

MODERN MUSIC

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LULU — THE TEXT AND MUSIC

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IN the period immediately following the premiere of *Wozzeck* (1925), Alban Berg's principal concern was with chamber music. This is easy to understand; the intimate, lyrical character of such music helped to restore the spiritual equilibrium of the composer after the great unburdening of his nature in *Wozzeck*. Two quite personal "confession" works were the fruit of this pre-occupation, the *Kammerkonzert für Klavier, Geige und dreizehn Bläser* (1925), which paid a mystical tribute to Arnold Schönberg on his fiftieth birthday, and the *Lyrische Suite* (1926), which was, in a certain sense, an autobiography expounded by a string quartet. But the aria, *Der Wein*, completed in 1929, on a text by Baudelaire, unmistakably indicated a return to the operatic style.

As a matter of fact Berg had felt an imperative urge to write a second opera immediately after he finished *Wozzeck*, but his unusually exacting standards for a libretto made it difficult to find the right text. He searched unremittingly, and considered seriously two works: Gerhart Hauptmann's *Und Pippa Tanzt* and Anski's *Dybbuk*. However, his choice was finally set on the Wedekind Lulu-tragedy. This was due only partly to the counsel of a friend unusually well acquainted with the demands of Berg's nature. In his youth, Berg had been profoundly moved by the premiere of the second half of Wedekind's two-part drama, *Erdgeist* and *Die Büchse der Pandora*, presented by Karl Kraus on May 29, 1905 in a small, private Vienna

theatre, to an audience of invited guests. An unforgettable impression was left on the young man by Wedekind's work and by the splendid performance of the actors who included the poet himself and Tilly Newes (whom Wedekind later married). The introductory lectures by Karl Kraus must have been equally impressive for they expounded those fundamental ideas which, more than twenty years later, determined the direction of Berg's approach in adapting the tragedy for his opera text.

In his lectures, Kraus discussed Wedekind's mode of creation as follows: "Out of a loose chain of events which might have been constructed by a cheap literary romanticist, a more penetrating eye has conceived a work with perspective, a work of upheaval and of harmony. Backstairs poetry becomes a poem of the backstairs, to be reviled only by traditionalist morons who prefer a badly designed palace to a well-designed gutter. The real vision, however, lies not in this exterior plane, but behind it. How little place there is for realism of environment in Wedekind's world where people exist to give living form to ideas! He is the first German dramatist to restore ideas to the stage, from which they had long been banished. All the fancies of naturalism are blown away, and what lies above and below his people is more important than the dialect they speak. Once more—one hardly dares say this—characters utter monologs, even when they appear on the stage together."

Therefore, although an attempt is made in the following paragraphs to sketch the plot of Berg's opera *Lulu*, it should be remembered that behind all this apparently realistic and brutal action, there are fundamental ethical principles, principles of unusual clarity and eternal greatness, which could have been enkindled with life only by a poet gifted as was Frank Wedekind. It would be especially false to regard Lulu, who moves through the drama, a "somnambulist of love," other than as a symbolic, legendary figure. Beset in a milieu of violence and lust, she endures and fulfills her tragic and deeply moving fate of martyrdom. "She is," a Prague critic has said recently, "a heroine of fourth-dimensional power in her endurance and her suffering, destroying all that she magnetizes. She is a phenomenon of nature, beyond good and evil, a complete cosmos, whose secrets,

altogether removed from ordinary comprehension, can be revealed only by the music. The way this glowing ball of fire scorches everything which it touches and finally burns itself out, leaving all life about it extinguished or fading away, has led the metaphysician in the composer to make a transposition to those unearthly spheres, where figures flicker in death like dream images, illumined only by the last dying afterglow of a great, irresponsible demon. Compared to his *Wozzeck*, Alban Berg's *Lulu* will have eternal life; she will find it easier than poor *Wozzeck*, for with Don Juan and Faust she belongs to those always new-born figures, from time to time appearing among us, which need only to be perceived by the poet, not created."



After these essential preliminaries, let us present a brief résumé of the opera. The prolog, delivered before the curtain by an animal trainer, suddenly plunges us into the fantastic atmosphere of the circus, to establish a proper harmony with the adventurous, almost legendary events of the drama. The tamer introduces the most important protagonists as animals in his menagerie (accompanied in every case by the individual musical characteristics, to be fully developed later). Lulu is presented as a snake, created to wreak havoc, and is admonished:

My dear little wild beast, don't be unnatural.
You have no right, by spitting and meowing,
To hide from us the primal form of woman.

Act I. The unbridled fulfillment of this "primal figure" creates the story of the Lulu-drama. Scene 1 shows us Lulu, dressed as Pierrot, in an artist's studio. Dr. Schön, who is present with his son, Alwa, gives the artist critical advice. When they leave, the artist, long enamored of Lulu, pursues his model through the studio in a wild witches' chase and finally catches her. There is a sudden knocking at the door; Lulu's husband, (an old medical councillor to whom Dr. Schön has married her off) has come to take his wife home. Immediately guessing what has happened, he is overcome by rage and dies of a heart attack.

Scene 2. Lulu has married the artist. He knows nothing of

her lively past or her relationship with Dr. Schön. In her luxurious home she receives Schigolch, an obscene old man who calls himself her father, exploits her, and yet is himself in love with her. Dr. Schön, who has become betrothed to a young girl, enters and asks her to set him finally free. Lulu answers the master of men, Schön, the only one she really loves:

If I belong to anyone on earth, it is to you.

Without you I would be—I dare not say where.

You took me by the hand, you gave me food, you
dressed me when I tried to steal your watch.

Do you believe I can forget all that?

In order finally to set himself free, Schön tells the artist of his own relations with Lulu and advises him to treat her with more severity. His illusions suddenly ripped away, in despair over his shattered ideal the youth commits suicide—the second man to be ruined by Lulu.

Scene 3: in a theatre dressing room. Lulu has been placed in a theatre by Schön, and dances the principal role in a pantomime written by his son, Alwa. Schön and his fiancée are among the spectators. Lulu, deeply humiliated, faints on the stage. By threatening to go to Africa with a prince who has proposed marriage, she compels Schön, who cannot break the inner bond with her, to write a farewell letter to his betrothed. With the downfall of Schön, who himself speaks of his "execution", the first act closes.

Act II. A room in the home of Schön, whose wife Lulu has become. Every one about her is now madly in love with her: the servant, Rodrigo—an athlete and a friend of Schigolch—, a young schoolboy, the Countess Geschwitz—an artist—, and Alwa, Lulu's stepson. Schön who, quite aware of the situation, is developing a persecution mania, surprises Lulu in a tête-à-tête with Alwa. After a great quarrel, he presses a revolver into her hand. Lulu justifies herself in the following outburst:

If men destroy themselves on my account,

That does not degrade me.

You knew why you married me.

Just as I knew why I married you.

You have betrayed your friends with me,
With me you could not well betray yourself.
If you bring me your declining years as sacrifice,
In exchange you have had my whole youth.
I never wanted to appear in the world
As anything but what men took me for,
And I have never been accepted by the world
As anything other than what I am.

(This piece is composed as a coloratura song and develops—in correspondence to the lines of the text—with the melody recurring in the second part of each couplet.)

Urged to suicide, Lulu points the revolver at Schön and kills him. Lulu's arrest closes the first scene of the second act.

Both scenes of this act are played in the same setting but there is the interval of a year between them, during which Lulu, sentenced for the murder of Schön, has been imprisoned, and then released by the Countess Geschwitz, Alwa and Schigolch. Berg has bridged this gap in a very original way, with a freely devised film intermezzo which will be discussed in detail later. Suffice it to say here that after the dynamic climax of a gradually increasing crescendo the music accompanying the film reaches a restful pianissimo. This marks the middle of the drama and the crisis of the action. Paralleling the events of the film, the direction of the music from here on is reversed. The instrumentation of the beginning is rigidly preserved; only the general sonority, in keeping with the gloomier mood, is modified on the return by a gradual toning-down.

Scene 2. Freed from prison in fantastic fashion by the generous self-sacrifice of Countess Geschwitz, Lulu must flee the country. The murderer of his father, she yet induces Alwa to accompany her, and the second act closes on a glowing love scene, the lyrical climax of the opera.

Act III. The last act shows Lulu further on the road of her catastrophic downfall. In the opening scene she is in Paris in a world of gamblers, procurers and swindlers, all of whom want to extort what she insists on granting only of her free-will.

Again the Countess Geschwitz, by a feat of self-sacrificing boldness, saves Lulu from threatening exposure and arrest. Everything here takes place in the setting of a glittering social assembly, whose brilliant splendor makes a doubly strong contrast with the final pitiful fate of Lulu.

Scene 2. The curtain rises on a poverty-stricken London attic, the lowest point of Lulu's degradation. Alwa and Schigolch wander aimlessly about while Lulu goes in search of men. Countess Geschwitz is there, also impoverished, her only remaining possession the picture of Lulu made by the young artist in the days of her greatest splendor. (This picture plays an important part in Berg's opera and is given a symbolical exposition in the music.) One of Lulu's visitors kills Alwa, who resents her shame. Lulu finally falls beneath the knife of Jack the Ripper. Her death takes place behind the scenes; only the death shriek, powerfully shrilling up in the orchestra, announces the gruesome event. Countess Geschwitz, who confronts the fleeing murderer, dies a sacrificial death. Her last words:

"Lulu, my angel, let me see you once again. I am near you,
I will stay near you, to eternity,"

end the Lulu-tragedy and the opera by Alban Berg.



Ernst Krenek recently made the following comment on the relation between Wedekind's double-drama and Berg's opera version: "The adaptation of the two Wedekind dramas by Berg aims first of all to abridge the text, without sacrificing dramatic motives or whole scenes, as has happened when previous attempts were made to condense the two works into one evening's performance. In the operatic adaptation, the gap between the two Wedekind works comes in the middle of the second act. Here Berg has taken the rather complicated story of Lulu's sentence and liberation, hardly susceptible of treatment in a music drama, and presented it in a silent film, accompanied by music. This central point of the work is also its dramatic peak, the peripetia in the fate of the heroine. Before, she has actively destroyed men by the desires she unleashed in them; afterwards, she is a passive

object, driven to destruction as a sacrifice to the bourgeois moralistic conception of guilt, to the prevailing instinct of atonement. This is worked out musically in keeping with the new impulses, of which Berg is an exponent. The form is not developed by the symmetrical arrangement of static masses according to the principle of the return of the first subject after the development of the second (a principle which rules all tonal music in the form of A-B-A); but, through reverse and backward flowing modifications, a basic form is established by means of which Berg marvelously underscores and interprets the back-swing of the inner flow of Berg's tragedy. Thus the film, which covers events from Lulu's arrest to her escape, runs in very symmetrical fashion. The "three involved in the arrest" at the beginning of the film correspond to the "three involved in the escape" at the end; the trial follows the preliminary hearing, the consultation of physicians is followed by transfer of Lulu to the isolation ward; the guilt corresponds to the sickness. The parallel extends to the smallest details; the prison van that brings the condemned woman to jail—the ambulance that takes her away; revolver (as *corpus delicti*)—stethoscope (at the medical examination); chains, in jail—bandages, in the hospital; paragraph marks, cholera bacilli, etc. These almost overburdening allusions of Berg's in the exposition of the film-intermezzo are not to be judged as an arbitrary profusion of external theatrical properties, but are significant of his organization of even the slightest details in a system of form-creation which aims to secure a place for ideas in the opera *Lulu*, such as Wedekind established in the drama."



A comparison of the formal shape of the music of *Lulu* with that of *Wozzeck* reveals a number of outstanding differences. Berg's general architectonic procedure with the loose succession of scenes in Büchner's work was to give each one a special individual musical form. In *Lulu* prescribed forms are assigned to individual persons of the opera and it is only by their gathering together that the musical characteristics of the figures emerge. While in *Wozzeck* the inner structure of the scenes to a certain

degree necessitated their development by instrumental forms, in *Lulu*, the progress of the action with large or small ensembles logically led the composer to prefer song development; the larger instrumental forms are reserved for the two principal masculine figures, Dr. Schön, (sonata) and Alwa (rondo). In *Wozzeck*, the unity of the musical form was assured by the unity of the forms introduced to characterize the individual scenes. In *Lulu* the "open" construction of the scenes made it necessary to obtain this unity by other means. The first of these was developed from the twelve-tone technic exploited by Berg in such exceptional fashion that the whole opera flows out of the series assigned to the figure of *Lulu*; all other thematic forms seem to lead out of that series. A greater unity, permitting at the same time the greatest degree of variety in the thematic building up of such a complicated musical structure as an opera cannot be imagined. And, besides, Berg was also successful in creating symmetries by his adaptation of the text which made clear musical connections, and therefore unity, possible.

In a highly original fashion he has discovered a way to utilize all the elements of musical form, even those of pure instrumental technic, in the service of the music drama. One might term this a sort of "developed leitmotivization" or perhaps a "psychologizing of the musical material." An example is the form for the figure of the Countess Geschwitz, which is based throughout on the pentatonic; or the characterization of Rodrigo by heavy piano chords. There are even pure leitmotives in the Wagnerian sense, such as the chords assigned to *Lulu's* picture.

An example of the creation of pure instrumental form, besides the film music already mentioned, is the entr'acte music, which, in the guise of a highly developed variations passage, links the two scenes of Act III. The variations theme, which appears for the first time in its original form towards the close of this passage, is the melody of a Wedekind street song; maintaining a constant and faithful repetition of the tones of the melody, it undergoes several changes of musical character and a mounting development, from variation to variation. The first variation (maestoso, in the 3/4 time of the theme) begins tonally (C major) and with a pompous swell in the instrumentation; the

orchestral tone indicates the false splendor of the Parisian demi-monde, foreign to Lulu's nature. The second variation, (*grazioso*, in 4/4 time),—by its polytonal structure—indicates the influence of the demi-monde on Lulu; even the brutality of the whole atmosphere is transmuted by her nature to something alluring. In contrast to this, the third variation (*funèbre*, in 5/4 time) with a completely developed tonality, expresses a further stage on her dolorous way: Alwa's death. In the fourth variation (*affetuoso*, in 7/4 time) the great emotional climax of this symphonic passage is reached by means which conform to the laws of the twelve-tone scale. Significantly it is only now that the theme of these variations appears in its original harmonic and rhythmic form, played as if by a hand-organ, floating up from the street into Lulu's wretched attic room, the place of her lowest degradation.

Of the many new musical forms devised by Berg for *Lulu*, only one more will be mentioned here, a "monoritmica" (at the close of the first act) which, by means of consistently restrained, rhythmically built-up thematic material, mounts in eighteen modifications of tempo from "grave" to "prestissimo" and then gradually turns around as "auskomponiertes ritardando"—a difficult and interesting task for the conductor.

The premiere of the *Fünf Symphonischen Stücke* from *Lulu*, given in Berlin, in November 1934, by Erich Kleiber, clearly indicated that Berg had reached a new peak of his creation with this opera. The music has a harmonious magic and effectiveness to which no hearer can fail to respond. It is to be hoped that the whole opera will soon be given production, to reveal what a great marvel of tonal beauty and psychological depth Berg has produced, and with what unity his noble music has embraced the richness of Wedekind's tragedy.