiations). In the fourth variation the song is reduced to just one pitch, albeit a strategically important one: the tone b. After this extreme condensation, the song gradually gains profile in the rest of the composition, beginning with the central and extended fifth variation that features outbursts in dotted rhythms covering the entire range of the keyboard. The rhythmic structure of the song plays an important role in the seventh variation (the characteristic dotted rhythms are featured in diminution and augmentation). Fragments of the song’s melody (in minor) make their appearance in the eighth (very short) variation, and rhythmic features, percussively articulated on the tone g, the tonic of the song, again inform the last variation—here, at the end of the set, is the song perhaps most clearly recognizable.

While *Variazioni* can be explained by resorting to purely musical features of the composition, the choice of “Bandiera rossa” as the foundation of the piece as well as the well-calculated succession of variations (arranged with the goal of achieving greater clarity and determination at the end—an extramusical program, so to speak) imbue the work with a political message.

Saluti (Rai Trade, RTC 837)

- 1 Saluto a Piero Farulli
- 2 Commiato dall’anno vecchio – saluto dell anno nuovo
- 3 Saluto a Wolfgang Rihm (in occasione del suo 50° compleanno)
- 4 Saluto a Luciano Berio (in occasione del suo 77° compleanno)
- 5 Saluto a Christian e Ulla (in occasione del loro matrimonio)
- 6 Saluto ad Alvin (in occasione del suo matrimonio con Susan)
- 7 Saluto a Miriam (in occasione del suo matrimonio con me stesso medesimo)
- 8 Saluto a Jürgen Thym (in occasione del suo 60° compleanno)

Being born near the end of the year (on December 24), Lombardi always has been acutely aware of the passage of time and quite frequently composed music celebrating or commemorating rites of passage (*La notte di San Silvestro, Jahreswechsel, Addii, Praeludium, Aubade* come to mind, or the above-mentioned *Valzer* and *Divertimento*, for that matter). The eight *Saluti* originated between 2001 and 2003 as brief musical greetings, celebrating birthdays of friends (Nos. 1, 3, 4 and 8), weddings of friends (Friedrich Christian Delius and Ulla Bongaerts, Alvin Curran and Susan Levenstein) as well as the composer’s own to Miriam Meghnagi. The second *Saluto* composed on New Year’s Eve 2001 in Yokohama, Japan, says farewell to the old year and salutes the beginning of the New Year. The pieces range in expression from introspective character studies to virtuoso show pieces (in addition to being a birthday salute for Rihm, No.3 is also a hands-challenging etude in octaves for the Italian pianist Franco Zennaro).

The pieces have in common that their respective pitch materials (in other words, their “tonalities”) are derived, using the German terminology, from the “musical” letters of the names of the dedicatees. The pitches e-a-f-e anchor the piece for Piero Farulli, renowned violist of the Quartetto Italiano and founder of the *Scuola di Musica* in Fiesole (Sandro Cappelletto, music critic of the Torino newspaper *La Stampa* and Farulli’s “second-in-command” at the *Scuola* also lurks in the background); the notes f-g-a-g make their appearance in the turbulent textures of the Rihm piece; a fragment from a Japanese song functions almost like a cantus firmus in the New Year’s Eve music; and the *Saluto* for the undersigned is a pretty good E minor. While all the pieces are tonal (even triads and other tonal pitch constellations appear), Lombardi composes in an idiom that has gone through the experience of atonality and serialism—in that respect, he is a postmodern composer. Polystylism, another hallmark of postmodernism, makes itself felt in the *Saluti*: Lombardi does not shy away from quoting the incipit of “Happy Birthday” (in the Berio piece) or a fragment from Wagner’s *Lohengrin* (in the wedding music for Christian and Ulla). An “orientalizing” scale, quotations of Yiddish songs, and fragments from

Yedid Nefesh, a song cycle by Lombardi, pervade much of the *Saluto* for Miriam Meghnagi, a singer and interpreter of Jewish diaspora music, who was born in Lybia, and the composer celebrates his marriage to her with a joyous waltz.

The Pianists:

Alessandra Gentile (who performs *Divertimento*) received her diploma at the Hochschule für Musik in Munich, Germany. For more than twenty years she has performed solo recitals and appeared with major orchestras in Germany, Austria, and Italy. She is a member of the piano trio *Trio XXI Secolo* and teaches chamber music at the Conservatory “Pergolesi” in Fermo.

Giancarlo Cardini (who is the interpreter of *Albumblätter*, *Wiederkehr* and *Variazioni*) studied, lives, and teaches in Florence (Conservatory “Cherubini”). He is sought after as a performer, especially of contemporary piano music, and has toured in Europe, North America, and Asia. His renditions of the piano music by Erik Satie, John Cage, Morton Feldman, Sylvano Bussotti, and Aldo Clementi have been praised by critics. He is known also as a composer, especially of audio-visual installations and mixed-media works, showing a preference for musical stasis and micro-theatre. He has edited the piano works of Giulio Ricordi.

The performer is assisted in executing several actions prescribed by the composer in *Albumblätter* by the pianist Caterina Venturelli.

Roberto Prosseda (who performs the eight *Saluti*) received his diploma in piano from the Conservatory “Respighi” in Latina. Master classes with Leon Fleisher, Charles Rosen, and Karl Ulrich Schnabel rounded off his education. Prosseda has performed solo recitals all over the world and played as a soloist with major orchestras in Europe. His interest in contemporary music led to recordings of Petrassi’s and Dallapiccola’s keyboard works (Fonè and Naxos, respectively). A CD of Mendelssohn’s piano music has recently been released by Decca.

The Composer:

Born in Rome in 1945, **Luca Lombardi** studied piano and composition in Rome, Florence, and Vienna, graduating with a diploma in composition from the Conservatory in Pesaro. Post-graduate studies led him to Cologne, where he worked with Stockhausen, Globokar, Kagel, Zimmermann and others as well as to East Berlin, where he became a master student of Paul Dessau. A dissertation on Hanns Eisler earned him a doctorate from the University of Rome in 1974.

Lombardi emerged as a compositional voice to be reckoned with in the late 1960s and, since then, has accumulated an oeuvre that includes operas, symphonies, oratorios and cantatas, chamber music for various ensembles as well as piano music. His music has been heard in Europe, Japan, and North and South America. He is the author (or co-author) and editor of several books (including *Hanns Eisler: Musica della Rivoluzione*, *Conversazioni con Petrassi* and *Instrumentation in der Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts*); in

numerous articles he has articulated his views on the state of music and music education in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Lombardi has been honored with commissions as well as numerous awards and fellowships in Italy and abroad. He lives at Lake Albano south of Rome and in Tel Aviv-Yafo.

The Program Annotators:

Jürgen Thym and **Thomas Donnan** (Eastman School of Music, University of Rochester) wrote and translated the program notes. They collaborated in the translation and edition of selected writings of Luca Lombardi, *Construction of Freedom and Other Writings* (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner-Verlag, 2006).