



Alban Berg mit Kameraden in der Schreibstube

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## A Portrait in War

Berg's Personal, Universal Opera

In Tom Stoppard's 1974 play *Travesties*, the Zurich-based English consular official Henry Carr remembers a dream about James Joyce.

I had him in the witness box, a masterly cross-examination, case practically won, admitted it all, the whole thing, the trousers, everything, and I *flung* at him – "And what did you do in the Great War?" "I wrote *Ulysses*", he said. "What did you do?"

Bloody nerve.

That question, 'what did you do in the Great War?', was often asked during the 1920s, to test a man's machismo, as well as his sense of patriotism. For another key modernist, Austrian composer Alban Berg, the answer would have been equally simple: 'I wrote *Wozzeck*'. But as well as composing the first of his two operas, Berg served in the Austro-Hungarian Army. That experience afforded him essential insights into the life and mind-set of the common soldier depicted at the heart of his operatic tragedy, which Berg began in earnest in 1917, exactly a hundred years ago, and which was first produced at the Berlin State Opera in December 1925.

### Hell on the Hungarian border

It was in August 1915, just over a year after the outbreak of World War I, that Berg was conscripted. Considered fit for service – ‘like everybody else, without even being examined’, as he wrote to his wife Helene – Berg began military training in Vienna, during which time he preserved something of his usual routine, before moving to Bruck an der Leitha in October. Positioned on the Hungarian border, Bruck had been the heart of military operations in the Empire since the Napoleonic Wars. It was a foreboding place, undoubtedly for a composer more suited to the *gemütlich* ease of the Viennese district of Hietzing, and fellow cadet Jaroslav Hašek vividly captured the mood and stench of the garrison in his 1923 novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*.

In the men’s huts the soldiers shivered with cold and in the officers’ quarters they were opening the windows because of overheating. [...] Down in Bruck an der Leitha shone the lights of the Imperial and Royal factory for tinned meat. Here they worked day and night and processed various kinds of offal. Because the wind blew from that quarter towards the alley in the military camp, it brought with it the stink of rotten sinews, hooves, trotters and bones, which all went into the tinned soup.

To Helene, Berg described the place as ‘hell’ and quickly became ill due to the barracks’ ‘highly primitive’ sanitary arrangements, the hard beds and the perpetual winds. By 7 November, he had been consigned to the Reserve Hospital, following a complete physical breakdown. Examined the next day, Berg was found to have ‘bronchial asthma’, a complaint from which he suffered throughout his life, and there were ‘no prospects of cure’. Consequently, Berg was returned to Vienna, where he undertook office work at the War Ministry for the rest of the conflict.

### Unheard-of intensity

These experiences, not least the medical examinations, would have reminded Berg of a play he had seen in May 1914, a month before the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. It was not, however, a contemporary drama, such as Berg’s idol Karl Kraus’s *Die letzten Tage der Menschheit*, then still

in its inception, but Georg Büchner’s fragmentary *Woyzeck*. Written in 1837, though never completed before Büchner’s death the same year, the play surfaced after Austrian author Karl Emil Franzos discovered the manuscript in 1875 and released his edition four years later.

The task of editing the play had not been easy, given Büchner’s miniscule writing and that the ink was bleached by the passage of time – hence Franzos’s spelling of the protagonist’s name as ‘Wozzeck’ (preserved by Berg), instead of Büchner’s original ‘Woyzeck’. What had not faded, however, was the work itself. Offering a unique hybrid of naturalism and expressionism, the play, based on the downfall of a real-life Leipzig soldier, gained an avid following among the diverse literary cognoscenti of the *fin de siècle*, including Gerhart Hauptmann and Frank Wedekind, as well as, later, Bertolt Brecht. The first production took place in Munich in 1913 and Vienna received the play in 1914, when it was staged at the Residenzbühne (later Kammerspiele).

Berg had been a voracious play reader and theatregoer since his teenage years and was present at that production, as remembered by writer Paul Elbogen in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1981:

We young people knew the play very well from Franzos’s publication. A German actor, Albert Steinrück, rude and rather brutal, played Wozzeck. I sat in the gallery of the little Kammerspiele. Four rows behind me sat Alban Berg, whom I greeted as I came in because I had known him very well for years. They played the drama for three hours without the smallest interruption in complete darkness. Indescribably excited and enthusiastic I stood up amidst wild applause, met Alban Berg a few steps behind me. He was deathly pale and perspiring profusely. “What do you say?” he gasped, beside himself. “Isn’t it fantastic, incredible?” Then, already taking his leave, “someone must set it to music”.

Socially conscious though he certainly was, Berg’s response to the play was as much intellectual as it was emotional. ‘It is not only the fate of this poor man, exploited and tormented by all the world, that touches me so deeply’, he later wrote to Webern, ‘but also the unheard-of intensity of mood in each individual scene’. And although Elbogen’s reminiscence seems to suggest that, ‘already taking his leave’, Berg might have set to work immediately, history, as ever, is not so succinct.

### For Schoenberg, for Mahler

At the time he saw *Woyzeck*, Berg was composing his *Drei Orchesterstücke* op. 6. This three-movement score resembles, at least in homage, Schoenberg's *Fünf Orchesterstücke* op. 16, completed in 1909, with Berg duly following his former teacher's encouragement to write a series of character pieces for orchestra. The language of the *Orchesterstücke*, however, reveals that their inspiration was as much Mahlerian as it was Schoenbergian. In May 1911, Berg had dutifully kept watch outside the Löw Sanatorium on Vienna's Mariannengasse, where Mahler died, and the younger composer was now writing his elegy to the man who was, alongside Peter Altenberg, Kraus, Adolf Loos and, of course, Schoenberg, one of Berg's *Hausgötter* or household gods.

Beginning with susurrating gestures, not unlike Mahler's Ninth Symphony, the *Orchesterstücke* close with a march, whose final hammer blow directly recalls those in Mahler's nihilistic Sixth Symphony. Collectively and, indeed, contextually, these motifs suggest an encroaching apocalypse, what writer Hermann Broch described as the 'dread of the coming dehumanization, the dread of the coming silence of humanity, the dread of human suffering that proclaimed itself everywhere'. Berg's bellicose sounds, conceived prior to World War I but completed during the hostilities (before his conscription), were to be continued in *Wozzeck*. The initial ideas for the opera were even sketched on the same sheets as the *Orchesterstücke*, with the final movement eventually quoted within the body of Act I. But the creation of those scenes would have to wait until Berg was able to take leave from his work at the War Ministry in 1917 and there was, additionally, the small matter of the composer's relative innocence in practical opera making.

### Distant sounds

Writing theatrical works was largely unfamiliar to the Second Viennese School, but Schoenberg's monologue *Erwartung* op. 17 (1909), a vocalized iteration of his burgeoning expressionism, and *Die glückliche Hand* op. 18 (1913). Both were still waiting to be staged and although Berg created the piano reduction for Schoenberg's cantata *Gurre-Lieder*, he was not asked to assume the same task for either of the dramas. His most direct experience of opera before writing *Wozzeck* was therefore Franz Schreker's *Der ferne Klang* (1912), for which he had indeed

provided a piano arrangement, though Berg's reduction proved far too complex for rehearsal purposes, prompting Ferdinand Rebay to create a simplified version.

Regardless of Berg's later protestations that *Der ferne Klang* was 'awful', Schreker's multi-layered score and its focus on down-at-heel society, to say nothing of Schreker's natural gifts for characterization and dramatic pacing, provided Berg with a remarkable model. Musically, the high-stereo effects of *Wozzeck* were something Berg had directly absorbed from Schreker. Act II of *Der ferne Klang*, set in a Venetian brothel, features a particularly virtuoso soundscape, in which Schreker combines various on and off-stage choruses (including one in a passing gondola), an on-stage gypsy band and the 'psychological' orchestra in the pit. His evident fascination with *Raumwirkung*, or what Christopher Hailey describes as 'the interaction of timbral effect and acoustic space', left its mark on *Wozzeck*. Likewise, the riotous success of *Der ferne Klang*, both before and after World War I, afforded Berg a preview of his own later operatic triumph.

### Beginning work

The creation of a libretto would, in normal circumstances, have been Berg's first port of call with *Wozzeck* when he resumed, or rather properly began, work in 1917. And while a separate text was eventually published, the composer worked directly from Paul Landau's revised 1909 edition of the play. Berg preserved Landau's sequence of scenes, constructed from Büchner's non-sequential fragments, while omitting parts of the text, including those scenes in which Büchner repeated ideas, although Berg partially incorporated such passages into other tableaux. All of this was annotated directly onto the composer's copy, complete with a cast list, voice types and his 'Scenarium'.

The composition, including the formulation of that balanced, 15-scene structure, split equally between three more-or-less equal acts, was not without its crises and hiatuses. 'The problem', he wrote, 'became more musical than literary and had to be solved by the laws of musical structure rather than by the rules of dramaturgy'. But he dared to confide in Webern during the summer of 1918 that he was finally making progress and to Helene that he had, at last, found the musical expression for one of *Wozzeck*'s key entrances. Such confidence proved premature, however, and three years later, by June 1921, he wrote that Act III Scene 1 'still won't quite come'. Perhaps Schoenberg, who sent an encouraging letter around that time, had been rightly sceptical about the project.

I was greatly surprised when this soft-hearted, timid young man had the courage to engage in a venture which seemed to invite misfortune: to compose *Wozzeck*, a drama of such extraordinary tragedy that seemed forbidding to music. And even more: it contained scenes of everyday life which were contrary to the concept of opera which still lives on stylized costumes and conventionalized characters.

Ever the teacher, Schoenberg nonetheless stressed that Berg did eventually succeed – the score was completed in April 1922 – because of his unwavering faithfulness to his ideas (just as he had been faithful to Schoenberg). And yet, as Bernard Grun noted in his English-language edition of the composer's letters to his wife, 'Berg wanted to compose *Wozzeck* without Schoenberg's personal influence and was afraid that if Schoenberg returned to Vienna he would expect to be continually shown the score as it progressed – which Berg would find it impossible to refuse'. Distance, thanks to Schoenberg's own military service, living in Mödling and post-War travels to the Netherlands, gave Berg the space he required. The composition of *Wozzeck* therefore became an act of personal release, one in which the many facets of his musical personality, including the young Lieder composer, the avid Mahlerian and the semi-reluctant Schrekerian, as well as the Schoenbergian, fused to create a highly individual idiom.

### Scene, interlude and self-portrait

Berg's eventual choice to juxtapose the 15 scenes he had selected from Büchner with orchestral interludes was to become the crux of *Wozzeck*, in which the audience's emotions are constantly transferred between ostensible objectivity, as those observing find themselves alienated from the action as much by atonality as by the brutal concision of the text, and the more subjective orchestral commentaries – a parallel with Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* is partly germane here. In Berg's hands, these interludes can, however, also provide a disconnected, meta-theatrical note, as with the ascending and descending harp glissandos that denote the rise and fall of the curtain in Act II. 'I obeyed the necessity of giving each scene and each accompanying piece of entr'acte music – prelude, postlude, connecting link or interlude – an unmistakable aspect', Berg later wrote, describing them as having 'a rounded off and finished character'. And yet these postcards, if you like, can only be viewed (or heard) as a series.

And what of their language? Berg's music is not atonal for atonality's sake, rather he uses dissonance for its power to shock, 'penetrating the armour called ego', according to critic Arthur Jacobs. Instead of 'emancipating dissonance', as Schoenberg repeatedly avowed to the exponents of the New Music, Berg retains the late-Romantic tension of consonance versus dissonance. He frequently challenges aural resistance – dramatic violence begets musical violence – before leading the audience by the hand, telling us both when we should be appalled and when we should reach out to the poor folk pictured therein.

Linked to *Wozzeck*'s tormenters, dissonance proves particularly eloquent, including with the Captain's wildly distorted vocal lines. No less callous is the Doctor. It has been suggested that, introduced by orchestral bass notes slipping from A to E flat (Es or 'S' in German musical nomenclature), he poses a far-from-flattering portrait of Arnold Schoenberg. Berg, no doubt also remembering the medics in Bruck, mocks the Doctor by the use of dogmatic rhythms and swooping downward leaps, 'like a donkey', underpinned, at one point, by a prescriptive fugue. The Doctor and the Captain, who is further characterized by his rhythmic cough, are automatons of authority, just as the Drum Major is a sexually violent caricature of Heldentenor masculinity. And while *Wozzeck* may be as prone to repetition as his superiors, his mournful 'Wir arme Leut' has a manifestly different effect, providing a motivic anchor in an otherwise freewheeling musical world.

That rootlessness – tonal and, therefore, emotional – contrasts with what is unfolding beneath the musical surface, namely Berg's network of formal structures: variously, five character pieces in Act I; a five-movement symphony in Act II; and six inventions in Act III. Though these processes may indicate a level of abstraction and further distance from the drama, Berg's perennial fascination with symmetry, palindromes and retrogrades, here and in other scores, exposes the highly personal nature of *Wozzeck*. He might have insisted that no one 'pays any attention to the various fugues, inventions, suites, sonata movements, variations and passacaglias about which so much has been written' – indeed, knowledge of them is not essential – yet for those wishing to study the score, it is impossible to ignore Berg's fanatical engagement with the drama and, specifically, its central character.

Berg clearly saw himself in *Wozzeck*. The soldier's eerily visionary moments, gazing at the moon or rooting through the toadstools, may well echo the composer's interests in the occult. And Berg's experiences as a soldier, of course, provided another crucial link to *Wozzeck*, as he wrote to his wife in August 1918. 'There is a bit of me in his character, since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned,

in fact humiliated. Still, perhaps, but for this, that musical expression wouldn't have occurred to me.' Consequently, Berg included what can be interpreted as another musical cipher during Wozzeck's medical examination. In parallel to the Doctor's A–E flat (AS), Wozzeck's first words revolve around A and B flat for Alban Berg (B natural being written as H in German), which looks ahead to similar self-portraits in the *Lyrische Suite* and, as Alwa, in *Lulu*.

### Authorial confession

It is entirely because a 'soft-hearted, timid young man', as Schoenberg described Berg, approached Büchner's 'drama of such extraordinary tragedy' that the opera is so potent. Someone more hard-hearted might not have imbued the adaptation with the same intensity of self-identification, manifest in both its musical language and structural finesse. Berg simultaneously registered his horror at the drama and found the expression for it, using his own 'humiliation' during the War to artistic ends. But it is here that, significantly, he parts ways with his protagonist.

Where Berg's response manifests itself as art, Wozzeck turns to violence, not towards those who have degraded him, but against his (and the opera's) sole source of solace: Marie. Although not blameless, her only true fault is flirtation and she desperately but ineffectually tries to break loose when the Drum Major approaches and rapes her. Sexual violence is then quickly followed by mortal violence, with Wozzeck killing Marie and himself as a direct result of the brutal society in which they live. That is represented by the presence of the Captain and the Doctor after Wozzeck's death – here, again, the libretto departs from Büchner, who only stipulated two anonymous passers-by. The Captain's final word, 'schnell', directly relates back to his very first in Act I Scene 1, 'langsam', as if to close the cycle.

With the main action concluded, the final two episodes provide a commentary. First comes a highly Mahlerian interlude (based on an earlier piano piece by Berg), which he went on to describe in his 1929 'lecture on *Wozzeck*'.

From the dramatic standpoint this interlude is to be understood as an "Epilogue" following Wozzeck's suicide, as a confession of the author who now steps outside the dramatic action on the stage. Indeed, it is, as it were, an appeal to humanity through its representatives, the audience. From a musical standpoint this final orchestral interlude represents a thematic development of all the important musical ideas related to Wozzeck.

Its predominantly tonal language, centring on the 'tragic' key of D minor, just as each of the other scenes in Act III revolve around an individual musical element, provides a direct bridge between 'the author' and humanity's 'representatives'. Furthermore, the reiteration of the opera's leitmotifs in this Adagio, most crucially Wozzeck's 'Wir arme Leut', blaring out, fortissimo, on the trombones, binds the audience to the drama's tragic outcome.

The sense of disavowal that Berg may have seemed to accommodate during the preceding scenes is now revealed as a delusion, with the final tableau, featuring Wozzeck and Marie's child, cast in a very different light. Here, the cycle of violence continues, with the children, successors to the Captain, Doctor and Drum Major, taunting Wozzeck's heir. Their song, 'Ringel, Ringel, Rosenkranz, Ringelreih'n!', further highlights the opera's cyclical nature. But perhaps, as Douglas Jarman has suggested, the composer was providing another self-portrait. After all, Berg had also fathered a child with a woman called Marie, one of the kitchen maids at the composer's family home in Carinthia. Is this, ultimately, an opera about personal responsibility disguised as universal concern? Or vice versa? Clearly, musico-dramatic breadth establishes itself interpretatively too or, as Wozzeck tells Marie, 'man is an abyss. It makes your head reel, when you look down inside'.

In just 90 minutes, Berg's opera brings together the individual and the collective, the subjective and the objective, in a vertiginous synthesis. Such a fusion mirrors Berg's deft sublimation of the various musical influences of his apprenticeship and allows for Büchner's 1837 drama to speak as effortlessly to the hostilities that decided the ruin of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as it does to the world today. Truly, Berg's 'appeal to humanity' has lost none of its power, though his warning has still not been heeded. 'And what did you do in the Great War?' 'I wrote the most incisive opera of all time. What did you do?'

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