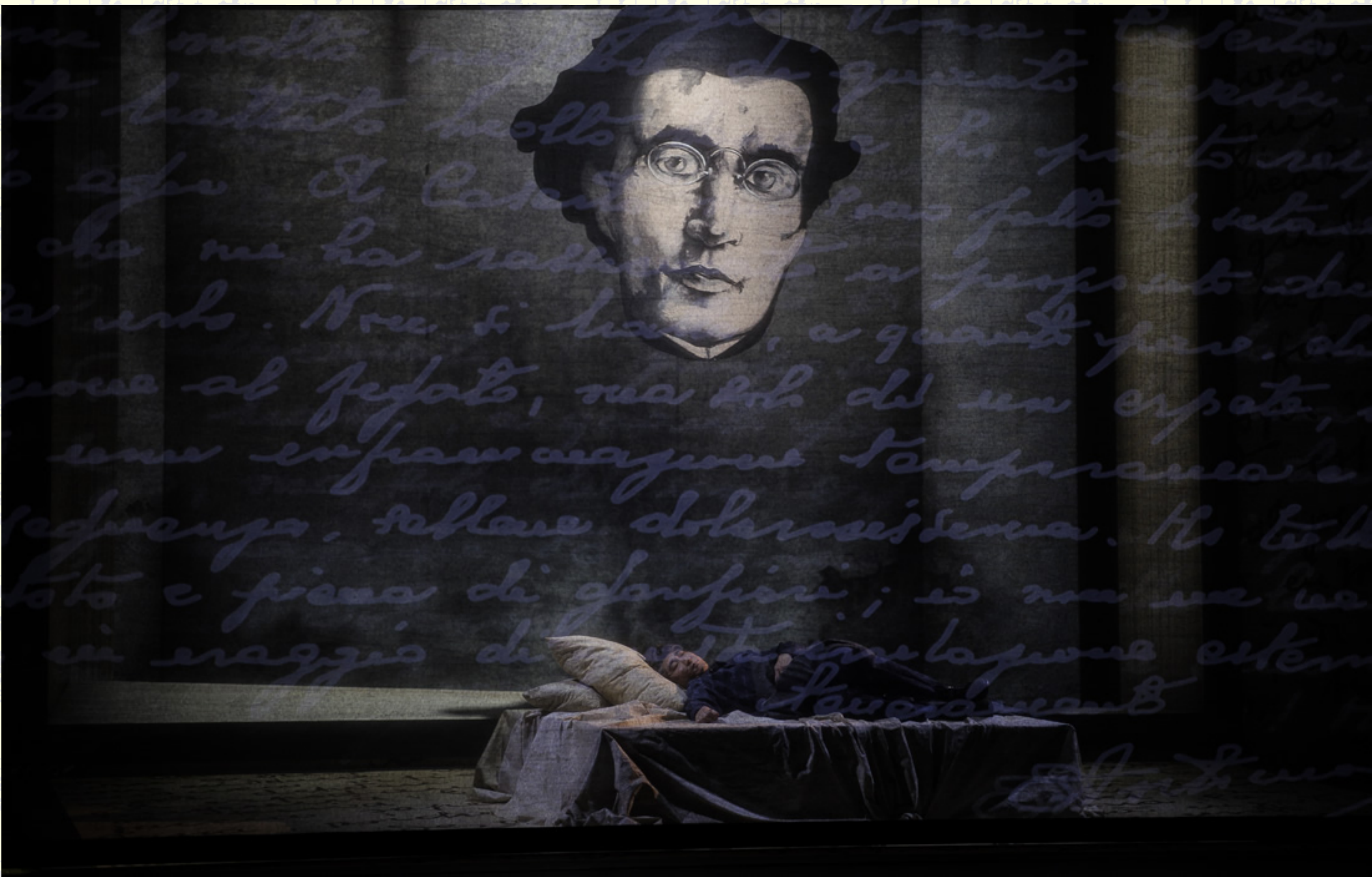


The Intellectual and the Nun



Antonio Gramsci had a conflicted relationship with music: perhaps because his wife Giulia's violin playing formed a silent barrier in their already strained marriage (he imprisoned in Italy, she living in Moscow; he suffering from osteomyelitis, she mentally unsettled), or perhaps because his extraordinary hermeneutic ability found its ideal ground in sociological and literary fields, but clashed with the lesser clarity of musical language. And although a certain excerpt from a famous prison letter addressed to Giulia has been excessively mythologized ("I think you were negatively impressed by the fact that once I [...] somehow showed that I couldn't bear music," March 28, 1932), the fact remains that Gramsci the music critic—writing for *Avanti!* in his role as cultural journalist—reads today as somewhat naïve. Starting with his dismissive judgments of Giacomo Puccini's works.

These evaluations, driven more by anti-bourgeois ideological prejudice than by genuine critical analysis, summarily dismissed *La Bohème* ("Puccini's immensely successful opera hasn't changed our conviction of its mediocrity"), *Butterfly* ("The musical value is minimal"), and *La Rondine* ("It says nothing to those who listen to it"). Therefore, it is a striking nemesis—or, in fact, a fertile paradox—that the world premiere of Cord Meijering's new opera dedicated precisely to Gramsci was staged in combination with *Suor Angelica*, the Puccini opera most often accused of sentimentality and saccharinity by anti-Puccinian musicology.

The credit for this production goes to the Gerhart Hauptmann Theater in Görlitz, a Saxon city on the border with Poland: one of those provincial German theaters still capable of offering genuine cultural contributions—especially notable since Meijering's score had been lying dormant in a drawer for over a decade, and in the meantime, the journalist and writer Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich—author of the excellent libretto—has passed away. That such an opera should have its premiere in the former East Germany is, after all, only logical, given that Gramsci was one of the founding fathers of the Italian Communist Party; and the fact that Saxony has now become a stronghold of the German far-right adds a further layer of historical irony to the debut.

The pairing with Puccini serves not merely to make the performance of a modern score—destined, like much contemporary music theater, to be challenging for many ears—more palatable. The mirroring between the fascist prison (to which Gramsci is condemned) and the cloistered convent (where Angelica is confined as punishment) is strikingly clear, and arguably even more precise than the combination offered—by a curious coincidence—during the same weeks by the Rome Opera, where *Suor Angelica* was paired with Dallapiccola's *Il prigioniero*. Further connections arise from the dramaturgy of both one-act operas: that of Meijering and Jungheinrich is based on flashbacks and temporal shifts; while Puccini and Forzano's structure, though appearing paratactic and sketch-like, reveals itself to be a deliberate and refined "divisionist" technique.



The fifteen tableaux of Gramsci follow one another rapidly over roughly seventy minutes: the prison is portrayed above all as a mental space (the opera merges the various institutions where the communist intellectual was detained into a single setting); his native Sardinia; the wife depicted as an absent presence and the sister-in-law Tatjana as a surrogate for Giulia; the clash with Mussolini following the Matteotti tragedy; the trip to Moscow and the ensuing misunderstandings with Stalin—all of it flows with theatrical stylization combined with a cinematic fluidity. Meijering—born in 1955, a German of Dutch origin and a student of Henze—puts himself at the service of a tightly structured libretto, without ever renouncing the semantic autonomy of the music: traditional instruments are joined by more exotic ones, particularly from the East; electronics are woven in frequently but always with precise intent; the richness of timbre tends to arise from rhythmic variety; a percussive dimension dominates, leaning toward introspection rather than obsessiveness. Nor are flashes of ethnic music absent (the *Cantu a tenore* to evoke Sardinian nostalgia, performed powerfully by the vocal quartet Tenore di Bitti "Mailinu Pira"), nor moments that border on pop (such as the theme of *Bandiera rossa*, unexpectedly breaking into a completely different musical texture). A few sharp grotesque touches—like the recorded voice of Mussolini—bring the varied sonic tableau to a close.

Ulrich Kern—who took over for Roman Brogli-Sacher, the General Music Director in Görlitz, for the run of performances—conducts with the razor-sharp precision this music demands, yet without forgoing a healthy operatic momentum. In *Suor Angelica*, he counters certain Puccinian allargando moments with a rhythmic discipline that transports the work fully into the 20th-century sound world. Bernhard F. Loges's stage direction likewise seeks to create an osmosis between the two operas: the barren Sardinian mountains of Gramsci's world become the same scenic backdrop for Puccini's monastery. While in Gramsci the director emphasizes a dreamlike tone (carnavalesque masks of Mussolini and Stalin, Gramsci's letters flowing across the backdrop like ideograms), in *Suor Angelica* the language shifts to a blend of hallucination and realism. Striking images linger: the visionary moment in which the Zia Principessa leads the festively dressed dead child by the hand as the protagonist embraces her self-sacrifice; and the starkly realistic final image that closes the orchestral cadence—of a nun fleeing the deadly convent in revulsion.

Buyan Li lends Gramsci a baritone voice with limited color but capable of multiple inflections. More open and luminous is the tenor Yalun Zhang, who portrays both the protagonist's "biological" brother and his "ideological" one—Togliatti. Similarly, the voice of dictatorship—Mussolini and Stalin—is entrusted to a single performer, although Hans-Peter Struppe appears to be a baritone with far more theatrical than vocal gifts (he also plays the professional yet ruthless fascist doctor in the prologue and epilogue). The three women in Gramsci's life—mother, wife, sister-in-law—find iconic expression in the austere mezzo-soprano of Yvonne Reich, the tense vocal line of Johanna Brault, and the fluted tone of Lisa Orthuber.

All three reappear in *Suor Angelica*, now in the habits of the Zelatrice, the Abbess, and an unusually well-defined Suor Osmina. Yet the stage is, of course, claimed by the Zia Principessa and the protagonist. The former is Michal Dorn, a mezzo-soprano with solid and ample vocal resources; the latter is Patricia Bänseh: a Puccini interpreter worthy of any theater, capable of infusing *Suor Angelica* with a sense of rebellion and sensuality that opens a new perspective on the character—and, in doing so, perhaps restores what Puccini originally intended.

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The photos for the feature were taken by Nikolai Schmidt.