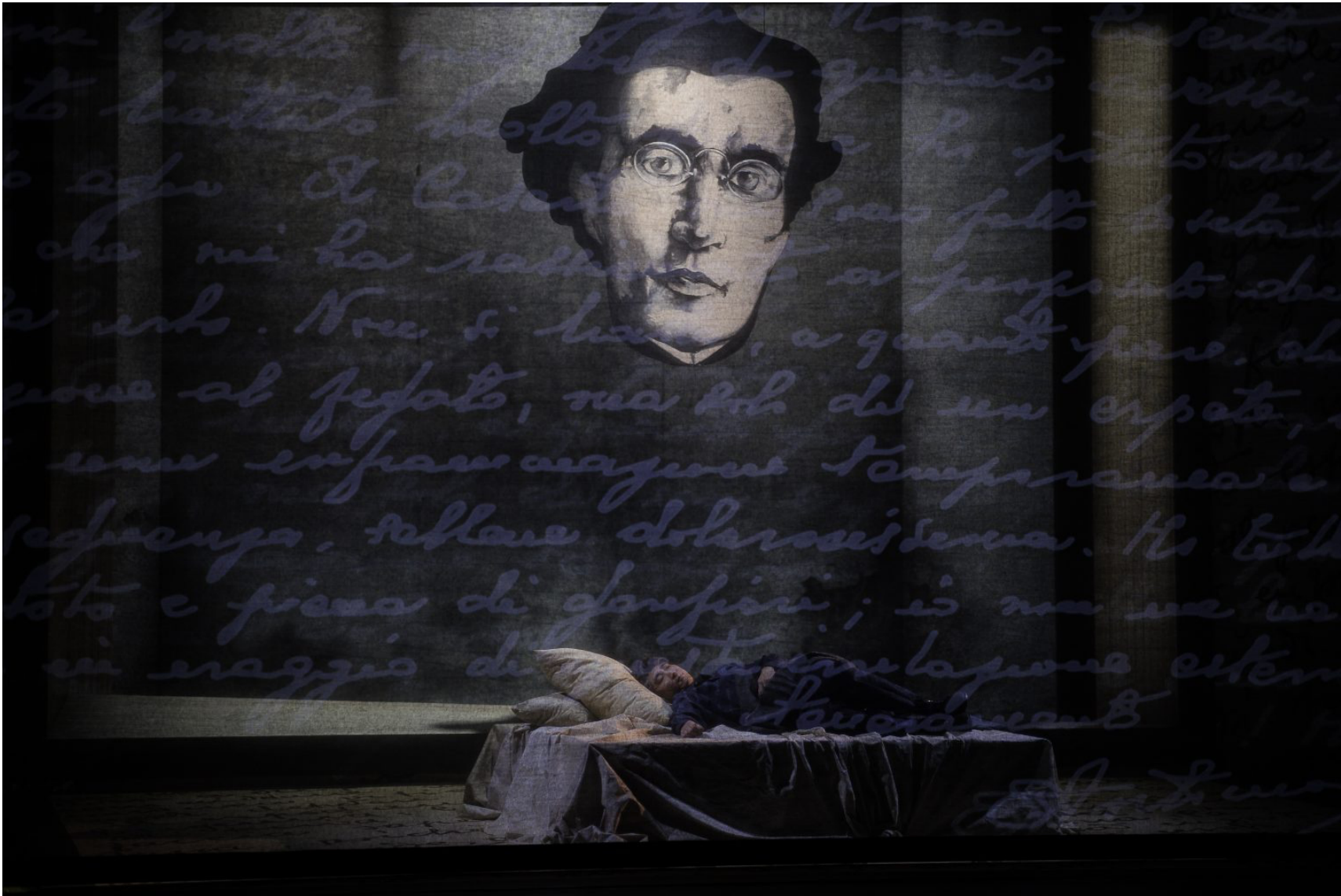


MUSICAL OBSERVATORY

From Gramsci to Puccini

By Giulia Vannoni – May 3, 2025



La scena iniziale dello spettacolo Gramsci - Ph Nikolai Schmidt



In Görlitz, the new work by composer Cord Meijering dedicated to Gramsci, paired with Suor Angelica

GÖRLITZ, April 30, 2025 – It had remained in a drawer for twelve years. And only now has Gramsci, by the Dutch-born but German-trained composer Cord Meijering, been brought to the stage at the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Theater in Görlitz (premiere on March 22). A pity that in all that time, no Italian theater ever thought to include this one-act opera—centered on the figure of the great antifascist intellectual, philosopher, and multifaceted writer—in its programming: a symbol of moral rigor paid for with twenty years of imprisonment, which gradually and irreparably undermined his already fragile health.

It was thus a theater in Saxony that brought the new work to the stage—a federal state which, ironically, is today a stronghold of the AfD. And Görlitz, divided by the Neisse River that marks the border between the German and Polish parts (Zgorzelec, reachable on foot via a bridge), has the vocation of a frontier city: to bear witness to past conflicts through various forms of cultural engagement.

The libretto by the journalist Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich—who has since passed away—outlines the most significant episodes in the life of Antonio Gramsci, structured in fifteen scenes: his childhood in Ghilarza, Sardinia, marked by spinal issues that would continue into adulthood; his clashes with Mussolini; his relationships with Togliatti and Stalin; and in the private sphere, his ties with his mother, his brother Gennaro, his wife Julia, and his sister-in-law Tatjana. What underpins the entire text is Gramsci's deep conviction that writing serves as a vehicle for moral values. In just over an hour—the opera's duration—Meijering's music does not merely accompany the evocative power of the libretto, but succeeds in generating a sustained sonic tension that holds the audience's attention scene after scene. The composer relies on both percussive impact and the timbral richness of an ensemble that, beyond the conventional orchestral sections, includes a wide range of ethnic instruments and a carefully targeted, never invasive, use of electronics—especially to support the vocal writing and transitions between scenes.

As for the vocal part—which is not always easy for the singers—the most compelling effects are tied to the choral passages, almost always arranged to emphasize the textual moments where Gramsci's emphasis on the significance of writing comes to the fore. In addition to the theater's opera chorus, these moments were enriched by the presence of the Tenores di Bitti "Mailinu Pira": the intervention of this Sardinian vocal quartet went far beyond atmospheric evocation, adding new layers of timbral meaning to Meijering's music. The conclusion, by contrast, was left to the recorded voice of Mussolini, superimposed over the melody of Bandiera rossa: a mental short-circuit in which historical and emotional reflection inevitably converge.

Essential to the success of Gramsci was the excellent performance of the Neue Lausitzer Philharmonie, conducted by Ulrich Kern with both drive and surgical precision. Regarding the cast, baritone Buyan Li—onstage almost without pause—was an emotionally compelling protagonist. At his side, Lisa Orthuber tackled the coloratura of Tatjana, the sister-in-law, with confidence; the expressive mezzo-soprano Johanna Brault convincingly embodied the fragility of the violinist wife Julia; while fellow mezzo Yvonne Reich portrayed the protagonist's grieving mother. The male cast members played multiple roles: tenor Yalun Zhang lent clarity and vocal strength to both brother Gennaro and Togliatti, while baritone Hans-Peter Struppe seemed slightly underpowered vocally to portray Mussolini and Stalin (and especially the ruthless fascist doctor who visits Gramsci in prison).

Equally effective was the stage direction by Bernhard F. Loges, who conceived a luminous, illustrative production without veering into didacticism. The fixed set framed a skewed tableau into which the characters entered scene by scene, while images of the Sardinian landscape were projected onto the backdrop, along with superimposed facsimiles of Gramsci's handwritten pages—the same ones inscribed onto the protagonist's costume.

Given its brief duration, the opera was paired with Suor Angelica: as if to suggest—through a liaison des scènes symbolized by the Sardinian landscape visible in the background—that the prison might bear similarities to the convent in which Puccini's protagonist is confined. This, too, was a production well conducted by Kern and enhanced by Loges's keen dramaturgical instincts. One need only mention the final flight of a nun—clearly not possessed of the same moral resolve as Gramsci, who never sought clemency to leave prison. Among a large and well-balanced cast, the standout was the leading soprano Patricia Bansch, expressive, fluid in vocal emission, and intense in phrasing; in the role of the Zia Principessa, Michal Doron displayed a fine contralto timbre; while Brault and Reich returned effectively as the Abbess and Zelatrice.

Among Gramsci's many literary activities was music criticism. An intellectual like him—who reflected on the reasons behind the success of popular genres from the novel to the opera—reserved his most biting critiques precisely for Puccini. One might wonder whether he would have approved of this juxtaposition: it certainly did not reflect his musical tastes, but perhaps it would have provoked reflection and dialectical confrontation. And that, indeed, would have been very Gramscian.

Giulia Vannoni



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