

Luca Lombardi

Tel Aviv-Yafo, September 1, 2015

A few years ago, a colleague asked for a “motto” about my work, to be included in a publication she edited.¹ I sent her the following text:

I wrote my first composition on the day I turned ten years old. I have known ever since that I am a composer. I never asked myself why—it was simply like that. And that is how it has been up to this day. Later, mainly around 1968, I did pose the question according to the fashion of the time, why and, above all, for whom I composed in the first place? I found a range of more or less convincing answers at the time, but of course, deep down, a composer is unaware of his motivation. The making of music is an expression of my will to live and my vitality, it is my way of experiencing and digesting life and of taking a stance. It is for me a chance to achieve and to “construct” freedom. I am my own first listener and my first critic. If others derive pleasure from what I do, it makes me happy. That more or less says everything there is to say: since my tenth year, composing has been a necessity of life and expressing myself through music has become my second nature. For nearly sixty years now, I have been doing what I set out to do. It has frequently found acceptance, frequently it has not. Everyone wants to be loved by all, that is natural, but what differentiates the consciousness of an adult from that of a child is that one gradually perceives that one cannot be loved by all. Willy-nilly one has to accept it . . .

If I think back, some episodes come to my mind where the making of music gave occasion for me to demonstrate my will, indeed, my obstinacy: In 1958, I was not yet thirteen years old, I entered the composition class of Gianluca Tocchi (1901–92). I had been composing after a fashion for nearly three years by then and was very proud indeed of my, in part, rather amateurish efforts. On one occasion, for instance, I showed Tocchi a *Sonatina in stile classico* for the harpsichord. I had performed it myself at a celebration of the German School at the Santa Maria dell’Anima (the church

¹ Violeta Dinescu, ed., *Begegnungen mit Musik unserer Zeit: Komponisten-Colloquium der Carl von Ossietzky Universität Oldenburg 1996–2011* (Saarbrücken: Pfau Verlag, 2011), 195.

Varga.indd 124 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

Luca Lombardi (b. 1945) 125

of the German-speaking Catholic community in Rome). Incidentally, my mother, who was basically not particularly bourgeois-minded, insisted that I wear a tie . . . I would have none of it, it was far too posh and middleclass for me. I remember I was already onstage, waiting for my turn, when a German friend of our family appeared with a tie in his hand and tried to make me change my mind. . . . That gives an idea of the customs prior to the decisive turn of the years around 1968 and how they have changed since then. . . . But also of my will to be different. End of bracket. Back to my first teacher of composition. I showed him my little piece and, with pencil in hand, he was about to make some corrections. God forbid! I instantly began to suffer intensely and would not allow Tocchi to destroy my work, of which I was rightly or wrongly so proud. I asked him to put his corrections in parentheses. “What, parentheses? Well, I never! Out!” And with that, I was kicked out of class.

Fifteen years later, in 1973 (I was spending some months in East Berlin), I was a master’s student of Paul Dessau. We would meet at his house at irregular intervals at Lake Zeuthen and on one occasion, I showed him the beginning of a piece I was working on: *Non Requiescat: Musica in memoria di Hanns Eisler*.² He knitted his brows: “Well, you are making

the trumpeter's job very difficult indeed! Why don't you assign the part to two trumpeters?" That was precisely what I would not do, for that particular section was supposed to render the player's gasping for breath. I had Godard/Truffaut's film *A bout de souffle* in mind, but more important, I was thinking of a sentence of Eisler's: "I am only the messenger who arrives out of breath and has to deliver just one more thing. . . . To do something useful, something one can deliver."³ Apparently, I was able to get my message across to Dessau, for—whether he accepted my reasoning or not—he did not ask me to leave his house.

From 1978, I lived for ten years in Milan, teaching composition at the Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi. My music was published by Ricordi and I worked closely with Luciana Abbado Pestalozza who was responsible for the production of my scores.⁴ She had her preferences among the composers—there is nothing wrong with that—her favorite being my respected colleague, Salvatore Sciarrino. Anyone who knows new music is aware that Sciarrino's work, apart from its many other qualities, is characterized

2 Originally published by Moeck, the work was acquired by Ricordi when it purchased the entire Moeck catalog.

3 Hanns Eisler, *Gespräche mit Hans Bunge; Fragen Sie mehr über Brecht* (Leipzig: BDV, 1975), 214.

4 Luciana Abbado Pestalozza (1929–2012), a sister of Claudio Abbado, was a publisher and festival director.

Varga.indd 125 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

126 *COMPOSING AS PERCEPTION AND SELF-PERCEPTION*

by its instant recognizability. From the very beginning, his compositions are marked by certain recurring features of sonority. Perhaps that is one reason for the success of his work. Also, for its numerous imitators, there are indeed dozens of composers who—especially in those years—absorbed a great deal from Sciarrino, so much so that in the 1980s one could speak of a veritable Sciarrino school—or Sciarrino epigones—in Italian music. As far as I am concerned, I have never bothered about having a personal style. On the contrary: I have endeavored not to repeat myself (whether I have succeeded, is a different matter). For me, composing is a journey of discovery. It is not so much about new sounds and playing techniques, but about new insights into myself and my relationship to reality. (I once wrote an essay titled "Comporre come conoscenza e autoconoscenza" [Composing as perception and self-perception], where, on the basis of two compositions, I explain what I mean by them, in other words how it works with me concretely—not always, but every now and then—that composing takes the form of a learning process. At the end of a "journey of composition," I know—if I am in luck—more about myself than before.)

However, my good friend Luciana Pestalozza did not see eye to eye with me. She was appalled by the difference between one piece and the next, for when she heard a work, then another and yet another, she could not recognize the same composer. . . . That was not the case with Sciarrino whose music she could immediately identify. In her view, it was a shortcoming. Today, after decades of working this way, with a highly diverse stylistic range of compositions, often written at one and the same time, listeners to my music tell me that, for all the difference between the individual pieces, the music has a color all its own. That gives me pleasure, for it is an aspect to which I have not devoted any attention, yet it shows that I may have many faces but just one soul—or perhaps one face and many souls. Which reminds me: in the mid-1980s, I got down to writing my first opera, *Faust: Un travestimento* (to words by Edoardo Sanguineti, after Goethe's *Faust I*). It is marked by a particularly great variety of stylistic elements, for reasons of content and also due to the virtuosic abundance of masks in Sanguineti's adaptation. The last (fourth) scene of act 2 is set

for soprano (Greta) and string quartet onstage. I had all along meant that scene to be an autonomous concert work as well, with the title *La canzone di Greta*. One day, my colleague and friend Armando Gentilucci dropped in on me, noticed the score on the piano and began to turn its pages.⁵ The piece uses material from Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* and is a kind

5 Armando Gentilucci (1939–89), composer, teacher, and lector with Ricordi.

Varga.indd 126 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

Juca Lombardi (b. 1945) 127

of journey to different and contrary landscapes of mood of the simple girl Greta who has just fallen in love with the youthful Faust.

Armando commented: “Are you out of your mind to write something like that?” I did not have the impression that I had gone crazy. Nevertheless, it was probably not “musically politically correct to compose something that smacked of minimalist music (a playful outcome of the repetition of a piano figure in the Schubert Lied that was iterative in nature anyway), not to speak of the use of consonances or—God forbid!—even of tonal passages . . . In the 1980s—and partly up to this day, although to a lesser degree—the “Cold War” was still lingering, causing havoc in music, in a wholly different way, of course, from politics. In music, too, you had (and have) the “Good Ones” and the “Evil Ones.”

You need not even hear a piece to decide whether it has to do with one or the other; it suffices to know its technique and musical idiom and whether it has been “accepted”—by whom? Well yes, by some radio producers, concert organizers, interpreters, and critics, who set great store by conformity with the Zeitgeist, or whatever they regard as such. Sometimes you need not even take the trouble of ascertaining the style of a composition, you only need to know its genre. A musicologist informed me once that he ignored composers of symphonies. Shostakovich, Hartmann, Pettersson, Henze, Schnittke, Rihm . . . they are all implicated, to hell with them! Sanguineti himself was altogether different. He was an experimental writer and poet, well-versed in contemporary music (not only because he worked closely with several composers, Berio in particular). He was no conformist but an open-minded artist. *La canzone di Greta* was the first bit of music he heard from the opera then in the making, and he wrote a text about it that tells something of the way he went about translating and disguising Goethe. That was what I tried to set to music, with wholly different means, of course.

A “Travesty” is neither a translation, nor is it a parody but a “ricreazione” that carries in Italian, as in English, at least a double meaning. It is no *a la maniere de* but a *d’apres* [in the case of my *Faust* a “d’apres Goethe,” of course, a “*secundum* Goethe”—L.L.]. One undertakes an orbiting maneuver, so to speak. One attempts to touch concrete reality, the hard present, in that one surprises it from behind, drawing on a *déjà lu*—as a painter has his *déjà vu*. If I am to cite an example, I would mention Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* in the version by Picasso. In naming Manet, however, I am doing so not just to use a model but also to refer to an archetype because, as is well-known, Manet's was in his turn a “travesty” of an etching by Marcantonio Raimondi which had been taken from

Varga.indd 127 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

128 *CONCERTE PER QUARTETTO*

Raffaello, one that in addition had also been treated, simultaneously, by Palma il Vecchio (or, more accurately, the author of *Concerto campestre*) and was also taken up by Courbet.

It is no coincidence that modern painting was born under the sign of “travesty.” And it does not suffice to say that we are dealing, in general and

in particular, with a natural and traditional problem of iconography. It was “allegory” that signified a turn, brought about by an alienation effect, to use Walter Benjamin’s words.

It seems to me that in *La canzone di Greta*, Luca Lombardi takes exactly that course of action. Inevitably, his Raimondi of *déjà écouté* is Schubert. But the actual encounter takes place just as in the case of Picasso and Manet, so that he profits from a veritable concatenation of allusions and alienated “travesties” that correspond completely to the intentions of the verbal material. Actually, a *Faust*, in words and in music, cannot come about other than through a metadiscourse about a myth, indeed, *the* myth of modernity par excellence. Every modern writer has dreamed of retelling his own *Faust*, if he did not already tell it again in that he positioned himself between the extremes of *Mon Faust* and *Votre Faust*. However, deep down, I would imagine that everyone dreamed of writing the last possible version of *Faust*, with a fatal lack of modesty, just as Picasso had surely hoped to have produced the last *Déjeuner*. Without that radical ambition, by the way, it would be impossible to repeat the experiment. That was probably also subconsciously my own challenge. And I think and hope that here, too, Luca Lombardi will be my accomplice, in this concert scene just as in the whole opera. And that is no excessive idea, for all myths, in order to be able to die, must somehow end in a “travesty.” That is how the *Odyssey* ended, with Odysseus in *Ulysses*.⁶

My *Faust* opera was surely a turning point in my work as a composer, although it was, I think, a logical step in a process that had begun at the latest in the mid-1970s with my *Prima Sinfonia* (First Symphony). In that piece, I had already used some tonal material—in the shape of quotations or otherwise—in defiance of the silly, dictatorial verdict of the “Cominform of the Avant-garde” (the supranational alliance of musical conformists) regarding the use of tonality. In the opera, I applied a range of stylistic means, including tonality, in accordance with the various guises Sanguineti had recourse to in his Goethe adaptation. As a result, I have been regarded ever since as a renegade by the high priests of the pure doctrine (even more so by the not-so-high ones).

⁶ Edoardo Sanguineti, *Per Musica* (Milan: Ricordi, 1993), 232–33.

Varga.indd 128 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

Luca Lombardi (b. 1945) 129

As I said, it was for me a logical consequence of my development. In a letter to Claus H. Henneberg (April 1987), I wrote:⁷

I am Italian, brought up in German culture . . . , so that an eminently German theme like Faust, newly interpreted by an Italian poet, is one that is dear to at least two of the souls . . . that inhabit my breast. In addition, I happen to have reached a phase in my life where I am calling into question my former views. My belief is doubt. For me, it is no paralyzing force but a productive one. Namely, to go on seeking. What better companion, in this leg of the trip, than Prof. Dr. Faust? Sanguineti’s text moves virtuosically on different levels of language. . . . As you know, I have taken a stand a number of times, both theoretically and in practice, for “inclusive” music that reflects the diversity of (real, philosophical, musical) viewpoints, without assuming the character of a supermarket. This music includes tonality (used not in a naive or restorative fashion), which, to quote Sanguineti, “represents today a particular form of atonality (the way a rhyme is a special case of free verse).”⁸

Some years later, in the summer of 1991—the opera had meanwhile been premiered, at the beginning of that year—I wrote:

It has by no means turned out to be an autobiographical work (although . . . alienation and empathy morph into each other. Empathy in particular

instances, alienation in the work as a whole—also the other way around). For me, Faust is also a human being, just like you or me, an intellectual, disillusioned by the theories and ideologies he had believed in. Still, he does not despair or give up but continues to try to achieve a clearer view of himself and his relationship to the world, even though now without illusions—an engaged skeptic.

In accordance with the travesty character of Sanguineti's text and my "inclusive" approach, a range of musical experiences find their way into the opera. It has serious and burlesque, sophisticated and trivial, popular and artistic features. The work's comic and tragic aspects are not in contradiction; indeed, it is difficult to ascertain whether the supposedly comic is in reality not tragic. And vice versa. I helped myself time and again to materials and stylistic moods suggested by the individual scenes, free of bias and worry. For all the diversity of its stylistic levels, the opera has a unified color, ensured also by the unity of its basic material (the Faust-, Mephistopheles-,

7 Claus H. Henneberg (1936–98), librettist, translator, and dramaturg.

8 L. Lombardi, "On Faust: *Un Travestimento*," in L. Lombardi, *Construction of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Jürgen Thym (Baden-Baden: Verlag Valentin Koerner, 2006), 501.

Varga.indd 129 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

130 *OSFER* *OSFER* *OSFER*

and Greta-chords). The schizophrenia that characterizes not just Faust but all other figures as well (not excluding the composer himself . . .) leads, on another level, to a contradictory unity. After several years of learning and wandering in the world, I have wanted to write music—as a stop on my continual travels, perhaps as a balancing act—where spontaneity and calculation, complexity, and simplicity engender and define one another (just as comedy and tragedy are not in contradiction). It is perfectly clear to me that it is well-nigh presumptuous to attempt something like that today. I would not have dared to do so if the subject had been less devilish . . . The perpetually negating spirit has been of help—through negating negation, as it were—to achieve a new, hard-won immediacy of the musical gesture. I thank him [Faust] for that!⁹

At the moment, I am working on my fifth opera—because of the subject I have chosen, it is alas not all beer and skittles, even though it plays in a country with plenty of beer and plenty of skittles . . . Still, I am afraid I am not interested in the easy way out but look for challenges of existential significance, something that is "true" in the sense that it has to do with real life. What is the new opera about? After paying my first ever visit to Israel in 2003 and some years later, in 2008, becoming an Israeli citizen, I began to look for a subject for an opera that would reflect this new phase of my life, also, my interest in Jewish culture and the land of the Jews. Finally, I found it in David Grossman's book *To the End of the Land*.¹⁰

Ofer—that is the opera's title—is the story of a great love against the background of a major tragedy. I fashioned the libretto myself, having obtained the endorsement and the help of Grossman himself, to cut the seven hundred pages down to about twenty-five. I am setting it in Hebrew, but there will be a translation into rhythmized Italian.

The book tells the story of Ora, her love for two men and her son Ofer. Having recently been demobilized from three years of army service, Ofer volunteers to fight in the West Bank. Ora panics, for she fears that soldiers with news of her son's death might be standing in front of her door. She seeks comfort in magical thinking: as long as she is away from home, the news cannot be delivered, Ofer cannot be dead. Her flight should protect him. She takes a youthful friend of hers, Avram, on her travels, who gradually turns out to be Ofer's biological father. Avram served in the army

⁹ Ibid., 501–2.

10 A novel (2009) by the Israeli writer, born in Jerusalem, in 1954. The literal translation of the original Hebrew title could be rendered as “A woman flees from an announcement.” David Grossman, *To the End of the Land* (New York: Vintage, 2011).

Varga.indd 130 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.

Yusef Ghannouchi (b. 1945) 131

during the Six-Day War and returned from his time in an Egyptian prisoner-of-war camp with deep wounds to his body and psyche.

Their travels—in a way, a magic spell of self-defense—is also one of remembrance, a conversation therapy, and the telling of a story: Ora conjures up for herself and for Avram their son’s life from the moment of his conception, in an effort to keep Ofer alive through the magical of retelling his life. The history of Ora, Ofer, and Avram as well as of other figures mirrors that of the country. However, even though the book and the opera are linked with Israel and its neighbors, the questions they treat of are not limited to that area of the globe—they are valid for other countries and other times as well—they are universal concerns of mankind.

That is what interests me not only in this new opera project but in general, in all my operas: themes that concern us because they are part of human nature and history. Love and hatred, hope and despair, life and death, sin with or without atonement, power and lack of it—and, alas, again and again, war that humankind apparently cannot do without. Indeed, since the dawn of history, humankind has found itself, right up to this day, in the age of war—in a way, in prehistory. Will it ever grow out of it? At the moment it does not appear so, even if Europe has lived in peace for 70 years (not counting the war in former Yugoslavia in the years 1991–95). But what are 70 years? Not much. And what are the 200,000 years of *Homo sapiens* in comparison with the 215 million years of tortoises or the 50 million years of bees? An extremely thin layer of time. But it helps us precious little to keep that in mind—we must attempt to come to terms with our own history and, if possible, take a step, however small, away from prehistory.

Varga.indd 131 12/12/2016 6:24:05 PM

This file is for proofreading purposes only. It is not available for posting to any internal university or social networking site, file sharing, or any web platform.