
Frankfurter Rundschau

“Gramsci” / “Suor Angelica” in Görlitz – Leaving, when one must stay

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By Judith von Sternburg



Gramsci with his thoughts. © Nikolai Schmidt

The Theater in Görlitz delights with its double bill of Gramsci and Suor Angelica.

The Theater in Görlitz has dared to undertake something quite unusual: it has discovered lines of connection that function — but entirely against expectations, both in content and form.

The composer from Darmstadt, Cord Meijering, and the author and critic Hans-Klaus Jungheinrich, who shaped the music discourse in the Frankfurter Rundschau until his death in December 2018, must have agreed years ago to create an opera about the Italian writer and philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Jungheinrich — as we know him and only as such — apparently delivered his text

punctually, reportedly in a length Meijering found unrealistic, yet it remained deeply realistic. “Do with it what you like,” he told him, “this is my suggestion.”

Meijering took him at his word, shortened and intervened where his musical plans required it. Gramsci, an “opera in 15 scenes,” has now premiered in Görlitz. The communist intellectual imprisoned under Mussolini, condemned to inactivity but eventually equipped with writing materials, develops from his cell a program of radical thinking and writing — a freedom of the mind, detached from adverse outward conditions.

“Fascism is devouring Europe”

But in this there is, as will soon be important, nothing otherworldly.

“And while I write here for eternity — which has no use for it — the world outside is falling apart,” says Jungheinrich’s Gramsci disillusionedly. “Fascism is devouring Europe. The party is ducking down. Above all, it cowers before Stalin. He cares only about Russia; he is nothing but a tsar, a tsar painted red!”

Gramsci is lonely but not alone. He recalls his childhood, sees visions of his family, his wife who fled to Moscow, and the beautiful sister-in-law — whom he likes and who likes him in return. The music skillfully introduces this sweetness, which remains intangible. Overall, it is surprising how immediately accessible Meijering’s music is — and how boldly he plays with this accessibility. Alongside tender scenes with his brother and mother, and cool scenes with his wife Julia, there are political encounters that feel oppressive yet, interestingly, also clear-headed (Gramsci: cool, clever). There are also fine choral passages. These are distinctive, dreamlike moments, especially when the wonderful Sardinian vocal quartet casually joins in. They do not bring folklore (particularly as they are given strict, reflective text), but they do reveal roots — even the freest person is not suspended in a vacuum.

Meijering’s highly differentiated sonic world also feels free, but never arbitrary: classical contemporary music, ethereal, danceable — but never derivative, instead born entirely of his own imagination. Often these elements are placed in sharp contrast. Never pretty, always human.

In the imposing Görlitz theater — long since merged into the Gerhart Hauptmann Theater Görlitz-Zittau — the Neue Lausitzer Philharmonie performs and, under the direction of GMD Roman Brogli-Sacher (Ulrich Kern conducted the reviewed performance, showing this production can rely on more than one capable conductor), engages the situation with assurance. Displaced rhythms, daring simultaneities — best when interspersed with the a cappella quartet — demand concentration. For the audience, however, it becomes a true music theatre experience: emotions, situations, and words that Gramsci sings and writes over the course of 70 minutes.

People who are trapped

Emine Güner’s set design captures this as well: the backdrop suggests a giant book, with every inch of the cell’s wall covered in writing. Gramsci is set in an imaginary space in Görlitz, and Bernhard F. Loges’ direction treats it accordingly — Gramsci’s memories appear as fleeting shadows. The baritone Buyan Li, born in Beijing in 1991 and wearing prison clothes also inscribed with text, plays the title role with a discreet tenderness. Vocally, he convinces with youthfulness, vitality, and

precisely that richness of nuance Meijering's music — always closely tied to Jungheinrich's text — demands.



Angelica with her fellow sisters. © Nikolai Schmidt

But the composer had another plan, even extending into orchestration. He structured the instrumentation to suggest a connection to a famous Italian opera — one that would hardly come to mind in this context. But Meijering easily makes his case: when reading the libretto, he immediately thought of Giacomo Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, one of the one-act operas from *Il trittico*.

Indeed: *Angelica*, too, is hopelessly confined. Immediately after giving birth to an illegitimate child, she is sent to a convent by her cold-hearted relatives. Like Gramsci, she is cut off from news of home, alone with her pain — and her piety. Loges' direction can pick up many threads prepared in Gramsci. One sees *Suor Angelica* with new eyes and hears it as an opera of the 20th century. Patricia Bäsch tackles the demanding role with force.

Meijering admits that his inner (by no means obligatory) connection to Puccini was also driven by the thought that new music theatre might fare better when paired with repertoire works. Sometimes dreams do come true — although rarely, and certainly not in these two operas. Here, death alone offers a way out.

Theater Görlitz: May 17. www.g-h-t.de