**Berg, Alban**

David Headlam

Composer Alban Berg (1885-1935) is best-known for his two operas, *Wozzeck* (premiered 1925) and *Lulu* (left unfinished but performed in incomplete form until the full premiere in 1979, as completed by Friedrich Cerha) and his *Violin Concerto* (premiered 1936). Berg's oeuvre consists of his opus 1-7 and then, without opus numbers, pre-Opus 1 songs, incomplete pieces, and arrangements, added by archival and sketch study.

Berg lived in Vienna, Austria, and took part in the remarkable intellectual and cultural activity of the era. Along with his teacher Arnold Schoenberg (from 1904) and his colleague in the Second Viennese School, Anton Webern, Berg began composing in the expansive style of tonality and form exemplified by composers Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms, and Gustav Mahler. He moved to the initially aphoristic style labeled atonal (1908), then to the Neoclassical style, which incorporates twelve-tone techniques (1923).

Berg began by composing songs, and he later orchestrated and published several of these songs in ‘The Seven Early Songs’ (1928). In his initial studies with Schoenberg, he developed his instrumental writing skills, and he completed the Piano Sonata Opus 1, the Four Songs Opus 2 and the String Quartet Opus 3 under Schoenberg's tutelage. The fourth song of Opus marks Berg's first atonal work, and this compositional period includes the subsequent string quartet, then the five orchestral songs entitled ‘The Altenberg Lieder,’ the four Clarinet Pieces Opus 5, and the three Orchestral Pieces Opus 6, which in some respects are studies for the following opera *Wozzeck*.

Berg composed his first opera *Wozzeck* while in military service in the First World War, and while his health precluded a combat role, Berg reflected some of his army experiences in the story of the soldier Wozzeck, which is based on Berg's adaptation of a play by Georg Buchner from 1837. In spite of his success with *Wozzeck*, Berg began to adapt Schoenberg's twelve-tone techniques in his subsequent Chamber Concerto for Piano, Violin and Winds, second string quartet the Lyric Suite, the commissioned Concert Aria Der Wein, on texts by Baudelaire. In 1905, Berg had seen a performance of Frank Wedekind's "Erdgeist", the first of the two Lulu plays (followed by ‘Pandora' s Box’.) Berg began work on his second opera, *Lulu,* in 1927, interrupted by Der Wein and in 1935 by the commission of the Violin Concerto by Louis Krasner. Berg dedicated the concerto to the ‘memory of an Angel’, Manon Gropius, the daughter of Alma Mahler and Walter Gropius who died at age 18. The integration of the Berg Chorale ‘Es ist Genug’ in the final movement of the concerto reflected this dedication, but also turned out to be Berg's own epitaph, as he died shortly after the concerto was completed, leaving *Lulu* incomplete.

Berg had a daughter Albine with Marie Scheuchl (1903), married Helene Nahowski in 1911, and from 1925 had a relationship with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, sister-in-law of Alma Mahler. Berg had asthma and generally troubled health, and died in 1935 from an infection originating in an insect sting. Revelations of Berg's life and the extent of his engagement with his contemporaries have emerged since the 1970's, but a complete biography has yet to be written. Berg's publisher is Universal Edition of Vienna, and a critical edition of Berg's music and writings, *Alban Berg: Sämliche Werke,* is in the process of publication by the Berg Foundation (Alban Berg Stiftung) in three series: compositions, analyses, and writings.

The principal proponents of Berg's music have been his pupils, Willi Reich and Theodor W. Adorno, and American composer and theorist George Perle. Analysis and interpretation of Berg's music begins with the composer's own writings on the music of Schoenberg and others, his commentary on contemporary issues surrounding music and art, and his sketches, notes, and letters detailing the compositional processes in his own music. Berg's writings were presented and interpreted initially by Reich and Adorno, and later by Hans Redlich, Perle, Douglas Jarman, Mark DeVoto, and others. The attention to form and detail in Berg's music and analytical writings, particularly in his lecture on *Wozzeck*, is reflected in Adorno's description of Berg as ‘the master of the smallest link’ (‘*Der Meister des kleinsten Übergangs’*) Adorno (1971) describes how the continual dissolution of motives is linked to the large-scale formal process. The alignments of "interval cycles" in a letter from Berg to Schoenberg (July 17, 1920) mark a starting point for Perle's comprehensive accounting of the cyclic and symmetrical formations that characterize all aspects of Berg's compositions, and in Perle's compositional realization of the implications of Berg's musical language in his system of twelve-tone tonality. The cyclic nature of Berg's music, found in pitch, rhythmic, formal, and serial elements throughout Berg's works, spans the alignments of cycles in the melodic and harmonic successions in the songs Opus 2, to the "Leitmotive" and "Leitsektions" of music associated with the central characters in Wozzeck, to the derivations of row material from a central row for the characters in Lulu and to the underlying basis of the row of the Violin Concerto in the open strings of the violin. Berg's self-conscious adoption of such ordering procedures, along with other number-based systems organizing every aspect from tempo and numbers of measures through large-scale formal transformation, leads to Adorno's description that "Few things are as noticeable in Berg as the combination of near imponderable subtlety with planning so manic that it reaches the point of number games."

The reception of Berg's music follows a path from his relatively unknown status to virtual overnight success with his first opera *Wozzeck*, then decline with the restrictions imposed by the Second World War and its aftermath. In the 1950s, Berg's music was largely ignored in favor of his colleague, Webern, who was felt to represent the future, which Berg along with Schoenberg were regarded as too mired in the failed past. With the broadening views of the 1960s, the emerging scholarship and advocacy of George Perle and Douglas Jarman, the "re-discovery" of important works such as the Altenberg Lieder Opus 4 by Mark DeVoto, the formation of the Alban Berg Society in 1968 with a board including Igor Stravinsky, and Leonard Bernstein's championing of Berg's musical forefather, Mahler, Berg's initial position as the most "popular" composer of his school, but with added respect for the complexity of his compositional craft, was re-established. In 1977, sketch study by Douglass M. Green and Douglas Jarman, and Perle's discovery of an annotated score of the Lyric Suite, a work with a public dedication to Zemlinky's Lyric Symphony, but a secret dedication to Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, started a research direction that has revealed the extent to which Berg reflected his life in his music. In his combination of an intensely personal expression with the systematic techniques of cycles and serial procedures, Berg's music is now seen as a significant assimilation of the romantic past with the modernist present.

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