

ALBAN BERG—FINALE: A REQUIEM

MOSES SMITH

ALBAN BERG'S Viennese circle of friends, associates and disciples tended to regard him as the Romantic of the Schönberg school. Those who know his music best, and therefore speak with greatest authority, see in his relatively short list of compositions a development that is consistent according to one central principle. It is, more or less, a continuous bridge between the world of Wagner's *Tristan* and that of our day. Throughout Berg's musical legacy there is emphasis on the specific kind of emotion that we associate with the word Romantic.

That his later compositions have been written largely, although by no means entirely, in accordance with the complicated technic of the twelve-tone system has misled some American critics—nonchalantly disposing of a work they have not been able to understand in a fleeting performance—into some curious judgments. They seem to start with the premise that any composer who has anything worth while to say would not try to say it in the terrifying language of the twelve-tone system. (Schönberg has not been able to live down that charge for thirty years.) Ergo, the twelve-tone system is the refuge of those dried-up musical intellects who conceal their paucity of originality and creativeness beneath a surface of mechanized technic. And so we see Berg's *Lyric Suite* for string quartet damned as music of cold intellect and theory; or the extraordinary *Suite* that Berg drew from his unfinished opera, *Lulu*, as unassorted rubbish.

The wonder is how *Wozzeck* took so many in. I suppose that the almost unanimous agreement with which cold shoulders have been turned to everything by Berg presented in America since *Wozzeck* may be interpreted as a confession of repentance and a promise not to repeat the blunder. Besides, there were extenuating circumstances. There was the exciting drama of Georg

Büchner which Berg fashioned into an opera. There was the remarkable method of musical treatment that led Berg to employ instrumental forms for a lyrico-dramatic work. (This treatment, as has been pointed out, was antedated by Dukas in his *Ariane et Barbe-bleue*.) And finally, no doubt, there remains the face-saving explanation that Berg was a one-work composer, and that nothing he wrote before or after *Wozzeck* is of much account. This explanation was duly included in many of the obituary notices on Berg.

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Thus *Lulu*, Berg's second opera, which he did not quite finish before he died, is put in its place before it has been heard. The symphonic excerpts have met with varying receptions in Europe and America at the few performances to date. The encouraging thing, for those who regard Berg as one of the master musicians of this century, is the spirit of controversy and even acrimony that has attended the playing of the music from *Lulu*. Anything that has caused such violent reactions is likely to have a lot in it. I had the good fortune to be present during several of the Boston Symphony Orchestra rehearsals for the American premiere under Koussevitzky. These impressions were strengthened by the hearing of two actual performances and by examination of the score. I have no hesitation in saying that if these orchestral selections are representative, *Lulu* is a very great work. The principal criticisms directed against the *Suite*—apparently mutually contradictory but actually quite reconcilable—are that, on the one hand, it is "atonal nonsense," on the other, it is frequently derivative from Wagner and Mahler. As to the first objection, there is no need to elaborate on the comment already set forth. As to the second, the question may pertinently be asked: what composer, great or small, has not left indications throughout his music of the influence of his forebears? When I say, furthermore, that the objections are readily reconcilable, I am referring again to the tie that connects Berg's music with that of the past.

In the case of *Lulu*, too, many were unpleasantly surprised to find that music which they had expected to be piercingly dissonant (and the twelve-tone system can produce some "unpleasant" tonal combinations) had frequently a quite unexpected sonority.



ALBAN BERG
his last portrait,
made in 1935 by
B. F. DOLBIN

The most remarkable single illustration is the "horrendous dissonance" (Herbert Peyser's expression) in the finale, when the twelve tones of the scale are combined into a gigantic chord that, in the opera itself, accompanies Lulu's dying shriek. The result is not noise at all, but has the effect which, in an earlier work, would be produced by a sudden, bold modulation, masterfully orchestrated. It is obvious that much of Berg's cogency is due to his handling of the instruments. Not for him intellectual "eye-music."

We are also inclined to forget that the twelve-tone system permits combinations that are not torturing discords. Schönberg, for his own good and sufficient reasons, in his later scores (except the most recent ones) has avoided combinations of tones that might even vaguely suggest tonality. But he was the pioneer who found it necessary, temporarily, to obliterate the recollection of the old in order that we might hear the new with unprejudiced ears. His followers are under no such obligation. Berg especially did not hesitate to employ passages in a more or less recognizable tonality when they suited his purpose. As an illustration, the theme of the Variations in the *Lulu* Suite, a street song, is for obvious reasons tonal.



An even more extended use of so-called tonal elements is contained in Berg's last work, the still unpublished and unperformed *Violin Concerto*. The story of how this composition was written is itself fairly remarkable. Berg was engaged in completing the orchestration of *Lulu* when, a little more than a year ago, he accepted a commission for a concerto from an American violinist, Louis Krasner. For several months he turned over in his mind the various problems entailed. Then, in June, Manon Gropius, the daughter of Mahler's widow and an intimate of Berg and his circle, died in Vienna after a period of great suffering, which the young woman bore with an almost angelic fortitude. Berg was deeply affected, set to work on the *Concerto*, which he now conceived as a requiem for Manon, and, in feverish haste, finished the piece in six weeks. The coincidence between the circumstances surrounding Berg's writing of this composition and those in the case of Mozart and his *Requiem* has not escaped Viennese

commentators. Berg survived the composition of the *Concerto* by only a few months, which were insufficient to enable him to complete his second and last opera. Thus, as in Mozart's case, the requiem he wrote for another, became his own.

The key to the *Concerto*, in subject-matter as well as form, is the dedication, *Dem Andenken eines Engels*. The *Concerto*, which takes about twenty-five minutes to play, is in two movements, each of which, in turn, is divided into two parts, the first serving as a sort of introduction to the second. At the beginning the solo violin sounds a figure that consists of the successive fifths of the open strings. This figure gives rise to the series (*Reihe*) on which much of the composition is constructed. It is immediately apparent, therefore, that however strictly the composer may thereafter pursue the twelve-tone technic, the result will bear certain close and inevitable relationships to more traditional systems. This prediction is soon verified by the appearance of twelve-tone series containing at least two triads, and occasionally the suggestion of a third. How consciously Berg sought to subdivide his series into triads I do not know. It is possible, of course, to build a series on four triads. Nicolas Slonimsky, in his researches into the twelve-tone theory, has worked out seven such quadruple combinations. The procedure leads, as is readily seen, back in the direction of tonality.

The first part of the first movement is a sort of preluding andante. The second, an allegretto, has the spirit and shape of a scherzo. The music has a Viennese flavor; a Karinthian folk-tune is heard; the music turns into a waltz. The scherzo is clearly intended to convey an impression of Manon Gropius in her happier moments. The second movement, following a brief pause, begins more turbulently. The first part is like a passionate, accompanied cadenza, interrupted momentarily by a quieter intermezzo. After an organ-point, with a diminuendo, the adagio begins, as the solo instrument sounds a Bach chorale, *Es ist genug*, from the cantata, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*. The text of the chorale is written into the score, that there may be no doubt as to the significance the music is intended to have, in accord with the *Concerto's* requiem character. The chorale, as it happens, offers no problem in terms of the twelve-tone system; but it is

first repeated with Bach's original harmony. From here on, the music assumes the character of an apotheosis; in Willi Reich's words, "like a lament for the dead." After the music has reached a most passionate climax, there is a coda with a quiet ending. Just before the end the solo violin plays the motto of the open strings; and the contra-bass has a scarcely audible descending figure to close.

The orchestra consists of woodwind and brass in twos, with an alto saxophone, a good-sized percussion section, harp and strings. Even a private rehearsal with a bare piano accompaniment (the piano reduction was made under Berg's supervision) suggests the unusual character of the *Concerto*; this is made even clearer by a study of the orchestral score. A most unusual device is employed in the treatment of the chorale, where the solo violinist takes a position which I believe is unique in the history of the concerto form. As the song approaches the climax there is a direction, written into the score, that the soloist shall gradually assume leadership of the upper strings, which at various stages join him in unison. The soloist's increasing dominance over the ensemble is, according to the composer, to be made evident to the audience, just as, later on, his relapse from the position of conductor-soloist is to be similarly apparent. Berg's emphasis contrasts with that of the classical concerto, in which as a rule no sooner does the soloist state a theme than the orchestral tutti take it away from him to show how much more effective they can make it sound.

The *Concerto* will receive its first performance by Krasner under Anton Webern at the I. S. C. M. Festival in Barcelona in the middle of April. Chronologically it occupies the same position with regard to *Lulu* as Mozart's *Requiem* did to *Zauberflöte*. If Berg did not entirely complete *Lulu*, there remained only a portion of the last act for Arnold Schönberg to orchestrate, with the assistance of Berg's sketches. The first performance of *Lulu* is scheduled for Zurich in December.