

# *Introduction*

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If the quantity of performances and recordings is anything to go by, and the warmth of their reception, Berg's music is reaching a wider audience as the twentieth century ends than it has at any previous time. Since the appearance in 1979 of Friedrich Cerha's edition at last allowed *Lulu* to be heard in its entirety, this opera has arguably overtaken *Wozzeck* in both popularity and critical esteem. Recordings of the *Lulu Suite* threaten to outnumber those of the ever-popular Violin Concerto in the catalogues.

It is no longer remotely fashionable to ask 'what if?' questions about composers who died prematurely, but the popular emphasis on Berg's final compositions makes my mind, at least, turn occasionally to such idle speculation. Berg's compositional technique in the final act of *Lulu* and in the Violin Concerto is remarkably focused and fluent, and belies the opera's long gestation. His willingness to consider a substantial list of future projects as he neared the end of his work on the opera – a third string quartet, a piece of chamber music with piano, a symphony, a piece for radio or film<sup>1</sup> – might be taken to suggest that he was ready to unleash an outpouring of creativity, following a long period of frustration whilst composing the first two acts. The Violin Concerto would have fitted into such a pattern, for though one can certainly see signs of the speed at which it was put together, it remains a work that almost unerringly forges what was for Berg a new balance between the intricate and the communicative. At 50, he knew himself and his ways as a composer well enough to organise his working methods so that the music would flow.

All this, of course, overlooks a number of crucial negative factors. The Nazis were in power in Germany and already had a strong influence on Austrian life. Berg's financial and domestic situation was precarious, yet so profound was his Viennese sensibility that he was not inclined to move abroad like so many others. Even biology was against him: his own father had died in his mid-50s, and poor health dogged Berg in his final years. Had he lived, his music would have been officially reviled in Austria at least until 1945, and in post-war Europe he might well have been regarded as a kind of musical dinosaur. It is factors such as these that render detailed speculation about an older Berg's achievements quite impossible.

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So we are grateful, as Willi Reich wrote in an obituary, 'for every smile of his bright yet still so puzzling countenance, for every note of his inconceivably intense and inspired work!'<sup>2</sup> What is more, we may observe that Berg's present popularity represents something of a rediscovery, rather than a direct continuation of his contemporaries' appreciation of the living man.<sup>3</sup> Recognising both these things, the present volume seeks both to discuss every major work, and to contextualise Berg's cultural outlook and musical output against the background of his own time and in terms of its resonances within the musical culture of the twentieth century.

In the first part of the book, Christopher Hailey takes us inside Berg's home territory in the Vienna suburb of Hietzing, Andrew Barker provides a profile of the composer's formative connections with major figures in Viennese cultural life, and Raymond Geuss examines how his music was treated in (and itself informed) the writings of a man who was both a talented composition pupil of Berg and one of the twentieth century's greatest philosophers, Theodor W. Adorno. Subsequent chapters in Part II examine the music itself, beginning with Berg's earliest compositions and culminating with his greatest success during his lifetime, the opera *Wozzeck*. The pivotal nature of this masterpiece for Berg's development is pursued at the beginning of the third part of the book, in three chapters which examine how Berg expanded his musical horizons in the early 1920s. For perhaps his greatest gift of all was to build constantly on his experience, accumulating and re-synthesising, so that almost everything he did was turned to good use later on. From this remarkable human nature, rather than from any reluctance to accept the challenge of the new, came the tendency of so much of his work to find its roots either in the Vienna of the 1900s, or in his complex personal life and his world of friends and acquaintances. Part III also examines all the post-*Wozzeck* music, and features a consideration by Judy Lochhead of the Lulu character in the light of recent feminist theory.

This chapter reminds us that the subsequent impact of Berg's music, whilst latent in whatever we might consider to be the music's substance, is nonetheless developing and multi-faceted. The final part of the book is devoted to Arnold Whittall's masterly examination of this topic, which shows how aspects of a Bergian synthesis may be detected in music that is either more single-mindedly constructive or single-mindedly referential, or – perhaps most of all – both pluralistic and historically sensitive. That these latter characteristics are so often seen as definitive for a post-modern age, and also of Berg's own artistic temperament, suggests in part why he has now become, not the foreign minister of his own land of dreams, as Adorno suggested to his face,<sup>4</sup> but to later generations a posthumous and much-loved ambassador from the world of modernism to our own times.