

## ALBAN BERG

Iain Hamilton  
and  
David C F Wright

It is one of the great injustices in music that people become angry and offensive if anyone criticises Bach, Schubert and Chopin, for example, and yet these objectioners can and do savage and vilify composers such as Berg, Webern, Bartok and others. How can people be so harsh?

Alban Berg was a great composer and, unlike some composers we could name, had a marvellous use of colour in his music.

He was born on 9 February 1885 in Vienna to a family of comfortable means. He was the third of four children born to Johanna and Conrad Berg. It appears that he had a happy childhood although his father died in 1900 and Alban was mainly self-taught until he studied with Schonberg and the resultant friendship, his happy marriage on 3 May 1911 to Helene Nahowski and his international and deserved success during his lifetime added to his contentment.



Before the age of fifteen, he had written some seventy songs without any musical training. It is somewhat unusual for a composer to start his career with vocal music when you think that Stravinsky and Bartok, for example, began with major orchestral works. What Berg did was honour literature and the philosophic side of life, sometimes using mystical texts.

In 1904, Berg met Schonberg and studied with him for about six years. Schoenberg had a marvellous grasp of traditional harmony and counterpoint as did Webern. Schoenberg's two books, *Harmony and Structural Functions* were well-written and logical as well as inspiring. The chromaticism of great composers was also highlighted to great effect, particularly as seen in Liszt and Wagner, and were, therefore, not symbols of dull and predictable harmony and which paved the way for twelve-note or serial music. It is important to note that Schoenberg never taught serial composition.

It has to be remembered that from about 1880 to 1900, the standard of music in Vienna had declined in that it had not developed. It was all much of a muchness. This is why changes had to be made and, if not, anachronism would set in and originality would be a thing of the past.

What Berg went on to achieve was a magnificent list of works, quite unlike the shorter gems of Webern. Berg's *Wozzeck* and the *Chamber Concerto* are unthinkable in terms of Webern. Berg's earlier works such as the *Piano Sonata Op 1*, the *Three Songs Op 2*, and the *String Quartet Op 3* date from his period of study with Schoenberg and are clever and individual works. It is said that the lieder style of Brahms may be behind his songs which style was carried on by Richard Strauss and Debussy. The *Op 2* songs are basically tonal, whereas the *Sonata* and *Quartet* are not and, as no sharps or flats were in the key signature, some have foolishly assumed that they are both in the key of C. The editor of an internet music journal bullied me to tell him what keys they were in!

The *Quartet* has a fine sense of form which makes the work even more coherent and acceptable to the discerning public. Even the enormous climaxes are built up in convincing logic.

This drama was to show itself effectively in *Wozzeck*, which is not only a powerful work but an emotional work which moves audiences to tears, even those who may not naturally like Berg's compelling music. And his style is unique showing a fantastic imagination. All great composers must be original and develop.

Berg's development continued with the *Five Orchestral Songs* to texts by Peter Altenburg Op 4, the *Four pieces for clarinet and piano* Op 5, and the *Three Pieces for Orchestra* Op 6 all very fine works. One of the many achievements is that Berg uses a very large orchestra with quadruple woodwind, six horns, four trumpets, four trombones, two harps, a large percussion section and strings, but the music is never thick or turgid but is noted for its clarity. He was not a noise merchant. As with the clarinet pieces, there is a wonderful sonority and occasionally moves from atonality to the core of D.

One could compare the Opus 6 pieces with Bartok's *Four Orchestral Pieces*, Op 12 written about the same time.

Berg has the capacity to evoke a fitting atmosphere and with great mastery.

From 1915 to 1918, Berg was in the Austro-Hungarian Army and, when time permitted, he worked on his opera *Wozzeck* compiled from fragments of Georg Buchner's drama and made his own libretto. It is in three acts with fifteen scenes all quite short and unfolding the tragedy. If there is any influence it may be Wagner. Tonality is almost non-existent but it is not serial. There is some bitonality and occasionally a hint of D minor. Serialism first appeared in his *Lyric Suite* of 1925-6.

The opera employs smaller musical forms in the fifteen individual scenes. The first Act is like a suite with a rhapsody, a military march, a lullaby, a passacaglia and a rondo. Act Two uses symphonic form with a fantasia and fugue, largo, scherzo and rondo. In Act three inversions are used. *Wozzeck* remains for all time to be one of the most evocative of operas. We have symbolism of the setting sun, watery death, unbridled lust, diseased minds, and emphasis on ferment, decay and death before the final transfiguration, all masterly expressed.

After World War I, Berg took on private pupils

Next came the *Chamber Concerto* for violin, piano and orchestra written between 1923 -5. The chamber orchestra is of thirteen wind instruments. The first movement is for piano and orchestra, the second is for violin and orchestra and the finale is for both. The central slow movement is beautiful in which the material is excellently handled.

The *Lyric Suite* for string quartet dates from 1925-6 and was a great success being remarkable in its resourcefulness and it exploits what a quartet can do. Movements one three and five are quickish while the others are slowish. The final quotes from the opening prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*. It has been said that this work was a document of his private affair with Hanna Fuchs (1896-1964). She had married the wife of a friend of Bergs, Herbert Fuchs Roberttin, but Hanna had an affair with Berg from about 1925.

*Der Wein* is a concert aria for voice and orchestra which is largely set with a rising harmonic scale of D minor. The text is by Baudelaire and was said to be a rehearsal for *Lulu*. The work is lucid and textured, complex but never thick. It includes some of Berg's traits such as endless passages for muted trumpets, the delicate writing for strings and the economic writing for piano and saxophone. There is an almost unbearable refinement and sensitivity and unearthliness.

The *Violin Concerto*, dedicated to the memory of an angel, took some time to be accepted because of the prejudice against new music. On hearing of the death of Manon Gropius on 22 April 1935, the daughter of Mahler's widow, Berg was much moved. The angel was only eighteen. The concerto is

in two parts, each part consists of two separate parts. The chorale *Es ist genug* is woven into the finale with great skill in what is a truly wonderful and elegiac work.

The melody *Es ist genug* was written by Johann Rudolf Ahle and used by Bach in his cantata number 60. The text reads

It is enough,  
Lord, if it pleases Thee  
Then release me.  
My Jesus, come.  
Goodnight now, O world  
I journey to heaven's house  
I do there securely in peace.  
My great suffering remains behind.  
It is enough.

Some have said that Berg had a fascination with the number 23. Some have opined that it was a code used to depict certain personal matters of intimacy, while others have said it refers to an asthma attack which occurred on the 23rd of a month.

We have commented about the decline of music in Vienna from 1880 to 1900 but it should be recalled how cruel Vienna was to many of its famous composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schonberg, Webern, and Berg all shamefully ignored while their fame was spread further afield. It is true that some British composers were, and are, ignored in their own country but admired in the USA and places like Germany.

The last work of Berg was the opera *Lulu* based on the tragedies *Erdebeben* and *Pandora's Box* of Wedekind. It is sordid and ends with *Lulu* meeting Jack the Ripper. The seediness is captured well, particularly in the jazz scene where there is ragtime and an English waltz. The piano score was completed, but not the orchestral version of the third Act.

Berg never heard *Lulu* or the *Violin Concerto*. He died of blood poisoning from what was thought to be an insect bite which caused a carbuncle on his back. His death was on Christmas Eve 1935, in a hospital in Vienna. He was 50 years of age.

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