

# From Prison to Convent

The Gerhart-Hauptmann-Theater combines the world premiere of Gramsci by Cord Meijering with Puccini's Suor Angelica.

By Michael Ernst Allgemein Rezensionen 27.03.2025



Gramsci, opera by Cord Meijering, Photo: Nikolai Schmidt

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On Saturday the premiere, by Monday the news was out: Daniel Morgenroth will move next year from the Gerhart-Hauptmann-Theater in Görlitz/Zittau to the Mainfranken Theater in Würzburg. Born in Coburg, he says he is leaving Saxony "with one tearful eye" but "looking with a joyful eye at my new assignment."

And yet, with his latest premiere success at Görlitz's main stage – often dubbed the "Little Semperoper" – he has every reason to be smiling. The seemingly daring pairing of the world premiere of Cord Meijering's opera Gramsci with Giacomo Puccini's Suor Angelica turned out wonderfully and was warmly received by the premiere audience. Even so, it was a risk.

Antonio Gramsci, Italian communist and Marxist philosopher, is now largely forgotten. Wrongly so, as becomes clear if one, for example, reads his Prison Notebooks. He spent almost the entire last decade of his life in fascist torture cells and died seriously ill at the age of only 46.

Elevating him to the status of an operatic figure is, on the one hand, logical, and on the other, challenging. How much of the personal and biographical should be shown? How much ideological distance must be maintained to avoid posthumously stylizing him as a hero—thus doing harm to his ideas and his life? Librettist Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, long-time feuilletonist for the Frankfurter Rundschau, a profound connoisseur of the music scene and a renowned author, succeeded in resolving this balance convincingly. He approaches the title figure in a personal manner, placing his ideals and the persecution by Mussolini's apparatus of power at the center of the drama, framing it all with themes of intellectual isolation and yearning for life. In his cell, Gramsci struggles for words, writes, calls out to the world; and is visited by a doctor who, as a physician, should help him—but as a fascist, wishes for his death. In a series of short scenes, this opera reflects Gramsci's love for his wife Julia, living in Moscow, and the comfort offered by her sister Tatjana. Flashbacks depict discussions with dictators like Mussolini and Stalin, and show his closeness to his mother and his brother Gennaro.

Cord Meijering, once a student of Hans Werner Henze, has condensed all these moments into 15 compact scenes, rich in both vocal and orchestral color, and has shaped them musically into an emotionally torn psychogram. Remarkably, the Neue Lausitzer Philharmonie and the male ensemble of the opera chorus brought this vision to life with precision, highlighted by a genuine Sardinian tenor quartet that effectively illustrated the biographical roots of the title character—convincingly portrayed by Buyan Li. Hans-Peter Struppe as the doctor, Mussolini, and Stalin, gave a vocally restrained performance, complete with Lenin-style beard and hand masks of the two dictators. Johanna Brault portrayed the distant, reserved wife; Lisa Orthuber was an emotionally engaged sister-in-law. Yvonne Reich, in the spirit of Italian neorealism, was a worried, sickly mother. Yalun Zhang appeared in a double role as the loving brother Gennaro and the cautioning comrade Togliatti.



Suor Angelica, opera by Giacomo Puccini, Photo: Nikolai Schmidt

How could such a work of confessional drama—staged by designer Emine Güner with a proscenium set where Gramsci spent most of his time gesturing from his prison bed—possibly be followed after intermission by Puccini's convent scenes from Il trittico? "Adequately" would be an absurd understatement. The long-awaited world premiere, for which Görlitz deserves nothing but praise (and which the Frankfurter Rundschau didn't even deem worthy of a review—while Jungheinrich's widow, along with her children and grandchildren, made the journey to the banks of the Neisse), blended harmoniously with Suor Angelica, premiered at the Met in New York in 1918. The middle part of Puccini's subtly constructed triptych was performed in its original Italian, set in a brightly blooming convent courtyard.

The title character, born into a wealthy family, was forced into the convent after giving birth to a child "beneath her station," thus "tainting the family's sacred honor." She is an outsider among the nuns, who live under the rigid regime of a dictatorial abbess. Angelica devotes herself to tending herbs, lives in silent withdrawal, and longs for the child taken from her immediately after birth.

Her aristocratic aunt, a cold-hearted, corpulent matron, leads her to believe the child has died. In despair, Angelica renounces her inheritance and poisons herself. According to the rigid doctrines of the Church, this constitutes a mortal sin.

Patricia Bansch embodied this broken yet dignified, loving mother with a touching and compelling presence. A true women's opera, in which the soloists and female chorus members delivered convincingly with monastic vocal beauty. General music director Roman Brogli-Sacher shaped the premiere evening with dramatic elegance, brought out beautiful tonal colors, and gave this pairing of new work and nuns' tragedy a finely nuanced emotional tone. Director Bernhard F. Loges created a persuasive staging in which the dual retreat from the world—Gramsci's enforced search for knowledge through writing, and Sister Angelica's faithful plea for salvation in the hereafter—releases two failed lives from the grip of doctrinal cruelty.

Further performances at the Görlitz theater: March 30, April 4, April 30, and May 17.



Michael Ernst / About the Author

Michael Ernst is engaged with literature, music, and theater both privately, in broadcasting, and in print media. He has worked with opera houses and music festivals, and has been writing for Musik in Dresden since 2009.