

# A Guide to Alban Berg's Opera *Wozzeck*

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THIS is the second of the monographs to be issued by the magazine, MODERN MUSIC. The publication of the series was undertaken last year as a means of bringing before the public certain important studies which require treatment longer than a magazine article permits and shorter than is prescribed by the usual book length. It is hoped that the appearance from time to time of such "handy manuals" as this one may encourage the development of a special and interesting type of music literature.

Dr. Willi Reich, the author of *A Guide to Wozzeck*, is one of the best known critics of Central Europe. Intimate association with Alban Berg, Arnold Schönberg and their group, and a detailed research into their works have made him an outstanding authority on the music of the Viennese school. In addition to being widely recognized as one of the most scholarly commentators on contemporary music, writing for the journals of Holland, France, England, Germany and Austria, he is a performer on the clarinet and a Doctor of Engineering.—[Ed.]

## ALBAN BERG

ALBAN BERG was born in Vienna, February 9, 1885, and except for a few brief journeys has spent his whole life in that city. His musical talent, apparent at an early age, developed for a time without schooling. But in 1904 he first met Arnold Schönberg who was destined to be his only teacher and his friendly adviser. Through him he gained a thorough knowledge of the composer's craft and that idealistic conception of art which lifts Schönberg's circle above the party conflicts of the modern musical scene.

Contemporary with Schönberg, a shining star had risen on the horizon of the art world in the person of Gustav Mahler, whose renown at the time was chiefly that of operatic reformer and conductor. Mahler's own compositions, on the other hand, were known to but a small group of the musical cognoscenti, among whom were Schönberg and his followers. Throughout his career Berg has retained a warm admiration for the personality and creative work of Mahler, an admiration to which he has given expression in the dedication of *Wozzeck* to Mahler's widow [Alma Mahler Werfel]. Many works of Berg may be viewed as the logical development and fulfillment of the intentions of Mahler. He has, however, avoided slavish imitation by evolving truly original ideas in his own way. The *Piano-Sonata* in B-minor, published in 1908 already bore the unmistakable mark of his individuality, which became more pronounced in the works that followed.

Almost all musical forms have been utilized by Berg, who is an extremely thorough artist, creating slowly. *Four Songs*, with texts by Mombert and Hebbel, followed the *Piano-Sonata*, Harmonically these are based on a Tristanesque chromaticism and on whole-tone successions. But the next work, a *String Quartet* in two movements, paves the way for that emancipation from traditional tonality which is finally achieved in the *Three Orchestral Pieces*, opus 6. Between these two works, *Four Pieces for Clarinet and Piano* and *Five Songs with Orchestral Accompaniment after Post-Card Texts by Peter Altenberg* find their respective places. These are real treasures of the art of musical miniature. Within a few measures they give exhaustive treatment to motives of the freshest inspiration. With the *Three Orchestral Pieces* (prelude, dance, and march) Berg reestablished himself as a composer in the larger forms.

In *Wozzeck*, a product of the years 1914–20, he created the first extensive opera freed from the bonds of tonality, and thereby proved conclusively that the new, so-called “atonal” manner of writing, decried by its adversaries as “the technic for miniatures,” could also be utilized as the foundation of a dramatic structure of the grandest style. In this sense the creation and the premier production of the opera may be regarded as a deed of emancipation.

After this great dramatic upheaval the composer again began the writing of intimate chamber-music. To this period we owe such self-revealing works as the *Chamber Concerto for Violin, Piano and Thirteen Winds* and the *Lyric Suite for String Quartet*. Both demand a high degree of virtuosity and possess deep profundity. They have a characteristically brilliant sonority, achieved through combinations that exploit to the fullest extent the individual properties of each instrument,

The concert-aria *The Wine*, for soprano and orchestra, after a text by Baudelaire, composed in the summer of 1929, reveals Berg again in a lyrically dramatic vein, and indicates the direction of the forthcoming stage-work, the opera *Lulu*, after the book by Wedekind.

Berg’s whole existence lies anchored in his creative efforts. Consequently in this brief review of his published works (to which latter might be added *Seven Songs* an early piece, and a transcription for string orchestra of a few movements from the *Lyric Suite*), one may find an almost complete picture of his activities so far. His uneventful existence offers no material for “exciting” biographical essays. The completely happy home-life which he owes to his wife, Helène Nabowska, whom he married in 1911, fosters uninterrupted creative activity. In the winter months Berg is quietly active in Vienna as a teacher and as a leading member of important musical organizations. He has often written clever articles, especially comment on and defense of the work of Schönberg. He was one of the first to receive the Arts prize of the city of Vienna and the Prussian Academy of Fine Arts has made him a member. But neither these high honors nor the world-wide success of his works distract this noble and modest artist from the conviction of his mission or hinder his steady progress.

I believe that nothing finer may be appended to this brief preface than the words which Arnold Schönberg addressed to him on the occasion of the *Wozzeck* premiere in Düsseldorf (April 1930):

“I am happy to have this opportunity to pay tribute to the work and achievements of my pupil and friend, Alban Berg. Are not he and our mutual friend, his co-student, Anton von Webern, the strongest proof of my efficiency as a teacher? Were they not both, in the time of my severest artistic tribulations, a prop secure, reliable, loving, the very best that I have found on earth? But lest you should be led to believe that only gratitude and friendship inspire this tribute, remember that I too can read music; that there was a time when notes which seemed mere hieroglyphics to all other musicians fired my imagination; inspired me with an impression of this talent. And I am proud that my conviction and its correctness gave me the opportunity to guide this great gift to its proper goal, to the most marvelous flowering of individuality, to the greatest self-sufficiency.

“I should like to say: friendship first, yet I must say: art first. But there is really no need to hesitate. The demands of friendship and of art are reconcilable here. The friend may praise the artist; the artist may praise the friend, no, must praise, if he would be just. . . . So hail to thee, Alban Berg!”



Georg Büchner (1813–1837)



Alban Berg (1885–1936)

## A GUIDE TO *WOZZECK*

**Introduction** No contemporary opera has been more thoroughly debated than Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*. The appearance of the piano-score in 1923 incited controversies which became passionately intense upon the occasion of the Berlin premiere. Even though we may be able today to reduce that early conflict of opinion to its proper proportions, the unprecedented intensity of expression in *Wozzeck* continues to present many problems to an unprepared audience; problems that, however, have no influence at all upon the tremendous final effect which this setting of Büchner's drama produces on every unprejudiced listener.

Attending many performances of *Wozzeck* in different parts of Germany I have found that this profound impression always rises with perfect spontaneity and that it cannot be directed by theorizing. So that, in one sense, a commentary on *Wozzeck* may be regarded as superfluous. This guide to the music drama, therefore, will attempt only to develop from the primary emotional, subjective impression, an objective understanding of the structure of the work and of the creative method of its composer. My task, as the result of a number of peculiar circumstances, might be considered that of compilation. Berg permitted me to see the manuscript of the lecture which he delivered in advance of the premieres. This paper, divested of the characteristics of a speech and supplemented by numerous examples of the music, has served as a foundation for my work, which is further indebted for much of its detail to the valuable remarks of the leading expert on the *Wozzeck* score, H.F. Klein, (adapter of the piano score and of an unpublished analysis), to an excellent article by R. Schäfke in *Melos*, and to a lecture given by the conductor, Dr. H. Jalowitz, in connection with the *Wozzeck* premiere in Cologne.

**Berg's Method Used** For the analysis of individual scenes, Berg's method in his *Guide to Schönberg's Gurrelieder* has been adopted here. I have gone into great detail in those places which afford an opportunity to point out such particulars as might facilitate a general understanding of the creative personality of the composer. Furthermore, due consideration was given to the fact that the parts of the opera in which Berg reverts to well-known types of structural form have been most sharply attacked and criticized<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup>For example, the Suite and Passacaglia in the first and fourth scenes of Act I.

Here it was necessary to prove decisively not only that these forms, despite the modernity of their musical content, perfectly fulfill the old rules, but that their application to the musical interpretation of dramatic events is justified with remarkable consistency throughout the course of the stage action. Other considerations will be obvious from the content and arrangement of my text. I hope that those who are seriously interested in really new music will find that this *Guide to Wozzeck* has made it easier to gain a deeper understanding of one of the most significant operas of today.

## BERG'S ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

A performance in 1914 of *Wozzeck*, the dramatic fragment of the German poet Georg Büchner (1813–1837), first gave Berg the idea of his opera. Büchner's sketchy design made an absolutely new dramaturgical treatment necessary. This has best been analyzed in the remarks of Jalowitz and Schäfke:

“The story of Büchner's drama is told in a few words. From the loose concatenation of twenty-five scenes Berg chose fifteen which he grouped into three acts of five scenes each. The orderly, *Wozzeck*, is tormented by his superior, the Captain; by a physician to whom he surrenders himself for medical experiments that he may be able to support his beloved Marie and her child, and by visions rising out of his fantastic reveries. Marie is seduced by the Drum-Major. When *Wozzeck*, after, torturing uncertainty, has convinced himself of her infidelity, he stabs his beloved and drowns himself.

**Wozzeck, The “Pure Fool”** “More significant than the external events is what animates these people and their deeds, what reveals them as phantoms in spite of, or rather by means of, the daring realism of the presentation. Thus the Captain becomes the mask of fear-tormented, moralizing philistinism; the Physician, the demon of cold, materialistic science, hostile to man and his soul; the Drum-Major, the embodiment of the beast in man; and Marie, simply the poor unfortunate. But *Wozzeck* is far more than the representative of the oppressed class, *die arme Leut*, who must not only suffer extreme misery but assume all the blame. This figure is akin to the “Pure Fool,” the primitive being, still outside morality; close to the forces of nature, surrounded by their hidden mysteries and forced to surrender to them. He loves tenderly yet murders and, from the same compulsion, cleanses his guilty soul by suicide in the very pond where he had washed the blood from his murderous knife. He is one of those “poor in spirit” in the sense of the Gospels, who, disorientated in a later age, seek their lost origins with every power and shatter their life-force in this superhuman effort. Words cannot convey the idea, which, though barely expressed, becomes embodied in this figure as powerfully as any concept ever has been on the stage.

“Thus *Wozzeck* has something of the force of a mythological being and for that reason is well cast as the central figure of an opera. The heroes of tragic opera who have survived are either taken directly from the material of sagas or they are just such incarnations of elemental feelings, of passions; to mention but a few, Orpheus, Don Juan, Leonore in *Fidelio*, the Flying Dutchman, as well as Carmen, Othello, Falstaff. The uniqueness and universality of these figures justify the elevating effect which song gives to words. All intellectual, all episodic, all realistic detail is relegated to the background so that the music may freely follow its own laws.

“Berg's dramaturgy condenses and clarifies the material. First he divides it into three parts: exposition, dénouement, catastrophe. Through apparently slight changes, symmetry and proportion are given to the individual scenes and so a well-conceived, balanced drama is evolved from a naturalistic sketch.

“The poetic treatment by Berg is an adequate answer to the question: How can this dramatic fragment, a hundred years old, be made the subject of a modern opera? Indeed the sociological undercurrent

of the Büchner play is not untimely today. The grotesque element in the delineation of the characters, especially of the Physician, finds its echo in modern art. The interpolated folk tunes and the opportunities for the use of tone-color in various episodes must have attracted the musician. But there would always have been a contradiction in style between Büchner's amorphous naturalism and the rigid, structural tendency of contemporary music. Here is where Berg the poet with sure instinct reconciles Berg the musician. The method by which the poetic material is developed contains the germ cell of Berg's music."

## THE MUSICAL STRUCTURE AS A WHOLE

In 1914, when Berg decided to compose the opera *Wozzeck*, the situation in music was most peculiar. The Viennese school, led by Arnold Schönberg, had just developed beyond the initial stages of the movement incorrectly known as "atonal." Composition in that style was limited at first to the smaller forms, such as songs, piano and orchestral pieces. There were no so-called atonal works with the classical four movements of average length, no symphonies, oratorios, and grand operas. In renouncing tonality this school had abandoned one of the strongest and most tested mediums for the construction not only of small but of large forms. When Berg decided to write a full-length opera he faced, in regard to harmony, a problem entirely new. How, without the proved resource of tonality and the formal structural possibilities based upon it, was he to obtain the same completeness, the same convincing musical coherence not only in the small units of the individual scenes but also, and this was the difficulty, in the large units of each act, and, further, in the complete architectonics of the whole work?

Text and plot alone could not assure this unity of form; certainly not for a work like Büchner's *Wozzeck*, made up as it is of many loose and fragmentary scenes. Even when the three-part arrangement, which clearly divided fifteen scenes into exposition, dénouement, and catastrophe was achieved and, through it, unity in the dramatic action, no provision had yet been made for musical coherence.

**Coherence And Variety** How this unity and coherence were aimed at and acquired will become clear in the course of our study. For the time being we must direct our attention to the harmonic construction, especially to that of the act endings. The points at which, in a tonal work, a distinct repetition and fortifying of the main key is made comprehensible to the eyes and ears of the lay audience are also the place in an atonal work where the harmonic circle of a long act must be brought to a conclusion. Such an emphasis was arrived at, first of all, by making every act steer its way toward one and the same final chord in a sort of cadence to rest there as on a tonic. These final chords always appear in a different form although they are made up of the same notes. The justification for these tonal differentiations lies not only in the occasional changes of dramatic situation, but also in demands of a purely musical nature. The striving for formal coherence and, to use a phrase of Schönberg's, for musical "coordination" is counterbalanced by just as strong a leaning toward change, toward variation in form.

To show still more clearly how this coherence, on the one hand, and variety, on the other, are worked out, let us consider the beginnings and endings of the acts.

In the first scene the curtain rises immediately after the opening of the orchestra; it descends on the last measure at the end of Act I. The curtain of Act II rises after a short orchestral introduction. When the music of this act is finished the curtain remains open on the final scene for a short time. Then it falls. Corresponding to this close, the curtain rises on the third act, preceding the music; there is a pause before the musicians begin. The curtain descends for the last time before the music has ceased; not, however, as in the first act, where the descent is simultaneous with the crescendo of the final chord, but before this chord sounds in a breathless pianissimo and dies away.

**The A–B–A Formula** Finally, another point may be made concerning the structure of the opera as a whole in relation to the striving for coherent form. The method of constructing each of the three acts makes it clear that in the main the old reliable, three-part treatment A-B-A is used, inasmuch as the first and third acts reveal definite structural parallels. Shorter by far than the weightier middle act, they enclose it in what might be called a time-symmetry. While the second act, as we shall see, is a completely coherent musical structure from the first to the last measure the form of the first and third is much freer. In each of the two latter, for the five loosely connected scenes there are five corresponding musical episodes also loosely connected. The scenes of the first act could be called a group of related character sketches, which, although they are consistent with the dramatic content, from time to time describe a new main figure in the action, always of course in relation to the protagonist. The scenes of the third act reveal musical forms whose coherence is established by the use of certain principles of unity, justifying their title of “inventions.”

These two acts, rather loose in structure, like the two “A’s” of the three-part form encompass the middle act, which is, musically, much closer-knit. The five scenes here are inseparably united like the movements of a symphony (in this case a dramatic symphony). The middle act corresponds to the “B” section of the three-part form and is essentially differentiated from the two “A” sections, the first and third acts, which are similar in structure. Thus the second act is clearly established as the middle section.

**The Notorious “Old Forms”** From the need for musical coherence even in small details, there came the much discussed utilization of certain “old forms,” which won much notoriety at the beginning of the opera’s history.

The composer’s desire for musical variety and the avoidance of “durchkomponieren”<sup>2</sup>—the common characteristic of music drama since Wagner’s day—led him to devise a different form for every one of the many scenes. But the completeness of each of these scenes demanded a similar completeness in the music, from which arose the necessity of creating an artistic fusion of the varied parts, in a word, of giving them musically complete forms. The application to the drama then developed just as naturally as the choice of the forms selected for this purpose.

We must not regard the use here of variations, even passacaglias and fugues, as an attempt to be “archaic.” It would be even more erroneous to conclude that this work has any relation to the “Back-to-Something” movements, which were actually initiated much later. As a matter of fact, Berg met his requirements not only through these more or less old forms, but created forms based upon new principles, such for example as those resting for a foundation on one “tone,” one “rhythm,” one “chord,” etc.

**Variety By Interlude** A further example of the inner necessity to be as varied and many-sided as possible is present in the relatively numerous interludes resultant from so many scene changes. To scatter transitions or intermezzi would not have been consistent with Berg’s idea of the music-drama, to which, despite his respect for absolute music, he strictly adhered in all matters pertaining to the theatre. Even here he was impelled to aim at a variety rich in contrast, making the connective music sometimes transitional, sometimes giving it the form of a coda or at times of an introduction to that which follows, or a combination of the two latter. Thus he attempts either an almost imperceptible connection between the diverse parts of the separate musical forms, or an often abrupt juxtaposition. On the next page a complete dramatic and musical perspective gives the relation of all formal events in *Wozzeck*.

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<sup>2</sup>*durchkomponieren*: through-composed

SCHEME  
of the  
Dramatic and Musical  
Forms in *Wozzeck*

DRAMATIC	MUSICAL
<p><i>ACT I: Exposition</i> Wozzeck and his relation to his environment</p> <p><i>Scene</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Captain</li> <li>2. Andres</li> <li>3. Marie</li> <li>4. The Physician</li> <li>5. The Drum-Major</li> </ol>	<p>Five Character Sketches</p> <p><i>Scene</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Suite</li> <li>2. Rhapsody</li> <li>3. Military March and Cradle Song</li> <li>4. Passacaglia</li> <li>5. Andante Affetuoso (quasi Rondo)</li> </ol>
<p><i>ACT II: Dénouement</i> Wozzeck is gradually convinced of Marie's infidelity</p> <p><i>Scene</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Wozzeck's first suspicion</li> <li>2. Wozzeck is mocked</li> <li>3. Wozzeck accuses Marie</li> <li>4. Marie and Drum-Major dance</li> <li>5. The Drum-Major trounces Wozzeck</li> </ol>	<p>Symphony in five movements</p> <p><i>Scene</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Sonata-Form</li> <li>2. Fantasie and Fugue</li> <li>3. Largo</li> <li>4. Scherzo</li> <li>5. Rondo Martiale</li> </ol>
<p><i>ACT III: Catastrophe</i> Wozzeck murders Marie and atones through suicide</p> <p><i>Scene</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Marie's remorse</li> <li>2. Death of Marie</li> <li>3. Wozzeck tries to forget</li> <li>4. Wozzeck drowns in the pond</li> </ol> <p>(Instrumental interlude with closed curtain)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Marie's son plays unconcerned</li> </ol>	<p>Six Inventions</p> <p><i>Scene</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Invention on a Theme</li> <li>2. Invention on a Tone</li> <li>3. Invention on a Rhythm</li> <li>4. Invention on a Key (D-minor)</li> </ol> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Invention on a Persistent Rhythm (Perpetuum Mobile)</li> </ol>



**SCENE 2.** The sudden interruption and quick blotting out of the stretta prepare us for a different world in the next scene. The narrow and musty barrack-room fades into air before the elemental forces of the open field, above which arches the eerie sky of a late afternoon. The music of this scene, too, departs from the familiar forms of the one preceding and seeks new bases. Its unifying principle is a harmonic one: three chords (4) make up the skeletal structure of this scene. Such a principle is recognizable as form-shaping, if tonality is held to be a structural medium; we may compare these three chords in relation to the functions of tonic, dominant and subdominant. Of course the manner in which the chords and their successions are employed is manifold and varied throughout.

(4) Chordal Structure, Act I, Scene 2

Since the composer has designated the musical form of the second scene a “rhapsody” we would naturally expect to find a structure of free fantasy, like a potpourri, in accordance with the well-known patterns of this type of piece. But on the contrary, Berg’s strong leaning towards form has led him even here to create a structure completely fulfilling the most exacting musical strictures.

In addition to the three-chord motive (4) there is a “Hunting Song”<sup>5</sup> by Andres, Wozzeck’s friend, which forms the second musical component of this scene. Its color is derived entirely from Wozzeck’s uncanny reaction to inanimate nature and his exulting superstition. In this scene the “rhythmic declamation” introduced by Schönberg in the spoken choruses of *Die Glückliche Hand* appears for the first time in the opera; we shall therefore, quote Berg’s own words about this important means of expression:

“It had become plain that this method (the *sprech-stimme*) of treating the voice in a music drama not only strengthened one of the best mediums for making such a work comprehensible—namely the words—but enriched the opera by the addition of a genuine means of artistic expression, created from the purest sources of music, ranging from a toneless whisper to the authentic *bel parlare* of far-reaching speech-melodies. Thus, moreover, all possibilities of form in absolute music which are lost, for instance, through recitative, may be preserved.”

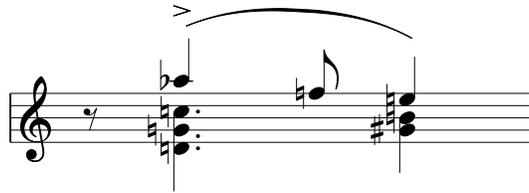
This scene dies away on a military signal and slowly yields to the approaching march of the stage-band.

(5) Military March --- Opening Measures

<sup>5</sup>This hunting song is an example of the composer’s ingenuity in creating a proper place for folk song elements, in other words, establishing a relationship within his opera between formal and folk music. While in a tonal work it is a mere commonplace, in the so-called “atonal” harmony, it is not so easy to make that difference in plan clear. Here it was accomplished by giving an obvious primitiveness—practicable even in atonal harmony—to all popular elements. Other means which might be noted are a preference for symmetrical construction of periods and phrases, harmonic construction by thirds and fourths, a melodic line in which the whole-tone scale and the perfect fourth play an important part, whereas in the atonal music of the Viennese school diminished and augmented intervals predominate. So-called “polytonality” is also a means of building up primitive harmonic effects.

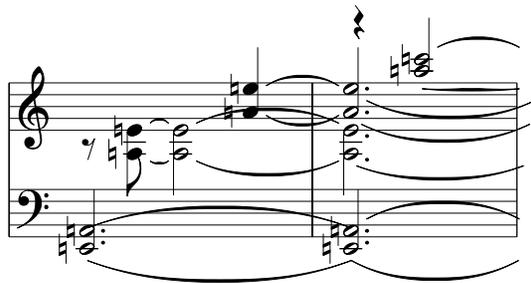
**SCENE 3.** With (5) we have the opening motive of the military march which is important later. During its repetition it becomes suddenly inaudible when the window is shut. Strings and voice bring a new significant motive (6), the “lament” of Marie, which may be considered a sort of introduction to her “Cradle Song.” The characteristic fourths of the latter are anticipated melodically by tympani and harp; harmonically, by the chords of the second inversion which prevail throughout.

(6) Marie --- Plaintive Theme



The song rigidly observes the two strophe form and is one of the most beautiful and significant melodic inspirations of the opera<sup>6</sup>. A lively first part is followed by a very much slower second whose beginning has already been foreshadowed in the introduction to the song. The second verse repeats the two antecedents literally, and the consequents in great variation; it closes with an instrumental coda which is again based on the beginning. From this a cadential transition (7) is developed as an ending, one of the most important motives of the opera. The open fifths represent the somewhat aimless waiting of Marie, a waiting which is terminated only by her death<sup>7</sup>. The repetition of (7) is interrupted by the swiftly intruding figure of Wozzeck suddenly knocking at the window (8). From here on the musical structure abandons all formal schemes of unity and suggests the free, unconstrained technic of composition of the post-Wagnerian style, which was so prone to develop long stretches of the text in this manner, (i.e., of *durchkomponieren*) using the leit-motive only as a means of support. I emphasize this particular idiosyncrasy here, because it is the only place in *Wozzeck* where it occurs. The composer deliberately sought to create a delightful alternation through contrast of this free structure with the rigid forms encompassing it. A short thematic development leads us into the next scene.

(7) Transitional Cadence --- Marie's waiting



(8) Wozzeck's knocking at Marie's window



**SCENE 4.** The line of the twelve-tone passacaglia theme is presented in (9). It is hardly necessary to note that its development by variation is not achieved mechanically or even by means of pure, absolute music. First of all, it bears the closest relation to the dramatic action. Even the introduction of the twelve-tone series has a basis in the drama. The series appears for the first time with the opening words of the scene, expressing the speech of the physician though concealed in the animated rubato of a cello-recitative. Twenty-one variations follow which are true

<sup>6</sup>For the folk music elements in the “Cradle Song” and “March” the footnote to the “Hunting Song” is equally valid.

<sup>7</sup>This device (used as a sort of leit-motive) recurs several times later on. Similar repetitions are made with other motives, applying at times to certain characters and sometimes to certain situations. The coordination and relation of recurrent motives are thus employed as another means of establishing unity in the opera.

variations, dealing with one and the same theme, with the same fixed ideas<sup>8</sup> of the physician, which find their echo even when Wozzeck, their victim and his, speaks in his torture.

(9) The Passacaglia's 12-tone series



In the parlando, apparently entirely improvised, with which the doctor accompanies the recitative-like introduction of the passacaglia-theme, two motives occur which are important in view of what follows. First comes the phrase (10) which grows out of the end of (9) and through its first part (mostly presented in the position F-Ab-D) gains a significant function as the connecting link between the variations, more often entering into their inner fabric. From (11) a motive is developed which characterizes the conceited, scientific attitude of the physician, and is later also employed for contrapuntal treatment. The whole chain of variations, with its deliberate gradation of intensity represents the growing scientific megalomania of the Doctor. When finally, in the last variation, he breaks out in a cry of desire for immortality, the most vaulting of his delusions, the theme, more or less concealed during the passacaglia, surges up with greater clarity, harmonized in chorale fashion in the full orchestra, only to be quickly subdued after a repetition of chord (4) and to return to the matter of fact dialog of the beginning of the scene. Over a tympani roll on D# fragments of (10) bring on the close of the scene.

(10) Development from (9) --- The Variation Link

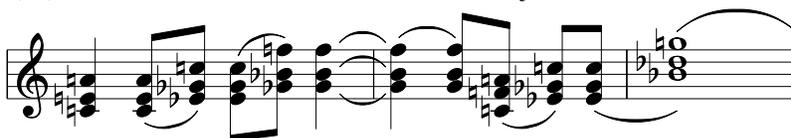


(11) The Physician's Obsessive conceit in science



**SCENE 5.** With its sixty-two measures the last scene of this act is the shortest, a characteristic which it shares with the other final scenes. It is the most important in the development of the plot, for here Marie is seduced by the Drum-Major, an event which is the immediate cause of the conflict and tragic catastrophe. Musically the scene characterizes the brutality of the Drum-Major. Even Marie to a certain extent adopts the language of her abductor, her role containing many phrases, which suggest his themes.

(12) Rondo Theme --- Marie and the Drum-Major

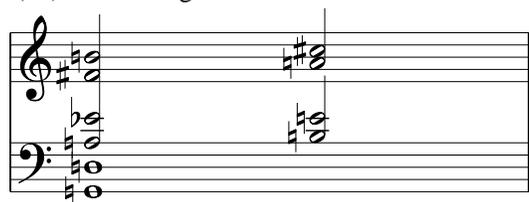


<sup>8</sup>Long after the composition of *Wozzeck*, Berg wished to be informed as to the origin of the word "Passacaglia." He consulted Riemami's Lexicon and found reference to its synonym "Folia." To his great satisfaction he read: "the folia (id'ee fi xe) is evidently one of the oldest forms of the ostinato." He had unconsciously fulfilled the literal meaning of the term.

The important theme of this scene, (12) fundamentally an “Andante affetuoso,” frequently interrupted by short interpolations, recurs always with but slight variation. It is, therefore, not inaccurate to regard its form as a sort of free rondo. On the other hand a certain three-part structure is also evident, which is obviously related to the events on the stage (the preliminaries, the seduction and the aftermath). Although the rondo theme (12) is well marked in the first and third sections, in the middle it is considerably overshadowed by the attack motive (13). When the Drum-Major has disappeared into the house with Marie the theme (12) is heard across the empty stage, in distorted rhythm. With a mighty crescendo, the chord (14), sounded in an increasingly rapid tremolando over the organ-point G–D, brings this important act devoted to the exposition to a close.



(14) Concluding Chord of Act I



## ACT II—Dénouement

**SCENE 1.** The first musical section of the second act is in sonata form. It is no mere coincidence that the three characters in this scene, Marie, her child and Wozzeck, serve as the basis for the three thematic groups of a sonata exposition: the main, second and closing theme. The whole dramatic development of this “Jewel Scene,” the twofold recurrence of certain situations, then the collision of the main characters, facilitates a strictly musical division, in which the first reprise follows immediately after the exposition, clearly repeating it although in an abridged form and with variations.

The development, just that part of the scene in which the main figures (human as well as musical) are in conflict, leads to the climax of the sonata, the motive which permeates the whole piece, the recurrent “Wir arme Leut” (3). The words of Wozzeck “Here, Marie, is money once more, my wages,” etc., are sung to a held C-major triad of the orchestra. (How could the prosaicness of money be better expressed!) The rest of the music of this scene and of the intermission which follows (but musically, really relates to and completes it), shows how the transition from the chord to the last reprise is effected. The transformation music is given independent life, that is, becomes a small unit, most palpably because at the moment where the transformation sets in, a harp glissando suggests a beginning; the end is indicated when the effect is repeated, the first time descending fortissimo, the second ascending pianissimo, whereby the connection with the next scene is made.

(15) The Physician --- Recurrent from Act I, Scene 4



(16) Wozzeck --- Recurrent from Act II, Scene 1



**SCENE 2.** This scene also brings three people on the stage, but their relation is not as close as that of the three members of the family group in the preceding one. Whereas the first could employ the sonata, a musical form whose

parts are organically connected like that of a family, here the form is constructed of more alien, disparate elements, a fantasy and fugue with three themes. The definite independence of the motives of these themes, in contrast to the closer melodic interrelation of those in the foregoing sonata, makes the strictly fugal form necessary, its rigidity somewhat relieved by the use of motives which are already familiar. We find that of the Captain (1) which dominates the first scene at the very beginning of the opera, then a motive of the Physician (15) recurrent from the fourth scene of Act I, and finally a Wozzeck theme (16) which, though not presented literally, is clearly suggested in the preceding sonata-form.

**SCENE 3.** The slow movement of this symphonic act is a Largo. Aside from the obvious thematic coordination which makes it a complete movement, we find this idiosyncrasy: the instrumentation is that of a chamber symphony and corresponds exactly to that employed by Arnold Schönberg in his *Kammersymphonie*. Thus Berg does homage here to his teacher and master. The introduction and close of the Largo furnish another example of how coherence, usually achieved by returning to the main key, can be gained by other means. The clarinet figures apparently quickly departing from the fugal thematic material of the preceding scene, lead over to the beginning of the Largo, and become fixed as the first harmonic foundations of its theme.

The end of the Largo closes with the same harmony, which in retrogressive movement again forms the very clarinet figures from which the chord developed. Moreover, these clarinet figures also lead into the transformation-music which introduces the next scene with a slow country dance.

**SCENE 4.** In the *Ländler* and in the other dance-music there are passages which seem to have a dissonance not merely within a tonality, a dissonance rather like the sounding together of several pieces of music in different keys. This effect, arising from primitive “polytonality” is of course deliberate, but not arbitrary; it is derived not only from the dramatic situations, but also from the rationale of the music. For example: the antecedent of a *Ländler* in G minor according to the rules may progress to the dominant (D-major) or return to the tonic. Since both these forms occur simultaneously (natural enough in a drunken, irresponsible, tavern-band!) the sense of confusion results. This effect is sustained when one part of the band modulates to the dominant, and returns properly to the tonic (G-minor), while the other part, also quite in conformity to rule, modulates at the same time to a related major key (Eb-major). It is indeed a miracle that they should find themselves together again at the end of the *Ländler*!

The tavern scene introduced by the *Ländler* corresponds to the scherzo in the dramatic symphony which this second act represents. The *Ländler* is the first idea of the scherzo. The journeyman’s song represents the first trio; the waltz of the ale-house band, the second scherzo; the hunting chorus of young fellows—the middle section of the whole—a second trio. In accordance with the regular construction of such scherzo movements (let us take for example those of Schumann’s symphonies!) a repetition of the first three-part scherzo-group follows. To be sure the repetition of these three small forms (*Ländler*, song, waltz) is not literal but much varied, corresponding to the course of the action. The *Ländler*, for example, though exactly repeated, is placed in an entirely new environment. The journeyman’s song which represented the first trio is so changed in its repetition, that the fundamental harmonies are split up to make a chorale melody in half-notes, which, played by the bombardon, lays the foundation for a “melodrama.” This melodrama, the good-natured parody of a sermon, is on the one hand the repeated first trio, and on the other a regular (but parodied) five-part chorale transcription.

The repetition finally of the tavern-band waltz occurs not only as a waltz, but in an extended form, a symbolic development for full orchestra, serving at the same time as the transformation-music to the next scene.

**SCENE 5.** The transformation music comes to a sudden stop with the “snoring chorus” of the soldiers in the guard room based upon the above-mentioned chord (4). Intended as a natural sound, it is heard at first before the curtain rises. The “Rondo-Martiale” which brings this act to a close is then introduced.

The scene presents the conflict between the Drum-Major and the jealous Wozzeck who is finally defeated. (The tussle which takes place is musically identical with the struggle between the Drum-Major and Marie in the last scene of the preceding act, which ended with her surrender. Here again is a device for achieving coherence.)

(17) Second Rondo Theme --- Wozzeck and the Drum-Major



The dramatic similarity of the two act-endings would of itself have brought about a musical parallel. In the passionate *Andante* of the earlier episode the rondo-form is merely suggested, but here in the scene which unfolds according to military regulations and discipline, the strictest rules are applied to the construction of a rondo on the theme (17). The act closes on chord (14) which is used in all the act-endings. It gradually resolves into its constituents, leaving the low B as the final sound. To anticipate, it might be mentioned that this low B which accompanies the prophetic last words: “Er blut,” “Einer nach dem andern,” is significant from the dramatic point of view in one of the important later scenes and that it also acquires a structural function.

### ACT III—Catastrophe

**SCENE 1.** As has been said, the first scene of the third act contains an invention on a theme. The severity of the architecture (an expression intentionally used by Berg in this connection) leads to the following construction: the two-part theme, consisting of antecedent and consequent, has seven bars; it recurs seven times in varied forms; more-over the concluding double-fugue, corresponding to this two-part form, has two seven-tone themes<sup>9</sup>. The principle of this construction is taken from the poetic text, which, through-out the scene, as well as in the theme, contrasts Marie’s objective reading of the Bible with her subjective reflections. There are further musical allusions to the text in details. For instance, the tonality of the fifth variation set off against the atonality of the work lends it a characteristic and delicate symbolism of the transcendental world of fairy-tales. The introduction of the persecution motive (8) in the sixth variation takes place in the manner of a leit-motive supporting Marie’s speech on the absence of Wozzeck.

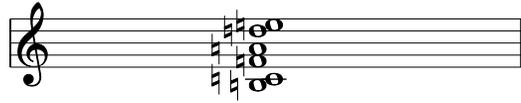
**SCENE 2.** The low B of the contrabasses, which was heard in the final chord of the fugue (also as the last tone of the important concluding cadence of the second act), now becomes the unifying factor, the coordinating principle of the murder scene. It appears here again in the greatest variety of ways, as an organ-point, as a stationary middle or upper voice, doubled in many octaves and heard in all conceivable registers and colors. Finally when the murder of Marie occurs to the fortissimo crescendo roll of the tympani, all her important musical motives are sounded in precipitate succession over this organ point of B—as in the moment of death all the important occurrences of life are believed to pass rapidly and in distortion before the mind of the dying person: the cradle-song of her first scene, reminiscences of the jewel scene in the second act, even of the Drum-Major, of the lament on her misery which finally melts into the motive in fifths, the theme of her vain waiting.

The brief transformation music brings this underlying B forward once more. This time it is employed as a unison, the only note of the entire scale, present in almost all the instruments of the full orchestra, beginning with the softest imaginable, the muted horn, and finally evolving to its highest powers through the entrance, one after the other, of

<sup>9</sup>It is of course very easy to poke fun at the mathematics of this form. Thus on the occasion of *Wozzeck*’s first concert presentation a critic discussed the Bible-scene, which, as a matter of fact, was not given. Even though no note of that music had yet been heard the clairvoyant critic could attest and already communicate to his readers how badly such a mathematical division stood the test, how ridiculous it was.

each member of the ensemble, except the percussion. It is to be observed that these consecutive entrances do not occur at regular intervals, but follow a peculiar rhythmic principle. The entrances of the winds as well as those of the strings make distinct rhythms, interlocking in the form of a canon of a quarter-note shift. The apparent irregularity so created, of which the listener is, of course, as little aware as of the logical arrangement of the entrances, seems to breathe an exceptionally strong life into this crescendo tone. The fact is that this crescendo has a greater dynamic effect and intensity than its recurrence on B in various registers, with the addition of the entire percussion.

(18) Transformation chord, Act III, Scenes 3 to 4



**SCENE 3.** The rhythm just spoken of, is of course not accidental. Like the chord (18) which first leads to this crescendo climax, it is of important thematic significance. This rhythm lies at the foundation of the new scene, and, conspicuous in every measure, guarantees a definite unity. To be sure, it is not applied in the form of a monotonous ostinato, but in a way that permits the greatest metrical differentiation within a quasi-rhythmical uniformity. Thus melodies are based on this rhythm, as in the quick polka of the intoxicated boys and girls which opens the scene; or the rhythm may appear in the accompaniment. Furthermore it is expanded, contracted, shifted, changed by different time signatures, divided into triplets and finally interlocked in two and more canonic entrances.

**SCENE 4.** A further example of such exploitation of musical material, first tonal, now rhythmical, (the “objectivity” is older than the modern slogan) may be found in the fourth scene, which is based solely on a chord, or rather, a group of six tones (18). This six-tone chord, as has been pointed out, has already been announced in the earlier short transformation music with its tremendous dynamic crescendo on B. It is also the harmonic completion for the close of the preceding scene, that is, of the corresponding transformation. In spite of the persistence of this six-tone group, variety is achieved here by subjecting the chord, as was done with the single tone and the rhythm, to all conceivable alterations, such as divisions, inversions, replacement of groups and changes in register of all or a part of its tones. Structural unity in this piece, on the other hand, is assured by the old reliable, symmetrical, three-part form, inasmuch as in the first and third parts the chord occurs in all its variations, naturally, on only one of the steps of the chromatic scale, while in the middle section it works its way to all the others. Finally (in the third part) when it reverts to its original position, to its tonal center, so to speak, this chord at the same time forms the harmonic transition to the one that follows, whose D-minor indicates the resolution of the former<sup>10</sup>.

**INTERLUDE.** A somewhat longer orchestral piece succeeds the fourth scene. From the dramatic point of view it should be considered the epilog to Wozzeck’s suicide, a gesture made by the author outside the circle of events seen on the stage; even as an appeal to the audience in their role of humanity’s protagonist. The music of this orchestral interlude is a thematic development of all the important forms used in relation to Wozzeck.

<sup>10</sup>It is evident that such music, based primarily upon harmonies and chordal combinations whatever its melodic twists, retains a strongly impressionistic character. This is of course appropriate for dramatic events concerned exclusively with nature and natural episodes. (For instance, the waves of the pond closing over the drowning Wozzeck, the croaking toads, the rising moon, etc.) Nevertheless Berg made no attempt here to ape that style which one attributes to the French School, to Debussy. Such impressionism as one may seem to find in these and in other places of the opera, appears also in the writings of the classicists and romanticists, and in the imperishable nature-impressionism of Wagner. Actually, what seems impressionistic here is far removed from vague, illogical sound-effects. Everything is constructed according to a strict, musically determined law. In this case, the thematic six-tone group is the basis, and in the second scene of the first act it is an ostinato three-cord succession.

The form is three-part; the coordinating principle, for a change, is tonality (D-minor). This D-minor tonality (whose introduction into the harmony has just been discussed), undergoes such unlimited expansion as to permit its every possibility to be finally and exhaustively developed. And this because in the middle section of the piece, where the fantasia-like entrances, in the manner of anticipatory strettos, crowd upon one another to a climax, a harmonic tonal combination results as if of its own volition. Though it contains all the twelve tones, in the field of this tonality it operates only as a dominant which, sounding naturally and harmonically, leads back to the D-minor of the reprise.

**SCENE 5.** The scene with the children which concludes this act, in its eighth-note activity, persisting from the first to the last measure (one could really term this, according to the old system of form, a *perpetuum mobile*), follows a certain law, really one of those systems of rules which Berg was so often obliged to “create in order that he might follow them.” The scene portrays the behavior and play of proletarian children, one of whom is the infant of Marie and Wozzeck, still unaware that it has just been orphaned. Though here a cadence is clearly made to the final chord (14), the music seems still to be going forward. It does indeed go on! As a matter of fact the first measure of the opera could be directly attached to these concluding bars, whereby the circle would be closed.

## THE HISTORY OF THE OPERA

“More than twenty-five years ago,” says Jalowitz, “a number of students gathered together in Vienna around Arnold Schönberg, the musical revolutionary who pursued his creative life apart from the busy world. They possessed only an enthusiasm for their teacher, a warm respect for the composer-conductor, Gustav Mahler, a knowledge of the masters they adored, old and new, but never an idea of the ways of publicity and success. Alban Berg was one of these young men. His talent was discovered by Schönberg, acting on the jury of a new society for creative musicians which had been organized as a sort of musical secession. For a long time he gave free instruction to this pupil, at that period without means, and one of the quietest and least obviously active of the group. When the others, their studies completed, were scattered to the four winds as conductors, he alone remained in Vienna, renouncing every practical pursuit to live entirely for creative work.

**The “Impossible” Opera** “Years passed. Among friends and the initiated there grew up a legend that Berg, who seemed to know so little of life, who had written only intimate songs and chamber-music, the only one of all Schönberg’s pupils who had never been professionally concerned with the theatre, was composing on Büchner’s *Wozzeck*. Work on this opera took about six years; when it was completed in 1920, a few friends were privileged to see the manuscript; they expressed admiration and astonishment but considered it absolutely impossible of performance. It seemed as if Berg had ruthlessly applied Schönberg’s polyphonic writing to the opera, demanding the unattainable of singers and orchestra. No publisher thought of accepting this monstrosity and even after Berg had brought out his own edition of the piano-score, requests for copies were made only by good friends in his own circle who usually received them forthwith. Then came the first surprise; one day it was decided to present Berg’s music at a festival in Frankfurt, 1923. His name had meanwhile become better known through frequent performances of the *Piano Sonata* and a *String Quartet*. A few selections from *Wozzeck*, those easiest to execute without dramatic representation, were grouped by Berg for concert performance and played at Frankfurt.

“The success was tremendous. Berg who had been standing on the side-lines, became the hero of the festival. But again several years passed by. In 1925 Kleiber found the courage to present the whole work upon the principal stage of the Reich. This brought the second surprise: the opera whose effect as a drama had in no way been indicated by its concert success at Frankfurt and whose most intricate score had now first become a reality, electrified and overwhelmed the audience at the premiere and continued to do so at the ten following performances. Then came the third surprise—the work was retained in the Berlin repertory, where it remains to this day. Gradually it has made its

way over the whole of Germany; it has been presented there on more than twenty-five stages, and has survived the success of operas more rapidly composed, those more readily accepted, only to disappear the more quickly despite their attempt at simple comprehensibility and modernity.”

**From Berlin to America** The first Berlin performances drew a few attacks from reactionary quarters but these were decisively routed by expert critics who stood at the top of their profession. In 1926 *Wozzeck* encountered a stronger opposition in Prague where the third performance at the Czech National Theatre was abruptly brought to a close by the planned demonstration of a nationalistic group, an event reminiscent of the *Tannhauser* premiere in Paris. In 1927 Leningrad presented a splendid performance, and to the small provincial town of Oldenburg belongs the distinction of completely shattering the fiction of the “insurmountable difficulties of *Wozzeck*.”

Further important *Wozzeck* premieres took place in 1930 in Vienna and Aachen. The former finally brought Berg the recognition long due from his native city; the latter was the high point of the Liège music-festival and presented the work to a large international audience.

Most recently auspicious is the course of *Wozzeck* in America. In the fall of 1930 Kleiber performed the *Three Fragments* from the opera at Carnegie Hall, and on March 19, 1931 Leopold Stokowski presented the brilliant stage premiere in Philadelphia. With the New York performance, under his direction, it is to be expected that a new high peak in the destiny of the work will be reached.