

# Study on opera with the example of Oslo Opera's *Wozzeck*

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*In this brief study, we ask ourselves what are the components of a successful opera production, may them be on an artistic or technical point of view. I had the chance to take part in a seminar in Oslo's opera, to meet the most important fellows of the opera and to discuss opera and performance with professor David Levin by comparing different Wozzeck representations with the one that was being built in front of our indiscreet eyes.*

*The first part focuses on the music and its dramatic mechanisms. We unfortunately did not discuss much about the music in the seminar so I decided to make things right. The analysis explains how meticulously the music is composed and why it is very narrative by itself. In the second part we study some mechanisms of Christof Loy's Oslo production and see what they tell and how they complete the music. The third part is the part of the confrontation of the first parts with the pragmatic reality. Opera is a highly picky art form in which every mechanism is thought one way or another. But it also is an art of the compromise because it asks hundreds of workers from various fields to give the best of themselves in a context of hard pressure and financial crisis.*

## A dramatic music

In this first part, we discuss some musical aspects of the opera. Despite the first appearances, the music is not a mess at all, but draws a dramatic line which tells a lot about the characters and their psychology.

## A modern use of ancestral forms

Right after the beginning, the paradigm of the *ABA* form (Clements 2017), which has probably been the most used form in all the history of musical composition, is being upsetted. The first *A* (let's call the two of them  $A_1$  and  $A_2$ ) is supposed to announce a theme, phrase, or the main idea of the musical piece,

which is to be developed more freely and expressively in the contrasting  $B$ , and to be re-introduced in  $A_2$  as rigorously as it was introduced in  $A_1$ . What Berg does here is completely reversing it. His  $B$  is a huge five-movement symphony in a less atonal style and that contains some Wagnerian chromatic progressions. It eventually contains the more rigorous and static forms : scherzo, rondo, fantasia and fugue whereas the two other acts are more freely built (the third movement is a set of musical inventions). Each scene in the opening and closing act holds more from the chamber music with impressionist touches than orchestral music. The first act is the act of introduction, the second of development, and the last is the act of catastrophe. The development is thus logically accompanied by a more continuous music, but the character being so different that chamber music of the first and third acts creates contrasts and distance between them.

The whole opera is meticulously composed on an architectural construction, a deeply personal construction. Each scene is a particular musical form with its own coherence. In the first act, each scene introduces a new character, and the complicated forms are associated to the complicated characters : the passacaglia, probably the harder baroque dance to write, is associated to the doctor. This structure, associated to a dodecaphonic theme ( $E\flat B G C\sharp C F\sharp E B\flat A F A\flat D$ )<sup>1</sup> and twenty-one variations makes the ironically doctor convoluted. Each sophisticated form is associated to the doctor or the drum-major by an "ironic class privilege" (Jameux 2002) ; each part of the structure gives Berg the opportunity to reinvent the form and appropriate it to serve the drama. As an example the inventions are not standard inventions on themes but they create new idioms : invention on a theme, tone, rhythm and key. But each is on purpose : the *Invention on a note* is the scene of the murder and Berg plays around the pole  $B$ , making it diabolically stressful, with pedals, accents, tritones, etc.

Berg used an extend orchestra and special bands (marching or tavern band) but not once all the musicians play together. This is not about putting random instruments together, this is about creating an exclusive scheme of orchestral colors. Even if only few people can recognize one of these forms by hearing them, all this architecture surrounds the atmosphere and gives landmarks (like the fact that each act ends on the same harmony). This whole work is to be remembered as a remarkable work of synthesis.

This succinct study of the form of *Wozzeck* is already enough to understand why this opera was such a crucial step in the music's history. Even if the whole opera is a mix of different idioms, it keeps a self-coherence. It made a bridge between the standard "numbers structure" (1. Recitative, 2. Aria, 3. Recitative,

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1. Those twelve notes are heard first on a cello recitative. This shows that they are a "voice" in themselves.

etc) and the Wagnerian lyrical drama (Rabetet 1969). To that extent Berg stands as one of the few to have developed such a personal architecture which is at the same time useful to the well the understanding of the opera<sup>2</sup>. By avoiding the Wagnerian *durchkomponiert* music<sup>3</sup> he had no choice but choosing one form per scene and to compensate the variety of forms by the coherence of music (Reich 1932). Unlike his master Schoenberg, he considered the beauty and the expression above the truth (Rabetet 1969). No doubt that one would not fully realize the distance between Marie and Wozzeck without the confrontation of Marie's perfect fifth and Wozzeck's tritone, or appreciate the madness of the doctor without his rhythmic and jerky voice. Berg wanted people to understand the opera, and like he said himself, to understand its social implications. He did not compose its opera as an art for the kings and queens.

## Use of popular music and Erinnerungsmotives

Another step for Berg to make people understand *Wozzeck* was to include "easy" musical parts : clear themes, symmetry in the scenes, perfect fourth, tonal elements (Jameux 2002) (*Invention on a key*, A harmonies associated to Marie). The most important thing however is probably the use of songs and popular forms. For example in the third scene, Marie is introduced the first time with the military march : a very rhythmic, hardly melodic music, emphasized by the text "Tschin Bum, Tschin Bum Bum Bum Bum Bum", which is more spoken than sung. This way, Marie is immediately associated to a military context. This is a first glimpse of her affair with the drum major. Note also that the drum major is a tenor, while Wozzeck is a baryton ; traditionally it was the other way around : the husband would be the tenor and the lover would be the baryton<sup>4</sup>. Right after this military march, Marie sings a lullaby to her son. Immediately recognizable by the audience, it shows her deep and true love for her son. This lullaby is baldly interrupted by Wozzeck, without any continuity, to show the distance established between those two protagonists<sup>5</sup>, the difficulty they face to communicate, the differences they have in there feelings. Her murder by Wozzeck is announced when the crystalline *A-E* fifth (played by woods with arpeggios on the harp) is disturbed by the tritone *B-F*, *B* being the note on which Wozzeck kills her in the third act.

This leads us to study the themes in the score. Berg talks about Erinnerungsmotives, or leitmotifs, which can be associated to a character, an emotion, an object, and many other things (but we will use the word "theme" to save space). The doctor's theme opens the opera. It is a rather sly theme which goes

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2. This is quite different to Schoenberg's obsessive precision and rationality.

3. A musical composition which follows more a narrative line than a precise form.

4. Note that the doctor is a Bass-Bouffe, to emphasize his grotesque .

5. We will later see how Mr. Loy completes this fact with his staging.

up and down, and it associates the doctor and to the inconsistency of his statements. Marie however has many themes : the "song" theme ( $A-A-B\flat-E\flat-B\flat-A$  and the repeated one half-tone above), and the fifth we mentioned above. This fifth really is of major importance since it occurs as a relief for the audience in a context of disturbed music associated to *Wozzeck*. Would Marie have such a music if she was a man croqueuse ? Probably not. It would be rhythmic, fast, potentially frivolous, but not dreamlike. The use of the harp, the slow and soft string crescendo (no winds at all) create a set of abstract sound layers. This portrays Marie as deeply in love of her *Wozzeck*, which love is interrupted by the clumsy efforts of *Wozzeck*. Her affair with the drum-major occurs because the drum-major gives her what she needs and what *Wozzeck* can no longer bring her.

Objects and affects are also portrayed by those Erinnerungsmotives. Here are two very interesting mechanisms. A famous one is the leitmotiv of "Wir arme Leut!" ("We poor people!"), which is a minor chord and not a "theme" strictly speaking. Highly recognizable, it appears when people can no longer act by themselves but when they are acted upon. It occurs several times in the piece, and this is a central problematic of *Wozzeck* : how does poverty affect the social interactions, how is society affecting people and how its effects differ when the people are rich or poor ? Another theme, very subtle, is the theme of the earrings offered to Marie by the drum-major since it appears during the rape of Marie, suggesting that she somehow consents to this rape. The music is suggestive in itself and relates to the concept of orchestral voice developed by Professor Nanette Nielsen (Nielsen 2012).

## A palet of singing technics

In *L'école de Vienne. Les chemins de la musique*. (Jameux 2002), Dominique Jameux reminds that the original *Woyzeck* by Büchner had Lieder the actor had to sing. If this process deliberately breaks the narrative speech in a play, Berg's concern was to make a continuous narration. In that sense, this opera is more than a play with music, it is an appropriation of two genres. This consideration made him use the *sprechgesang* technic (literally "spoken-sung"). This was first used by Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* and it is hardly defined. It is sounds free than an *arioso*, it is not written as a recitative<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps it is easier to understand it when it is compared to other technics : sung (basic singing technic), *sprechgesang* (right tone but speak inflexions, speaking domination), half sing (right tone, singing vibrato but remains of speak inflexions) and full singing. *Sprechgesang* is that it is opera singing without the vertiginous vibrato and diva caricature of opera singing, the technic is hidden. Is *Wozzeck* all

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6. There has been lot of discussions on how to write this *sprechgesang* on a score. Schoenberg himself had trouble explaining his singers how to do it (Rabetet 1969).

about social implications ? Erasing the gap between opera's technics and non initiated people is certainly a good way to achieve Berg's will to make people think. Still today most people who say they hate opera hate it because of the singing technic. It is brilliant to make an opera without any recitative, to make musical words with realistic nuances (Elder 2013).

The laugh of the captain in the first act is a good example of *sprechgesang*. When we encounter Wozzeck and Andres together for the first time, Wozzeck gradually goes from speaking to singing while Andres remains in *sprechgesang*. Why ? It is not obvious but it seems that Wozzeck goes singing as his thoughts are focuses on the blood moon, to prevent us of the future murder. The *sprechgesang* is also crucial in the first scene with the doctor since the notes of the doctor are hardly audible, only the rhythm remains. He speaks/sings like a broken robot, showing all the artifice and fraud of his theory.

## Conclusion on the music

This short study can only suggest the deep richness of the score. It is less music than an opera by Mozart, because it has to tell a lot more. Why does it had to be such hard to listen ? Because in real life people don't sing. They speak and their speaking is rarely beautiful but the intonations and breaths tell a lot that words do not tell. It is fair to assume that Berg wanted to render this in his music. This a bit paradoxical, but only Opera tolerate those mysteries, and the stage director's role is to embrace all those concepts and to build something that the music cannot tell.

## Christof Loy's production

The idea of this part is to demonstrate how Christof Loy's production completes very fine Alban Berg's music. When we discussed with Mr. Loy about his production, we eventually came up discussing the role of spaces : he did created them as a claustrophobia factor. We extend this concept by stating that the whole stage represent an invisible kind of jail.

## Social invalids against order representatives

In our world and in most of our societies, prisons are made such that prisoners feel in prison. But Wozzeck's world is a dystopian world with different standards of normality and madness<sup>7</sup>, but their world stands as a prison. The prisoners ignore they live in this prison yet the disposition of the set prove that they are

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7. Is the fool a fool in their world or our world ?

acted upon : the walls move at different occasions and pay no attention to the characters. If a character leans on a wall, he/she must go away before the wall crushes him/her. In the first scene, Marie is alone in a space (the scene is divided into maximum three distinct spaces), and she has to move out when the wall begins to move all of a sudden. Those movements of walls are unpredictable, no mechanism is apparent and it does not seem rational at first sight. The question is to know who this prison is made for and who decides the rules.

First statement : the only people-characters of the piece are the poor people (Wozzeck, Marie, Andres and Margret). They are real people that the system (we define the system to be the person, the people, or the tools that control the walls) aim to manipulate, and they also are the only people to maintain affective relationships each other. Nevertheless they are all tragically alone, they aim to be independent but their whole lives are dictated by their social abilities. It even seems that their ability to maintain social relations is associated to their ability to make their way in the spaces. Andres is quite able to fit in a group of soldiers (men choir of act II, scene 5) despite his difficult relationship to Wozzeck and does not seem to have a lot of troubles<sup>8</sup>. On the opposite side, Marie cannot maintain either Wozzeck or the drum-major relationship. She is struggled between the industrialized, unhumanized world in which she was born and Wozzeck's world of unbalance. Spaces tell a lot about their relationship in act II scene 3 when they finally break the ice. All the walls are moved out to the sides and the two lovers are in a wide and empty grey room. This unexpected vastness suggests the drastic emotional distance between the two of them.

Second statement : the other non-people-characters are defined by their class in the society : doctor or soldier, class that were considered to be the more respectable ones from the eighteenth century to Berg's epoch. The doctor and the captain - who talk a lot in the opera - play their role for the system by educating (the captain makes statements about Wozzeck's morality and to make him work) and curing (doctor's role) the people-characters. They are functions, not humans. The drum-major is ambiguous in the sense that he just represent the manly male. His function may be to reproduce with a "fine woman" to make new instruments for the system, that is to have children.

## The invisible jail

Christof Loy said "I have to show what is real". In this part we use our previous observations and this citation to finally understand who is the prison made for. From the audience's point of view, this prison is an horizontal prison

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8. Imagine Wozzeck to be House, Andres to be Wilson and Marie to be Cuddy in the last seasons of *House, M.D.*.

since the characters only evolve on the horizontal axis : they go from room to room, they walk horizontally only, the man choir is horizontally lenghtened, etc. The possibility for characters to go the other way, to "cross" the jail seems to be a tough task. There is almost always a wall in the back of the scene, and when there is not, it is because we are in an exterior scene. The straight row of canes of those exterior scenes however is here to prevent characters to cross the prison border, more than to initiate pastoral atmosphere<sup>9</sup>. The only character to cross this wall at any moment is Marie, when she is being murdered by Wozzeck. She first circles around Wozzeck, but when she understands her fate, she runs out of the prison and Wozzeck stabs her as soon as she goes out. One can only leave this prison through death.

Both those people-characters seem to find a moment of clairvoyance at some parts in the performance. Marie goes back to the essentials of her beliefs just before being murdered, when she goes beyond the black-curtain with her child and the fool to read the Marie-Magdalene passage from the bible. This is a moment of introspection, she finally starts thinking about what is happening to her and to control her emotions with her intellect. As far as Wozzeck is concerned, he goes beyond the black curtain at three different occasions : act I scene 1 (he has his hallucinations and he watches in the audience's direction), act II scene 4 (after the tavern scene, when he saw Marie dancing with the drum-major) and act III scene 2 (after the murder). At each different occasion, Wozzeck is more lucid than he ever was, exception of the murder<sup>10</sup> and also seems to be in a complete introspection. As Mr. Loy said it, Wozzeck knows that he will be judged, by himself, by the doctor, by the captain, and he takes this time for him. The hallucinations are indeed not rational but they at least have the advantage of getting him out of his industrialized reality. He is concerned by his concerns and not by the captain's morality or the doctor's pseudo-cure, that is, he is not acted upon.

When Marie and Wozzeck go out of the prison, they don't really : they do physically cross the border, but the black curtain indicates a different space than the theatrical scene, the mental space we descussed. The truth that Mr. Loy talks about is then that all those characters are in a mental jail, and that we, as the audience, are getting to it as well. They cannot escape their head when they are alive. Their pure madness is the vector of the claustrophobia Mr. Loy told us about.

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9. Creating a realistic stage is clearly not the main problematic of the director. The fact that all the action occurs in the same rooms makes no realistic sense at all. Consequently we cannot consider those canes simply as a ambience element.

10. He is at the time very rational since he knows that the deep love and trust he has known with Marie will never come back. He kills her to keep some kind of a well-rounded relationship that will remain intact. Suffering of loss is better than suffering from a degrading relation.

My opinion is that the system is the association of Alban Berg and the stage director Christof Loy. The music sets the stage by its effects, and the staging is here to be more explicit. Mr. Loy put the characters in a prison because he can do it and that is the occasion to give the original score a new meaning, a meaning which is not an esthetic position but a philosophical opinion, in the sense that the staging is not here to support the music but on the contrary, the music supports the message sent by the staging. There is no fourth wall in this prison because the audience is jailed with the characters. The non-people-characters (doctor, captain) represent the important actors of our real society : companies, politics, social networks, advertisements, bosses, etc. The staging is all about social relationships, class influences and how those affect 90% of people in our world. The social anxiety created by the soldiers, the doctor and the class-representatives in Wozzeck's world is created by social networks in our world ; people live by the reaction of other people to their image, creating a vast misunderstanding of human relations. But unlike Wozzeck, few people realize their social madness and decide to react to it and to take time to think. Mr. Loy wants us to realize that what happened to Marie and Wozzeck may soon happen to every one. Opera is an efficient media because many different people go to the opera and that art is sometimes more explicit than a boring seven-hundred pages book. If Wozzeck stares at the audience when he is beyond the black curtain, it is because Mr. Loy wants Wozzeck to connect at us and to warn us. That is, Wozzeck's clairvoyance moment is a warning toward us.

## Pragmatic reality of building an opera

### The modern opera

The concept of production as a whole thing is quite new in the history of the opera. Wagner's Gesamtkunstwerk was certainly not applied everywhere and until World War II, an appealing opera performance was guaranteed by the prima donna<sup>11</sup>. But with the growing importance of advertisements after World War II the public to come to opera was getting more and more eclectic, and the opera houses decided to change their strategy by putting the accent on the stage director, the maestro and the set designer. It was the beginning of our contemporary concept of opera production, which was helped by the fantastic technological enhancements in the electric and electronic machineries to allow new perspectives of set and stage designs. Despite the financial crisis of the

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11. Literally the "first lady", she was the most important female singer of a performance, most of the time a soprano. Her fame was enough to make people come to the opera, like the Callas or Montserrat Caballé.



last decades, opera has been at the heart of new social and cultural politics : new opera are always built and are meant to establish new architectural and acoustic standards<sup>12</sup>. Rentability is now hoped to be achieved by the cheap subscriptions for young adults who discovered the classical opera with very fine digital recordings.

That being said, it is not that surprising that each opera house develop its own esthetic and way of doing things. The seminar in which we took part as students was the occasion to meet the most important characters of an opera house : director, stage director, maestro, set designer, assistants, stage manager (the person who coordinates and gives the orders for all the technicians working on the stage). We learnt that taking a production from a house A to a house B is impossible without significant modifications. Oslo's *Wozzeck* was created in Frankfurt in 2016 but right from the start, both houses began to work with the stage director Christof Loy and the maestro Lothar Koenigs many month before the premiere and established the pros and cons producing a same piece in two houses with different visions and habits. Annilese Miskimmon who is the new director of Oslo's house insisted on the fact that managing a house here in Scandinavia is a very particular thing because people are different than anywhere else in the world and because those countries do not have such a big opera tradition. The wait is different, the relation to art is different, and at the end, building this piece for both Oslo and Frankfurt was a real challenge. Nowadays, houses tend to need each other because of the financial recession, but they of course aim to be independent, that is also why good work is so crucial. It is a strong victory for a young Scandinavian house to be on an equal foot with an old german house.

## Case study of this production of *Wozzeck*

The Oslo opera house is a new house with new technicians. The stage manager is a Norwegian musicologist who has been employed at the creation of the opera with no technical skills and whose task was to create an efficient working team. This situation is the same for many people in the opera<sup>13</sup>. The productions are the reflect of those working processes and so are the rehearsals. The first rehearsal we saw was an orchestral rehearsal with Mr. Loy's assistant (the person that makes sure that the rehearsal respects the staging of the stage director when the stage director is not present at this time). There were conse-

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12. This is comparable to the constructions of operas in Western Europe during the nineteenth century. Opera houses were the results of politic strategies more than musical ambitions. They symbolized power of nations and were created at the end of vast and beautiful avenues, like in Paris or Vienna.

13. There must not be any misunderstanding here, those teams are not amateurs. They are very professional, and have the strength to build new processes.

quently three main drivers : the maestro, the assistant and the stage manager. And this was a bit confusing, because since no one is officially the chief, everyone wants to be the chief. The maestro was conducting some specific passages for the orchestra, but he was from times to times interrupted by the assistant who wanted to rehearse coordination with the stage mechanisms. Those mechanisms had an issue and the stage manager tried to explain that the problem could not be fixed instantly. The assistant would not agree and both of them would hanger quickly. Hopefully, the maestro's diplomacy helped to make things better. Finally at the first rehearsal with Mr. Loy, the assistant was here but stayed quiet, because each rehearsal is somebody's rehearsal, and non-drivers must remain quiet even if they have a (clever or not) objection. The next orchestral rehearsal showed that diplomacy was a crucial vector of productivity since the maestro used sentences like "Violins, it is wonderful, really the sound is really beautiful, but on bar 236, I need more crescendo" instead of "Bar 236, more crescendo the violins". It is hard to get the job done when you have hundreds of artists' egos in one place at the same time.

To resume, nobody is the chief, but everybody is the chief of a rehearsal at some instant  $t$ . The modern opera is a total art and audiences expect opera houses to be great in every artistic and technical domain, but this total art is too demanding and technical to be handled by a single person, that is why people must know each other to rely on each other. This is also why a production requires so many months to be built ; the compromises are inevitable but each person gives the best and the production is a success. The stage designer told us many times that he had to explain directors that their ideas, no matter how brilliant they were, were not realizable financially or technologically speaking. That is, everyone had to discuss with each other to find better solutions that would content everybody. The result of all those people working together and accepting compromises is probably far better than the result of one person only.

Knowing those pragmatic and technical constraints can make the analysis of a production more difficult. During the seminar with professor David Levin, we established a theory that explained shadows and lights on the back-wall at specific moments of the action. We discussed this theory with the set designer and he immediately broke it, those shadows were simply an artefact of the light he chose, they were not intentionally created. And the light was created on a feeling with the stage director. This recalls us that everything cannot be interpreted, even if some theories can sometimes look truly amazing. We discussed many hours about the production during the seminar, but we forgot that we were working on a beta version of the production, which even if it was produced in Frankfurt, was unfinished yet. Opera is a constantly moving art, a living art, and like all living things, some things are more important than others, some are just here because they are the consequences of more important processes.

*This whole paper remains general, too general sometimes, but I hope that it will convince you that making an opera stands of a wonderful miracle. Berg gave the world a score full of details, each note being exactly where it has to be and saying a lot about the characters. Christof Loy and Lothar Koenigs took this score as a precious gift. As the maestro says, "the score is my testament, I have to respect it. The score is my testament.". They analyzed it, respected it, and took all they could take from it in order to create something with clever implications, a performance that would ring in people's minds across weeks and months after the performance. All-together with the stage designers, the assistants, the technicians, they did achieve to render the social implications that Berg wanted, social implications that stand as a warning to our social habits.*

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