

LULU, AFTER THE PREMIERE

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THE world premiere at Zurich of Alban Berg's musical legacy, the unfinished opera, *Lulu*, came as a sensation tragically intensified by death. It was a memorial service rather than a gala premiere, especially since the incomplete work was presented as a "torso." Two acts were given, plus the last two movements of the *Lulu Symphony* composed by Berg from sections of the opera with a certain formal independence—the variations on a theme for the lute composed by Wedekind, and the death of Lulu, which is an adagio with scenic accompaniment. But since the complete effect of the work depends upon its unity of form and the ultimate rounding out of every impression, the true motivating idea could, under these circumstances, be intimated only. Closer acquaintance with the third act, partially completed but so far undisclosed, will be necessary before the full power of his conception can be realized.

Berg, as man and as musician always a modern, that is, always able to transmute the most forward-looking accomplishments of his time whether technical, psychological or emotionally expressive into his own art forms, did not, when selecting the material for *Lulu* fulfill the expectations raised by the composer of *Wozzeck*. In *Wozzeck* he was attracted by the almost ageless problem of a human struggling creature, the individual enmeshed in society, against meanness, against socially motivated brutality; a problem which is expressed with ever greater force in life today. In *Lulu*, on the other hand, the urge to formulate a modern, an actually present-day conflict is completely lacking. The Wedekind dramas, *Erdgeist* and *Büchse der Pandora*, after so many years, after so many important changes brought on by the world war and the decline of capitalism and its culture, after the modifica-

tion of the whole range of emotions, are today flat and ineffectual. But at the turn of the century they were both glorified and proscribed not so much for their content as for their daring, for their expression in art form of ideas then new and still only latent in humanity. How significant and path-breaking these plays once were has already been forgotten. Even Berg's music and his brilliant dramaturgic union of the two works into the story of the rise and fall of Lulu evoke only the splendor of a dust-shrouded salon of the eighties rather than a significant and inevitable comprehension of life. Lulu, "the soul who rubs sleep from her eyes in another world," transported to an age which knows neither spiritual sleep nor another world, meets the blank wall of non-comprehension, for this is an era which appreciates the past at best only historically, not in terms of actual experience. Lulu is not a female Don Juan for whom sex opens up all the mystery of the universe and of existence. She is, rather, a frail woman, for whom the world and all being are enclosed within the boundaries of sex and the actual expression of her functions.

Berg, who attended a performance of the Wedekind drama in his youth, never lost the deep impression it made. Twenty years later, still under that influence, he decided to set the work to music. But we who completely lack this initial impression or in whom it has been obliterated by later, stronger influences and experiences are confronted by an image of astonishing strangeness; we fail to get the impression of transcending power.



And yet, notwithstanding the handicap of the text, Berg's opera represents one of the most imposing developments in recent music history.

It has already been said, and with special emphasis after the *Lulu* performance, that Berg deserted the road marked out by Schönberg, compromised with tonality, and sought a modification of the twelve-tone technic. Although these observations may seem unconvincing and unscientific, on superficial consideration they can be aptly applied to *Lulu*. Motives of tonal character, their development, the instrumentation of the opera, the application of forms, all tend to produce an impression clearly distinguishable even for a layman from Schönberg's methods.

Yet it is Berg who has placed Schönberg's contribution—not only artistically but dialectically opposed to the old and the reactionary—on the firm and real foundation of pure art. At the moment when twelve-tone music was on its way to mastery, to victory, as the sole, intrinsically contemporary expression of German music, it could afford to shed its belligerent character as unnecessary and to indicate the bonds between the old and the new more clearly. It was only essential that the union, just as in Berg's work, be contrived with the use of the new materials. Is this compromise? Then is the invention of dynamite to be discredited because it is used for road building instead of for war?

Lulu, like all great achievements, typifies growth, not arbitrary calculation. Here the musical form develops to a greater extent than in *Wozzeck* and, much more consciously, from the necessities of the text. Arias, ensembles, contrapuntal forms (canon, ostinato, etc.) deliberate expansions of the old music based on new material, create unity for the whole work. New forms are contrived directly from the materials to express a new emotional content, like the monoritmica, a musical texture based on a single rhythm, representing for the first time in history the completely logical development of a purely rhythmic concept.

The leit-motive technic is profoundly thought out, with the twelve-tone scale as the material. Never thematic in itself, the twelve-tone scale is only motive-forming; just as the A-minor key in *Lohengrin* was not the Grail motive, but presented rather the material out of which the Grail motive was formed.

Characterizations of the dramatis personae stem from the inner meaning of the characters themselves. The almost transcendently horrible figure of Schigolch is represented purely instrumentally, in chamber music style, by woodwinds and pizzicato of the strings; the boorish athlete, Rodrigo, by heavy, coarse piano chords; the strange compulsion of the Countess Geschwitz, her unnatural love for Lulu, by an archaic Greek pentatonic, here very exotic in effect. The unity of characters is defined by the unity of whole forms. Alwa is characterized by the rondo, Doktor Schön by the sonata.

But all this emphasizes a deficiency not only in Berg but in all new music, which is its lack of form. The sonata is the product

of its component material, namely tonality, and is a form which grew out of the relationship between tonic and dominant, having meaning only because of this interrelationship. (It is only necessary to recall the key relationships between the sonata movements, the harmonic interchange between the principal and the subsidiary subjects, the essentially harmonic principle of the development section.) But if these relationships are lacking, if a material entirely new serves as the foundation, does not the form lose its significance, creating rather the effect of a relic of a bygone age, beautiful but cold and dead?

New forms must be developed from the new material of the twelve-tone technic, as form has always been developed from material. Berg gives us some examples, for instance Alwa's hymn, a choral prelude based on a well-thought-out though not convincing cantus firmus, completely conceived in terms of the twelve-tone scale. But the ultimate accomplishment, the form of compelling unity is not yet at hand. There is much that sounds unconvincing and illogical. In an art that has not yet had time to mature to master's stature, this lack becomes the excuse for sweeping and destructive condemnation of an entirely new concept.



It was obvious that diligence and tireless effort were expended on the direction of the performance. But these should never be evident. The efforts devoted to any work—this applies equally to classic as to modern productions—to be successful should not be discernible in the ultimate effect. There is only one goal, the performance. The fault was not altogether that of the Zurich theatre nor its conductor, Denzler, who had the courage to present the work despite all the difficulties. It was plain that a comprehension of the real spirit of the work was missing, which is rather the consequence of the regimentation of art in Europe today by which new music is given the role of a strange and deliberate intruder into customary routine. But there was one thing that is utterly inexcusable—the scenic investiture. If the musical short-comings can be attributed to lack of general music “literacy” and to misinterpretation of the new music, the cancer at the heart of the production was the staging by Schmidt, director of

the Zurich opera, not only because of its clichés and carelessness, but because of a completely erroneous interpretation. "The soul who rubs sleep from her eyes in another world," represented on the stage by an unmistakable suburbanite of the lowest order became amusing and grotesque. We had a professorially blustering Dr. Schön, a smart-aleck Schigolch, out of operetta, and a gigolo Alwa, all more appropriate for a Lehar *Lulu*.

Berg deliberately made a parallel between the characters of the first act and the characters of the last, intending thereby to identify his tragedy as a symbol of the mystery of sex. And throughout the whole course of his music and by its transcendental effect he aimed not at giving us the individual portrait of a loose woman, but at the fact itself of her sex-determined path of destiny. The coarse naturalism on the stage, the too literal action of the performers in the movie written by Berg for the middle of the drama, acted as in the primitive beginnings of the silent film, fell completely out of the frame, and destroyed the meaning of the work. A staging which is based neither on the text or the music, but is the product of haphazard and antiquated theatrical methods, must inevitably hamper the true success of any work. *Lulu* did win an unusual réclame in Zurich. But this was because the master's greatness, the sheer power of his creation overcame all handicaps, the impossible was made possible, so this new work made its entrance into the cultural consciousness of mankind.