

**ALBAN BERG (1885–1935), 50**

*Peter Platt*

“[W]hat thrilled me...was the complexity of his mind: the number of internal correspondences, the intricacy of his musical construction, the esoteric character of many of his references, the density of texture, that whole universe in perpetual motion revolving constantly around itself.”

—Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestin Deliège*<sup>1</sup>

In simple terms, Alban Berg was an avant-garde composer merely through his association with the group that came to be known as the Second Viennese School, a group headed by Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), which included Schoenberg’s other most famous pupil Anton Webern (1883–1945).<sup>2</sup> These composers were generally accepted—at least from about 1909 to 1939—as the avant-garde. Between the two world wars, Berg was already considered the least avant-garde member of the group and later, when Schoenberg’s and Webern’s music began to lose its terrors, he began to seem altogether too approachable, as if some compromise was involved. Indeed, it is not difficult to demonstrate the musical background—formally and stylistically—in any of the pieces in his comparatively slender output, whether the background be Johannes Brahms, Richard Wagner, Johann Sebastian Bach, Gustav Mahler, Hugo Wolf, or Schoenberg himself. Yet, every Berg composition is an advance on the one before. Late twentieth-century Berg scholarship, which is radiant in its discoveries—musical, analytical, cultural, and circumstantial—confirms him as a composer exploring and consolidating expressive and constructive possibilities of well-established genres and forms, but at an unprecedented depth.<sup>3</sup>

Two aspects of Berg’s genius are especially typical: his rich lyrical gift and his penchant for adopting almost any idea, whether musical or extramusical (personal, cultural, or symbolic) as stimulus to his intense creative imagination.

Berg was born in Vienna in February 1885 and died of septicemia on Christ-

Page 51

mas Eve 1935 in the same city. He lived in Vienna all his life, and though he found its generally stuffy conservatism distasteful, he took enthusiastic part in its artistic and intellectual life.<sup>4</sup> He was well read, urbane, genial, and intensely a romantic with a strong sense of the impossibility of achieving the Utopian. Photographs of him show a handsome, sensitive face, testifying, one feels, to his rich and complex inner life.<sup>5</sup> His exterior life, however, was uneventful. His father was a business man, but a sensitive soul; his mother lively and energetic. His early musical life was at the level of a gifted amateur. He delighted in playing piano duets with his sister Smaragda, and from the age of about fifteen began pouring out songs. In May 1911, he married Helene Nahowski, a love-match that seemed to survive Berg’s numerous later affairs. The two dedicated themselves to a romantic life, and from this he derived continual inspiration. They lived in the same house for nearly all their married life (and Helene remained there until her death in 1976). They were often not very well off. Berg joined the Austrian army in a fit of patriotism in World War I—at first as an infantry corporal, later, because of the asthma that

dogged him from his “teens, as a pen-pusher.” He hated the army and his experiences, his feelings of frustration, humiliation, boredom, and anger<sup>6</sup> contributed not a little to the authentic spirit of his opera *Wozzeck*, which he began to sketch as early as 1914 after seeing a performance of Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, the play on which the opera is based.

Decisive in Berg’s musical life was his meeting with Schoenberg. In 1904, his brother Karl (Charly) showed some of Alban’s songs to the master (only eleven years Berg’s senior but already an eminent professional composer about to embark on unprecedented musical adventures). Schoenberg divined in Berg’s songs exceptional lyrical gifts and straightway took him as a pupil, free of charge for the first year. Schoenberg, it will be remembered, was largely self-taught, and his exhaustive knowledge of the compositional techniques of masters in the Western tradition from Bach to Mahler and his sense of comprehensiveness and of mission made him a teacher of unique ability.<sup>7</sup> Finding in Berg a talent that seemed incapable of thinking outside the confines of the song, Schoenberg set about giving him rigorous courses in harmony, strict and applied counterpoint, and, in due course, principles of construction of pieces small and large. Berg was Schoenberg’s pupil for five years (1904–1909) and was touchingly grateful to his master and mentor throughout his life. Schoenberg was a severe teacher and there are moments in exchanges of letters between them when Berg seems positively obsequious, and Schoenberg positively cruel; there was in fact a rift between them for a year or two after 1915. Nevertheless, Berg as an apprentice responded deeply to the rigorous training and the continual creative challenge and during those years of saturation with masterworks under a teacher of penetrating mind and awesome erudition, he acquired a limitless technique. It is to Schoenberg’s credit that his pupil’s lyrical gift was not suppressed, but rather developed into Berg’s most individual musical characteristic. For the flow of melody is the foundation and glory of Berg’s music. No matter how esoteric

Page 52

the style, no matter how turbulent or jagged or intense in expression, the course of the melody carries the music.

Berg’s opus 1 is a one-movement piano sonata, written in 1907 and 1908 while he was still with Schoenberg. The music flows passionately from first moment to last and is clearly related in style to the late romantic music of Wolf or Mahler—ultimately to the chromatic yearning of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. The sonata’s first phrase clinches the key of B minor. Thenceforward, the music surges from (implied) key to key, never quite settling until the B minor of the final bars. Intriguing is the intermeshing of the musical personalities of pupil and master. The control of surge, climax, and subclimax, the clear delineation of individual phrases (often by *ritenuti* and tiny pauses), and the immaculate formal shape are features of Schoenberg’s one-movement works such as *Verklaerte Nacht* and the *Chamber Symphony no. 1 in E Major*, op. 9. More intimately, there is a complexity of relationships between melodic themes that derive from motifs and motifs that lead into themes, between harmonies, counterpoints, and rhythmic contours, which shows the thoroughness with which Berg absorbed the teaching of Schoenberg, a master of such intricacy, and shows also the *affinity* Berg had with his teacher’s music.<sup>8</sup> The general concept might be described in terms of Schoenberg’s “developing variation,” but the seraphic, ecstatic flow is Berg’s own. Schoenberg’s musical

energy has sharper edges: apocalyptic catastrophe seems never far away. In Berg, catastrophe is tempered by his compassion for humanity and by the yearning for what might be or for what might have been.<sup>9</sup>

In the last of the *Four Songs*, op. 2 (1909–1910), Berg abandoned key as a controlling (and referential) principle, and this stance is adopted with amazing confidence in the two-movement *String Quartet*, op. 3 (1910), the last of the pieces written under Schoenberg's guidance.<sup>10</sup> He takes easily to the splendid tradition that began in Joseph Haydn's *Quartets* and is consummate in Schoenberg's *String Quartet no. 2 in F-sharp Minor*, op. 10, of conversational, yet virtuosic interchange between the four instruments, a counterpoint of ever-varying textures that gives Berg's intricate musical mind full scope. The piece begins with a memorable sextuplet motif that will engender a myriad of different consequent phrases and whose influence extends into the generally more aggressive second movement. The ebb and flow is continuous and passionate, the musical argument sometimes a sustained lyrical outpouring, more often a web of febrile motifs. Classical key and key relationships ("classical tonality") no longer form the backbone of the musical language, which therefore may be labeled "atonal," provided the term is defined as "not based on classical tonality." (As Schoenberg pointed out, "atonal" would literally mean "without tones," which is nonsensical.) But the language is grounded in extreme chromaticism (itself originally a development from classical tonality) and on the gestures that go with it—motivic intricacy, passionate, intense expression, tortured or sinuous melodic lines, dissonant harmonies, cataclysmic effects, and a flexibility of rhythmic deployment, phrasing, and period structure that supports all these.<sup>11</sup>

Page 53

After the quartet, Berg wrote two pieces in which a wealth of expressive device is condensed within a tiny musical space. His opus 4 (1912) is a set of five musical "picture-postcard-texts" (*Ansichtskartentexten*), for solo singer and orchestra, on poems by his distinguished writer-friend Peter Altenberg, and opus 5 (1913) comprises four exquisite miniatures for clarinet and piano. The intimate orchestral mastery<sup>12</sup> in the postcards is as striking as his mastery of the quartet medium in opus 3—scintillating, brittle, yet intensely expressive. In the three orchestral pieces, opus 6 (1914–1915), this capacity is expanded to a triptych of strong moods and expansive forms, now turbulent and aggressive, now rich and lyrical.

Berg was now a master of all the musical resources that make his opera *Wozzeck* a monument to Western musical expressivity. Its source was *Woyzeck*, which was written in the 1830s by the scientist-socialist-playwright Georg Büchner (1813–1837) who portrayed the humiliations, obsessions, and final self-destruction of a private in the Habsburg army. With some omitted scenes but few other changes, Berg fashioned a poignant libretto in three acts with five scenes apiece, in which *Wozzeck* is a model or metaphor for all oppressed and hopeless persons. "Wir arme Leut" (we poor folk) "in heaven we'll be the ones who have to help with the thunder"—sentences from Büchner for which Berg invents heart-rending music. "Wir arme Leut" indeed becomes a musical no less than a textual emblem. The eloquence of the music, in which every character, every speech, every detail of the action connects with Berg's by now formidable expertise, is carried by the flow of melody and motif, the clear yet subtle phrasing, the absolute command of tempo, rhythm, texture, and climax and the power of the orchestral resources. The

opera is full of musical interconnections and cross-references of a complexity even surpassing those within Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*.<sup>13</sup>

As a guarantee of constructive cogency—but quite as much as a stimulus for his own compositional inspiration—Berg turned to well-tried forms to work to: Act 2 is a gigantic five-movement symphony, and Act 3 is a set of inventions (on a theme, on a single note, on a chord, and so on). The scenes of Act 1, showing Wozzeck in his personal relationships, are organized as follows: a suite (he is shaving his captain), a rhapsody on three chords (he is gathering sticks with his friend André), a military march (introducing the drum-major who will seduce Marie, the woman Wozzeck lives with), a lullaby (Marie and their illegitimate son), a chaconne with twenty-one variations (the doctor, who is experimenting on him in return for a few extra *groschen*), and a rondo (the beginning of Marie's infatuation).

A glissando chord for strings underpinned by a side-drum roll makes a slippery, sighing opening to the opera, then the oboe has a motif associated with Wozzeck and the cor anglais a slightly pompous, slightly ridiculous one, associated with the captain who admonishes “Langsam, Wozzeck, langsam” [slowly ...]. The music points up simultaneously the stifling dominance of the captain—who refers to Wozzeck in the contemptuously familiar third person—

Page 54

Wozzeck's insecurity (“Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann”), and a generally grotesque quality that will become by turns nightmarish, sinister, and homicidal.

The movements of the suite underlie the changing dialog: in the febrile prelude the captain reproves Wozzeck for hurrying (“what will I do with the extra ten minutes you save me?”); a pavane underlies the captain's absurd diatribe on Eternity; a viola cadenza accompanies further admonishment; and a rushing gigue characterizes the wind and Wozzeck is trapped into agreeing that it is blowing from south to north. The captain taunts him (contrabassoon cadenza) for being so “ganz abscheulich dumm” and then—to a gavotte—for having had a child “ohne den Segen des Kirches” (without the blessing of the church)—here a mock-solemn, yet somehow poignant, reference to church music. The captain is taken aback by the vehemence of Wozzeck's reply in the following Air (the longest solo in the opera)—“Wir arme Leut”; “Man hat auch sein Fleisch und Blut” (we're all made of flesh and blood); “it would be easy to be virtuous if one had money, a watch and an eyeglass.” The postlude is mostly a retrograde of the prelude, a device that for Berg symbolizes a basic inertia.

As Berg pointed out himself,<sup>14</sup> the audience is not conscious of this high organization—only of a supple, expressive musical flow making manifest the grotesque tragedy that is being played out.

All the same, the ingenuities not only help Berg toward variety and cogent construction (especially necessary when classical tonality no longer rules the pitch structure), but they also set his imagination racing. His method is to search for the musically most rich solution to his (self-imposed) problems.<sup>15</sup>

The level of musical resourcefulness never fails: through the vivid, multifarious genres of the Act 1 and through the five-movement symphony of the second (in the close-knit sonata-form of Act 2, Scene 1, the three themes represent Marie, the child, and Wozzeck). An extended tavern scene is laid out as a scherzo with ländler, waltz, and two trios (all repeated). It is here that Wozzeck, amid the drunken goings-on, sees Marie dancing with the drum-major and succumbs to murderous jealousy. The five inventions of Act 3 constitute Berg's most original musical structures, including the invention on a tone in which the pitch B is constantly reiterated in a myriad musical environments. Marie screams out "Hilfe!" on a high B, plunging to one or two octaves below as Wozzeck slits her throat, and the orchestra finishes the scene with a deafening crescendo on the same pitch. An eloquent interlude for orchestra alone (invention on a key)<sup>16</sup> follows this scene, then a scene in a sleazy tavern in which Wozzeck unavailingly tries to forget his guilt. He returns to the pool by the side of which Marie's body lies, wades out to retrieve the knife, and drowns (the music here is an unforgettable evocation of the ripples widening and spreading as he sinks). The captain and the doctor pass by. They think they hear something and flee. In the last scene, Marie's son is playing when the discovery of his mother's body is announced (innocent music here but nevertheless replete with cross-references to previous music). He goes off to see what the excitement is about.

In *Wozzeck*, and henceforward, stimulus and technique, ingenuities, musical

Page 55

strength, and musical diversity are fused in unprecedented acts of musical creation.<sup>17</sup> Thus, when—once again following Schoenberg's initiative—Berg turns to the twelve-tone method, he works out, not without agony, his own methods of using the series, forging the new discipline into acting as a powerful web of relationships. This is particularly telling in his second (and unfinished) opera *Lulu* (1929–1935). In music of utmost richness, Berg represents the life of an irresistible woman (a mythic femme fatale created by the playwright Frank Wedekind in *Erdegeist* [Earth Spirit] and *Die Büchse der Pandora* [Pandora's Box]) through her catastrophic relationship with men, her progress, passive or predatory, through three marriages and a lesbian relationship, to her escape from the law for the shooting of her second husband Dr. Schön, and her final status as a whore and murder-victim of Jack the Ripper. The basic series of twelve pitches in *Lulu* is subject to vast and volatile variation. Several other series are related to this basic set, standing for other characters, and developed with Berg's characteristic vividness and ingenuity. There are many other serial-related formations (see especially Perle [1983, 1985]; Jarman [1979, 1991]). Compared with strict Schoenbergian methods, the connections are relaxed, the principle being fecundity rather than pitch-discipline.

The *Lyric Suite* (1925–1926), for string quartet, declares by its title the nature of Berg's inspiration. Its six movements are laid out as a progression, from an *Allegro gioviale*, an *Andante amoroso*, through an *Allegro misterioso* (an extraordinary spectral piece entirely in the glassy sonority obtained by playing near the bridge [*sul ponticello* or *am Steg*]), with a *Trio estatico*. Then an *Adagio appassionato*, a feverish *Presto delirando* with a twice-recurring *Tenebroso* episode and finally a *Largo desolato*. The paradoxical quality that music possesses of being at one and the same time inarticulate in word meanings yet supereloquent in aural expression has never been so clear as in this masterpiece. Some of the movements or sections are twelve-tone in

pitch structure, some not; there are quotations from Wagner's *Tristan* prelude and from the *Lyric Symphony* of Alexander Zemlinsky, a friend, brother-in-law of Schoenberg, and in fact at one time Schoenberg's teacher. As well as this, there is a secret agenda, uncovered by Douglass Green and George Perle: the pitches B (H in German usage), F, A, B flat (B), which shape so much of the music, are the initials of Hannah Fuchs-Robertin and Alban Berg and the successive movements trace the emotional course of a love affair doomed to unfulfillment. The fading ending in which the instruments drop out one by one, leaving the viola repeating two pitches "dying" (*morendo*) somehow suggests far more than personal unfulfillment: rather unfulfillment as a condition of humanity (see especially Perle [1995]).

Berg's last work, the two-movement violin concerto, is a memorial to "an angel" Manon Gropius, the daughter of Alma Mahler and her second husband. Manon died in April 1935 of complications stemming from infantile paralysis. Berg had already a commission from Louis Krasner for a violin concerto, and Manon's death spurred him to write this tragic and yet finally consoling work.

Page 56

The two movements are laid out as four: Part 1 *Andante* and *Allegretto*; Part 2 *Allegro* and *Adagio*. Nowhere does a twelve-note series more manifestly saturate an extended piece of music. The series infills and extends the open strings of the violin (G, D, A, and E) in a most poignant fashion that lends itself, at Berg's will, to an emphasis of either its tonal or nontonal qualities. Its pitches are G, B flat, D, F sharp, A, C sharp, E, G sharp, B, C sharp, D sharp, and F. The four pitches at the end, the tritone, are used with especially telling effect. They are the first four pitches of a Bach chorale, *Es ist genug* (It is enough, Lord, relieve me of my yoke). The music in the heart-rending last section is drenched with the music of this chorale that appears complete, surrounded by marvelously controlled pitches, foreign to Bach's vocabulary but cogent to Berg's specially created twelve-tone world.

It is possible to think of Berg's music as a rich autumnal glow, the end and apotheosis of the romantic heritage in a final magnificent expressionist outburst. More rewarding is to learn to experience Berg's pieces in all their complexity—not a task easily accomplished—to value them for their intensity of expression and for the depth of their reference to the entire Western canon.

## NOTES

1. Quoted by Whittall (1997, 249).  
Other Schoenberg pupils, such as Egon Wellesz and Erwin Stein, should be included in this group but Wellesz himself in his book on Schoenberg says that he regarded Schoenberg, Webern, and Berg as an inner circle, and the twentieth century has endorsed this view. The sobriquet "Second Viennese School" implies renewal of the musical legacy of the Viennese
2. classical masters: Haydn, Wolfgang Mozart, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Franz Schubert. There is a certain paradox here: Schoenberg could demonstrate beyond doubt the classical derivation of his musical procedures, and this distinguishes them from Stravinsky's procedures, at least up to 1920, yet the advances Schoenberg made were so acute that the general musical public even now finds them more difficult than Stravinsky's.

- One could make an analogy here between Berg and Bach. Take for instance Bach's forty-eight preludes and fugues. Both preludes and fugues were common practice, and even the
3. idea of a collection in all possible major and minor keys was not original to Bach. But no one else had come anywhere near achieving the cogency (and conciseness) of his musical argument, still less the pungent individuality he gave to every one of these pieces. For accounts of early twentieth-century Vienna and of Berg's association with writers and painters such as Karl Kraus, Gustav Klimt, Oscar Kokoschka, Peter Altenberg, and Adolf
  4. Loos, see Redlich (1957) and Janik and Toulmin (1973). The philosopher of new music Theodor W. Adorno was a pupil of Berg's and attuned to his personality. See especially his account of Berg as man and composer in Adorno (1991). The Berg pupil, Willi Reich, wrote an obituary for him that ends: "Thanks, a thousand thanks
  5. for every moment lived with us and for us, for every smile of his bright yet still so puzzling countenance, for every note of his inconceivably intense and inspired work!" (see Reich [1965, 105]).

Page 57

6. In a letter to Erwin Schulhoff (November 27, 1919), he describes his senior officer as a drunken imbecile. An inkling of Schoenberg's supremacy as a teacher can be gleaned by perusal of his didactic books: his *Theory of Harmony* (Harmonielehre) of 1911, and those he wrote in the United
7. States—*Structural Functions of Harmony* (1954, rev. 1967) and *Fundamentals of Musical Composition* (1969). The depth and comprehensiveness of his knowledge and of his thought about the entire corpus of Western classical and romantic music is simply breathtaking. Berg's understanding and affinity are clearly shown in his well-known essay, written in
8. 1924, "Why Is Schoenberg's Music So Difficult to Understand?" For an English translation of this essay, see Reich (1965, 189–204).
9. In the operas, the same applies: they are full of catastrophe, yet drenched with Berg's sympathy for the plight of his protagonists and his sadness at ideals never to be realized.
10. Surely the most accomplished student piece ever written! "In the end our ears no longer made us feel we had to intervene, actually to introduce the keynote. All twelve notes came to have equal rights" (Webern, 47]). However, the last
11. sentence has to be taken with a pinch of salt. The Western ear carries a more or less nonnegotiable tendency to hear this music in terms of harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic ploys coming from two or three centuries of musical development. For a lucid account of Berg's structural use of intervals, which fan out symmetrically, see Perle (1983).
12. The technique here of using a huge orchestra as if it were a set of infinitely variable chamber groups has its origins in the practice of Mahler and of Schoenberg himself.
13. "[T]hat whole universe in perpetual motion revolving constantly around itself," as Boulez puts it in the opening quotation of this article.
14. In his lecture on *Wozzeck* of 1929. It is reprinted in Redlich (1957, 261–285). Such problems increasingly (from *Wozzeck* onwards) include retrograde passages, complex canons, musical palindromes (in which the music gets to a certain point and then repeats
15. itself in reverse), number symbolism, and coded messages (such as the opening phrases of the *Chamber Concerto* [1924], written for Schoenberg's fiftieth birthday, the German nomenclature of whose pitches are those to be found in the names Arnold Schoenberg,

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Anton Webern, and Alban Berg—as A(rmol)D, S (Es E flat), C, H (B natural) (o) E (n) B (B flat), E (r) G, and so on). For accounts of the importance and complexity of Berg’s secret programs and number symbolisms, see especially articles by Douglas Jarman and Barbara Dalen in Jarman (1989) and by Perle (1983, 1995).

16. D minor.

As an introduction to Berg’s technical and imaginative mastery, the reader with musical

17. training might care to study the multifaceted use of the three chords in the rhapsody, Act 1, Scene 2, and the invention on a rhythm, Act 3, Scene 3.

## SELECTED WORKS

*Seven Early Songs*, for voice and pianoforte (1905–1908)

*Schliesse mir die Augen beide*, for voice and pianoforte (his first setting of a text by Theodor Storm) (1907)

*Piano Sonata*, op. 1 (1907–1908)

Page 58

*Four Songs*, op. 2, for voice and pianoforte (1909–1910)

*String Quartet*, op. 3 (1910)

*Five Songs*, op. 4, for voice and orchestra (*Ansichtskartentexten*) (prose by Peter Altenberg) (1912)

*Four pieces*, op. 5, for clarinet and pianoforte (1913)

*Three Pieces*, op. 6, for orchestra (1914–1915)

*Wozzeck*, op. 7 (opera in three acts) (text adapted from Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck*) (1917–1922)

*Chamber Concerto*, for pianoforte, violin, and thirteen wind instruments (1923–1925)

*Schliesse mir die Augen beide*, for voice and pianoforte (second setting) (1925)

*Lyric Suite*, for string quartet (1925–1926)

*Der Wein*, concert aria for soprano and orchestra (from a Charles Baudelaire text translated into German by Stefan George) (1929)

*Lulu* (opera in three acts) (text adapted from Frank Wedekind’s *Erdgeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora*) (1929–1935)

*Concerto*, for violin and orchestra (1935)



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