

Opera as a Means for Revolution: Interpreting Alban Berg's Wozzeck as a Tool for Engendering Social Change

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Wozzeck is a story written by the nineteenth-century German playwright, Georg Büchner, about the plight of a poor foot soldier named Wozzeck who faced hardships because of his low social standing. Musicologists have considered Alban Berg's operatic adaptation of *Wozzeck*, composed between 1915 and 1922, revolutionary for multiple reasons. Many have said that the work changed the face of twentieth-century opera, as it was the first atonal opera ever written. Berg also drew on earlier musical forms and mechanisms, such as the passacaglia and the dance suite, which led to an unusual combination of archaic traditions and modern archetypes. But while scholars have focused on these aspects of the opera in great detail, Berg himself stated that he did not use these techniques with the intention to revolutionize the music of his time (Reich 21). What has not yet been addressed is how Berg may have intended his opera to revolutionize his world: to draw people's attention to the problems they were facing in interwar Viennese society.

In this paper, I explore how Berg may have composed *Wozzeck* with the aim of engendering social change. I detail how Berg incorporated autobiographical aspects into his operatic adaptation of the play in order to help himself and his audience relate to Wozzeck's plight by recognizing their own experiences of Viennese society in *Wozzeck's* encounters. Through an analysis of Berg's dramatic and musical constructions of his characters, I propose that he has an agenda for the opera not yet considered: to focus the audience's attention on sociological issues present in interwar

Vienna. More specifically, I suggest that he hoped to illuminate the inequality of certain social hierarchies in order to demonstrate the necessity of revolution.

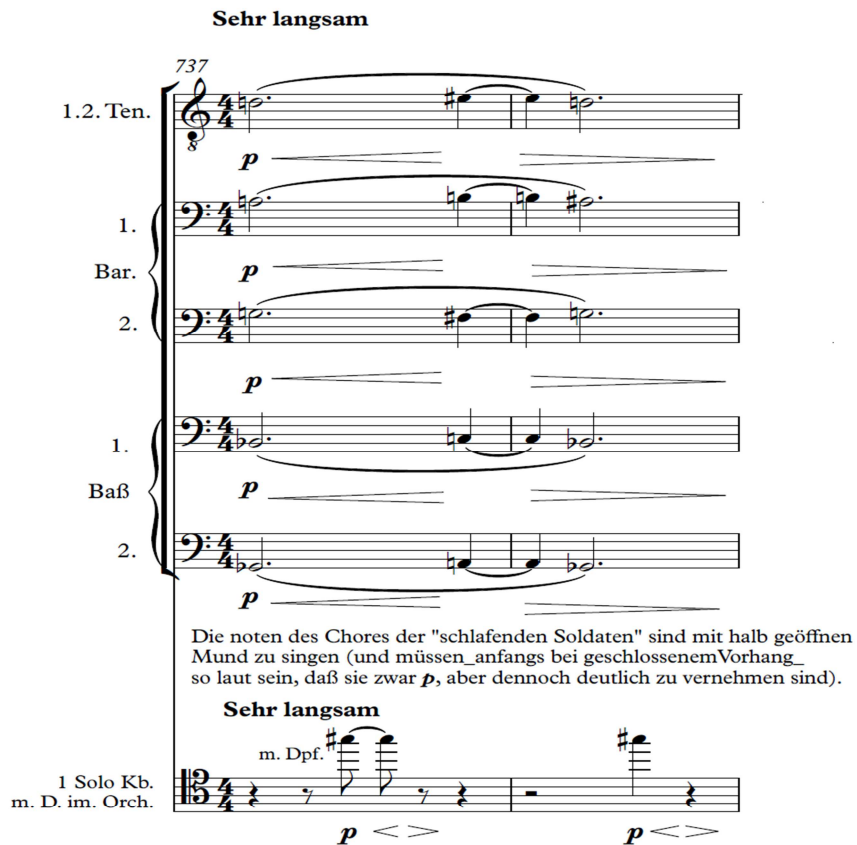
Büchner's *Woyzeck* was left as a collection of fragments in 1836 after the playwright's early death. During the second half of the nineteenth century they were revived and patched together by numerous literary scholars, the first pioneer of whom was Karl Emil Franzos. Berg saw one such revival of *Woyzeck* twice in May 1915 when it was premiered in Vienna and his letters reveal that he instantly found the material suitable for his first opera (Stein 168). A reason for this was that Berg saw aspects of his own life within the plot and he altered the libretto and character construction for his opera in order to convey this and other nuances of contemporary Viennese life. In the 1980s, Kurt Blaukopf investigated Berg's letters to his pupil Gottfried Kassowitz written between 1913 and 1929, and he concluded that Berg associated some of *Wozzeck's* opera characters with people that he met during his war service. Blaukopf suggested that Berg used this stimulus to design a situation that related to him personally (Blaukopf 62). For instance, Berg changed the diet prescribed by *Wozzeck's* Doctor from peas to beans and mutton, which reflects a statement Berg made in a letter that "Once or twice a week we are given mutton...prepared in the most disgusting manner" (76).

Blaukopf has pointed out that beans and mutton were given as Austrian army rations during World War I and since a significant number of the opera's audience members would have served in the war and eaten such a diet, this change meant that the opera could resonate with many of the audience members. Another way Berg attempted to incorporate his own world into the opera is through the chorus of snoring soldiers in Act II, Scene 5 (Ex.1). Blaukopf has pointed out that "the actual snores of the soldiers and the stuffy barracks" during his stay at Bruck Hospital provided the

inspiration for this scene (62, 76). These changes indicate that Berg attempted to reconstruct the opera's setting in an effort to create a relatable experience for an interwar Viennese audience (ibid.).

Sehr langsam

737



Sehr langsam

1 Solo Kb.
m. D. im. Orch.

p < > *p* < >

Die noten des Chores der "schlafenden Soldaten" sind mit halb geöffnetem Mund zu singen (und müssen anfangs bei geschlossenem Vorhang so laut sein, daß sie zwar *p*, aber dennoch deutlich zu vernehmen sind).

Ex.1 Chorus of sleeping soldiers, Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, II.5, 737–739.

With the knowledge that Berg adapted the libretto, I will from here on discuss some of the opera characters and their interactions with Wozzeck to explore how we might understand these characters as constructed by Berg to make audiences respond to them in a particular way. In each case I will also describe how Berg reconstructed these characters to illicit responses from his interwar Viennese audience.

Through the opera's libretto and music, Berg constructs Wozzeck's military superior, the Captain, in an unflattering light in order to point out the injustice of certain hierarchical social constructs. The Captain's indecent behavior towards

Wozzeck evidences the initial suppression and ill treatment that Wozzeck is subjected to. The Captain is portrayed as an idiot from the outset to show the discriminatory nature of his actions. As he re-emerges throughout the opera, we often witness him ridiculing Wozzeck for circumstances that are out of Wozzeck's control. In this way, the Captain can be understood as highlighting the inequality and frustrations of many hierarchal constructs. The music associated with the Captain further serves to give us a hostile impression of him. During the opening scene, the Captain's melodic material is frantic and rhythmically unsettling. This occurs at a moment in which the Captain tells Wozzeck to stop working in a hurry as this signifies he has low morals. By setting the Captain's vocal lines in this way, Berg portrays the Captain in an ironic light, since the latter's associations of low morals with fast movements simultaneously suggests that he himself has the low morals.

Berg's experiences with military personnel during his war service beginning in 1915 suggest that he wanted to construct the Captain in a satirical way in part due to his own experiences. He developed very hostile opinions of military officials during this time and described his service in a letter to Erwin Schulhoff as,

...daily for two and a half years from 8 o'clock in the morning until 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening [...] under a frightful superior (an idiotic drunkard); these long years of suffering endured in the rank of corporal, not composing a note—oh, it was dreadful. (Perle 21)

The similarities in rank between Wozzeck's Captain and Berg's superior have been acknowledged by musicologist Patricia Hall and it is apparent that the two also shared other attributes in common (Hall 14). Berg exclaimed to Kassowitz that it was "sheer injustice" that his Captain declared him fit for service of up to 36 hours at a time, despite his asthma attacks and a generally poor state of health (Blaukopf 62). Unlike

Wozzeck, Berg was able to resolve his situation, but the brutality and the lack of sympathy displayed by the Captain in *Wozzeck* nonetheless demonstrates parallels with how Berg experienced his military authority. Wozzeck's Captain thus emerges as a caricature of Berg's captain, purposely exaggerated to highlight the inequalities of social order and status, which are often outside of one's control.

Another character that Berg seems to have constructed to highlight the effects of Wozzeck's cruel world is the Doctor. The Doctor represents inhumane treatment, both in terms of scientific experimentation and of the general disregard of human life. Berg introduces the Doctor in Act I, Scene 4, as he is giving Wozzeck a check-up in his laboratory. Wozzeck suffers significant trauma throughout the opera by being the Doctor's scientific experiment. He endures hunger, malnutrition, and the Doctor's complete lack of empathy in exchange for a few pennies each week. The Doctor acts sadistically to Wozzeck's desperation; for example, when Wozzeck tells the Doctor about his hallucinations, the Doctor appears delighted. He comes across as a cold and a callous character, who is interested only in self-benefit. We also witness the Doctor in later scenes gossiping with the Captain about Marie's affair with the Drum-Major, thus further demonstrating his lack of human compassion or empathy. Berg represents the doctor musically by using a twelve-tone passacaglia theme with twenty-one variations. The theme (Ex.2), initially obscured by the texture, becomes more and more evident as his character is revealed in the drama. In Willi Reich's words, "When finally, in the last variation, he breaks out in a cry of desire of immortality, the most vaulting of his delusions, the theme, more or less concealed during the passacaglia, surges up with greater clarity" (Reich 23). Reich's interpretation highlights the effect that Berg achieved to musically pronounce the

Doctor's selfish interests and his desire for fame on account of his scientific experiments.



Ex.2 Doctor's theme, Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, I.4.

Berg appears to have conceived the Doctor as having similarities with a military doctor he met during his service (Hall 14). This doctor displayed cold-heartedness on par to *Wozzeck*'s. He apparently threatened the military casualties under his care that he would send them back to the battlefield if they ever complained about their wounds, and he was described in letters as being inhumane and of “revolting attitude”:

It is impossible for me to safeguard my rights by appealing to the doctor, since flat feet, ruptures, etc., are more likely to be taken into consideration than internal complaints. (Blaukopf 76)

We can also consider the Doctor in the larger context of Vienna, however. Vienna was a center of sciences, medicine, and psychology, including the burgeoning field of psychoanalysis during the first decades of the twentieth century (Janik and Toulmin 45). But despite the city being a medical capital, practices were still highly experimental. Berg's letters describe a tendency of medical practitioners to prescribe medications without consulting whether they might disagree when taken simultaneously, and to treat the side effects caused by the drugs with additional drugs. In a letter to his wife Helene Berg dated 1909, Berg explains the medicines he was taking:

...almost too many to mention at present, including lactose, codeine, sodium sulphate (the nastiest medicine you can imagine), some morphine mixture, a

cocaine solution, menthol with oil of paraffin (because the lactose hasn't worked)—and various others! Quite enough to make me well, or ill, I don't know which. (Grun 66)

Therefore we can speculate that the Doctor was representative of the emerging developments and the hostile nature of medicine, psychology and the sciences in early twentieth century Vienna and representative of their reception, by Berg at least.

Berg used the suffering soldier *Wozzeck* as the central character through which his audience experiences social injustice. In the opera, he suffers and experiences a mental decline that is stimulated not only by his inability to transcend poverty, but also by the cruel treatment of the other characters. For instance, as I have discussed, the doctor carries out heartless and detrimental scientific experiments on him; his military superiors belittle, chastise, and humiliate him, and Marie, the mother of his child, has an extramarital affair with a drum major—another of his military superiors. *Wozzeck's* destitution prohibits him from rising above his social situation. The initial signs of his hysteria occur early on, when he has hallucinations in the opera's second scene, and his mental illness culminates in the opera's final act when he murders Marie and commits suicide soon after.

Following *Wozzeck's* murdering of Marie and his own suicide, Berg asks his audience to reflect upon the events that have led to this point by revisiting musical material from previous scenes. He does this through a symphonic interlude that quotes fragments of musical material that were associated with particular characters and moments up to this point. One of the musical fragments is a quotation from a funeral march associated with the Captain in Act III, scene 2 that serves to highlight the characters' lack of mourning following *Wozzeck's* death. Musicologist Jillian Rogers understands this kind of compositional process to serve as a catharsis for the

audience by communicating through “a perpetual resurfacing of remembrances” to show that no words will suffice to appropriately mourn Wozzeck (Rogers 12).

According to Rogers, Berg does this to allow his audiences to express and accept their grief of wartime trauma by letting them revisit the reasons for Wozzeck’s grief. The opera plot thus serves as a lesson that when issues are not sufficiently acknowledged they may have fatal consequences—in this case, Marie’s murder and Wozzeck’s death.

Berg’s invitation to reflect extends to the next and final scene of the opera, in which he places an emphasis on Marie and Wozzeck’s orphan child to demonstrate how, if such sociological problems are ignored, they may remain unsolved and thus have an impact upon future generations. Until this point, Wozzeck pays less and less attention to the child and becomes more preoccupied with his hallucinations and his destitution. The mother’s treatment of her child is also often cold and she forces him to sleep warning him that he may be taken away and sent to “gypsy land.” Berg reflects Marie’s treatment of her child in the music by increasingly distorting one of the most lyrical and melodic moments in the opera, Marie’s lullaby of Act I, Scene 3 (Ex.3), in later scenes. This musical treatment aids our awareness of the increasing neglect of the child in the opera. In the final scene, we witness the child playing with other children in the street when news breaks out that his parents have been found dead. But the child is unaware of the implications of what has happened or of his loss at this stage and the circumstance seems to be beyond his comprehension, as he simply follows the other children’s actions. The effect is harrowing. Berg seems, in this scene, to be asking his audience to sympathize with this child, just as he asked them to sympathize with Wozzeck in the previous scene. Both characters emerge to be victims of circumstances, but in this final scene, Berg perhaps wishes to

acknowledge the potential harm that can impact upon future generations if sociological issues are not addressed.

Marie

370 *(sehr frei)* *p* *p*

Ei - a po - pei - a... Mä - del, was fangst Du jetzt
Hush - a - bye, ba - by... Mai - den, what song shall you

Marie

373 *f*

an? Hast ein klein Kind und kein Mann!
sing? You have a child, but no ring.

Ex.3 Marie's lullaby, *Wozzeck*, I.3, 370–375.

Yet again, a parallel with Berg's life and *Wozzeck's* child exists through Berg's daughter, Albine. Albine was born out of wedlock when Berg was a teenager and kept a close secret, even from Berg's wife Helene (Bamford-Milroy 61). Berg was unable to provide for his child at this time and it is likely that he felt remorse and sadness about this. The father and daughter eventually met when Albine was an adult, living in an area of Vienna uncannily close to the home of Berg and Helene, but Berg hesitated to spread public knowledge of Albine, for the sake of his marriage and for fear that the public knowledge of his daughter's circumstances might have affected his reputation in a negative way (59). It is thus possible that Berg related to *Wozzeck's* parental situation. During the shaving scene in Act I, Scene 1, for example, the Captain declares the immorality of having a child out of wedlock, which *Wozzeck* denies to be true:

You have a child which is not bless'd by the clergy, as our regimental chaplain says to us, preaching in church: "Which is not bless'd by the clergy" (the

words are not my own.)’ ‘And yet sir, the good Lord God will not spurn the poor little fellow, all because the Amen was not spoken before a child was thought of. The Lord spake: “Suffer the children to come to me!” (*Wozzeck* I/1)

The passion and strength that *Wozzeck* displays in this scene is rarely demonstrated to the same extent again in the opera. A possible reason for this is that Berg wanted to highlight the ignorance of the Captain’s statement and the injustice of such public reactions as he may have felt in his own life. The child therefore allows for our attention to be focused upon the most vulnerable members of society and the most important for the future, our children, who all too often emerge as victims of intentional classist prejudice just as *Wozzeck*, *Wozzeck*’s child, and Albine did.

The elements of *Wozzeck* that I have discussed until now point towards the notion that the opera contains a social critique. However, it appears that the opera’s initial critics did not understand the social message that Berg was seemingly interested in conveying. In their reviews, the critics mention the war only in the biographical context of Berg’s service, not as a central element of the opera. They are preoccupied mainly with the opera’s radical atonality, either loved or hated (and described in *Pult und Taktstock* as “sewer odor”), and they fail for the most part to understand *Wozzeck* as a victim of the society in which he lived (Hall 63). However, this does not negate the potential for social critique in Berg’s opera. Patricia Hall states in her analysis of Berg’s collection of opera reviews that the “humiliation of the previous decade must have seemed like past history, or was even intentionally pushed out of consciousness” (67). Hall’s formulation thus permits a reading of these early reviews as the result of a post-traumatic “blindness” of their situation (67).

Furthermore, the initial responses of the critics do not offer a bird’s eye view of the

reception of the audiences in general, but merely of the critics themselves, who can all too often conceive art and performance in much different ways than the general public. Therefore, that the opera's first critics did not acknowledge the points raised here does not refute the possibility that Berg intended to bring attention to them, but instead highlights that the critics' responses may have been shaped by their desire to distance themselves from the war - torn and politically instable reality of the past decade.

All of this suggests that Berg designed his opera in part as an educational tool through which he might create awareness of public responsibility in regard to social justice and the necessity of social change for the benefit of future generations. *Wozzeck* is still frequently performed today. Considering these performances within the context of contemporary society prompts us to reflect on whether the opera might still have the ability to revolutionize our world. Rather than feeling that the opera is far removed from our own worlds today, just as the critics of the opera's premiere may have done, we may have much to gain by achieving a deeper understanding of the work. Acknowledging the original context of Berg's opera and speculating upon his intentions for the material allows us to consider the lessons that we might learn from, because perhaps *Wozzeck*'s world is not dissimilar to our own. Perhaps, there is a still lot to learn from Berg's opera that may serve to create a more equal and just society today.

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