

Lulu: A new production of a challenging 20th century opera

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Lulu, the opera left unfinished by Austrian composer Alban Berg at his death in 1935 and not presented in a full three-act form until more than four decades later, arrived at New York's Metropolitan Opera last November, in a new production directed by South African artist William Kentridge.

This latest production provides the opportunity to explore the opera itself, and its place in the history of 20th century music. It is one of relatively few operas of this period to have found a place in the repertory of many European and North American opera houses.

Berg was born in 1885 and was shaped by fin-de-siècle Vienna in the years immediately preceding the First World War, amidst the growing social and political crisis that would end with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The crisis was reflected across many fields of cultural life, including that of music. Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951) became the leading theorist of what he characterized as a necessary break with the system of tonal harmonies that had shaped Western classical music for about three centuries.

Atonality was systematized by Schoenberg in the early 1920s, with his twelve-tone system, in which each musical note in the twelve-tone octave is treated equally.

Berg was one of Schoenberg's most well-known pupils. He adhered to Schoenberg's teachings, but with some flexibility. He found ways to bring dramatic and musical coherence to his music, giving it an expressiveness that was lacking with most of the other practitioners of atonality. Of particular significance was his use of leitmotifs in his two operas, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, in which pitch progressions were repeated to correspond to certain characters and situations. While not representing the tonal system of major and minor keys, the repeated pitches made the music more dramatic and accessible than other twelve-tone compositions.

Much of Berg's music retained elements of late romanticism, an expressiveness and emotional quality inserted, as it were, into the atonal framework. In addition to *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, the composer's best known compositions include the Lyric Suite for string quartet, several song cycles, and especially the Violin Concerto, which he dedicated to the memory of Manon Gropius, the young daughter of architect Walter Gropius and Alma Mahler, the composer's widow. He wrote the concerto in the last months of his life, before his sudden death at the age of 50 from blood poisoning.

In relation to Schoenberg and Berg, it could be said that the works of the pupil have attracted more interest than those of the teacher. *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* are among the most frequently performed operas of those composed during the explosive inter-war period. Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron*, also composed during the early 1930s and, like *Lulu*, left unfinished, is heard far less often.

Wozzeck was completed in 1922 and premiered in 1925. It is based on *Woyzeck*, the famed drama of Georg Büchner, who died of typhus in 1837 at the age of 23. (The spellings are different because the manuscript

Büchner left behind was nearly illegible and "*Wozzeck*" was thought to be the title at the time Berg began composing his opera; a later edition corrected the mistake.) Büchner was a revolutionary figure, influenced by utopian socialism, and *Woyzeck*, along with the opera based on it, clearly indicts militarism and social oppression.

Berg began work on *Lulu* in 1929, amid the growing threat of fascism both in Germany and elsewhere. The composer based himself on two plays by Frank Wedekind, who was active at the turn of the 20th century. Wedekind was a German playwright and critic of existing society, whose work focused on exposing bourgeois hypocrisy and puritanism, especially on sexual matters.

Earth Spirit (1895) and *Pandora's Box* (1904) were originally conceived as one play. Berg had seen both of these works by the time he was 20 years old, and some 25 years later he began work on the opera that followed the life of *Lulu*, the sexually magnetic woman at the center of both dramas.

Berg worked on the opera intermittently over the next six years. It grew to proportions far greater than the 90-minute *Wozzeck*. He was interrupted in his work by other projects, and he also had to contend with the Nazi-inspired campaign against all forms of musical modernism, a campaign that became official policy in Germany after January 1933, and also grew in influence in Vienna in the years leading up to the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. Berg's compositions, along with those of Schoenberg and others, were labeled "degenerate music," and Berg was threatened in particular because of his association with the Jewish Schoenberg.

The orchestration of *Lulu*'s third and final act was sketched out but unfinished at Berg's death. After Schoenberg indicated he did not have the time to complete the opera, the composer's widow, who lived until 1976, forbade anyone else from taking up the task.

A two-act version of *Lulu* was premiered in Zurich in 1937, but it was not until 1979, after Helene Berg's death, that a three-act production, including a completion of the orchestration by Austrian composer Friedrich Cerha, premiered in Paris. Since then the opera has almost always been presented in this form.

Lulu is a very complex work, lasting nearly four hours and including two dozen significant characters. It is set in Vienna, Paris and London, in a period suggestive of the late 19th century. The opera, with its predominantly sexual themes, reflected the influence of Freud's psychoanalytic theories among the Central European intelligentsia during this period.

The libretto, written by Berg himself, follows the rise and fall of the title character, whose sexual power leads first to wealth and comfort, and then to destitution and death.

Lulu exercises her magnetic power over every man in sight, and at least one woman as well. The characters include her first husband, identified in this production only as The Physician; her second victim, The Painter; Dr. Schön, the wealthy publisher who first discovered *Lulu*, and becomes her third husband; Alwa, a composer who is Schön's son and later becomes

another of Lulu's lovers; and the Countess Geschwitz, a lesbian who falls madly in love with Lulu and follows her from Paris to London.

Act I finds Lulu steadily growing in power. The Physician dies of a heart attack when he discovers his wife being romanced by The Painter. The Painter then marries Lulu, but soon after slits his own throat when Schön tells him of Lulu's lurid past. Lulu, who has long been Schön's mistress, marries the wealthy publisher, after demanding that he break off his engagement to his fiancée.

Act II witnesses the accumulation of events that will eventually be the undoing of the title character. The luxurious existence of Schön and Lulu is disturbed by the continued attention devoted to Lulu by Alwa and Countess Geschwitz, among numerous others. When Schön orders Lulu to shoot herself to protect his reputation, she turns the gun on him instead.

An orchestral interlude portrays the sequences of arrest, trial, imprisonment, and Lulu's escape from the hospital to which she has been confined after contracting cholera. Alwa, the newest of Lulu's conquests, goes to Paris with her.

In the final act Lulu and Alwa are enjoying a lavish lifestyle that is disturbed by various attempts to blackmail Lulu as Schön's murderer. At the same time, the speculative investment in railway shares that is financing this lifestyle suddenly collapses. The final scene of the opera finds Lulu and Alwa, followed by the Countess, in London, where Lulu is working as a prostitute.

Here the mirror-like character of the libretto—the rise and fall—finds vivid expression, as Lulu brings back to her pathetic living space three clients who are played by the same performers as Lulu's first three "victims": the Physician, the Painter and Schön. The first of the clients is the Professor, the second an African Prince, and finally Jack the Ripper. Lulu argues with this latest client, and in a moment her death cries are heard from her room, after which Jack the Ripper completes the carnage by killing the devoted Countess.

The critics and the team involved in the new production have focused almost exclusively on the grim psychosexual themes of *Lulu*, which undoubtedly figured prominently in the composer's own conception of the work. Berg turned toward a more psychological approach in this opera compared to *Wozzeck*.

At the same time, *Lulu* brings some other themes and associations to mind. It is certainly not the antithesis of *Wozzeck* in its handling of social questions. Particularly in the scene of the share collapse and the direct impact this has on Lulu's fortunes, we see echoes of the early 1930s, scenes of decadence worthy of artists George Grosz and John Heartfield, and suggestions of the bankruptcy of the capitalist social order. Just as Büchner a century earlier had indicated that Woyzeck's murderous jealousy was the product of social circumstances, so Lulu's fate is also at least partly a commentary on society.

In this sense, *Lulu* is somewhat reminiscent in its theme of *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, the operatic masterpiece by Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht that premiered in March 1930, while Berg was engaged in work on *Lulu*. *Mahagonny*, which contains some of the most famous musical numbers in the Brecht-Weill collaboration ("Alabama Song," "Benares Song"), tells the story of the search for wealth in a mythical Wild West America that ends in disaster. It is a parable of the decay and savagery of capitalism. Like the *Threepenny Opera*, it was banned by the Nazis and virtually disappeared for several decades, before being revived in the 1960s.

In *Lulu*, we have the rise and fall of a powerful woman who sells her most valuable asset, her sexual power. She begins essentially as a high-priced courtesan, and she ends her life as a desperate prostitute.

Lulu's musical language, however, is very different from that of *Mahagonny*. Atonality, pioneered by Schoenberg about a quarter-century before *Lulu*, represented musical experimentation and a reaction against the lush harmonies of late romanticism. It also reflected, even if indirectly,

an atmosphere of crisis, amid growing awareness of the social and political contradictions that would explode in a few short years in world war and revolution.

By the time Berg wrote the works for which he is most famous, the twelve-tone system that had by then emerged became, in the hands of many composers, an expression of despair over the fate of humanity in the wake of the First World War, followed by the crisis of the Weimar Republic and the isolation of the Russian Revolution.

The 1920s were a period of debate between different musical trends, as even the briefest hearing of *Mahagonny* and *Lulu* will attest. The debate was severely distorted and cut off, with composers forced into exile or placed under immense pressure by the triumph of Fascism on the one hand and the totalitarian rule of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the USSR on the other.

These conditions led some sections of the artistic intelligentsia to draw very pessimistic conclusions, and it is not possible to hear Berg's lengthy *Lulu* without feeling this element strongly.

Berg's genius enabled him to present these moods in a way that is, at least in part, musically and dramatically effective. One feels the element of social criticism, but even more the mood of despair.

The opera uses "Sprechstimme," the German term signifying a vocal technique between singing and speaking. This method is used to convey varying moods, almost all of them bleak. The coloratura soprano role of Lulu is of course central. It requires, in addition to a powerful voice and vocal technique, the ability to shift moods rapidly between those of exhilaration, fear, agitation, desperation and despair.

The performances in the latest production were for the most part excellent. Especially impressive was Marlis Petersen as Lulu (who has sung the role numerous times). Among some of the other major roles, leading American mezzo-soprano Susan Graham was Countess Geschwitz, Johan Reuter sang Dr. Schön/Jack the Ripper, and Daniel Brenna was Alwa.

Lulu's changing moods were powerfully on display in the first scene of Act II, ending with the murder of her patron Schön, and even more so in the first scene of Act III, as Lulu schemes for survival in the face of blackmail threats and her impending re-arrest.

The production as a whole cut across some of the strengths of the performances, and the reasons for this were made clear by the director himself.

Kentridge has spoken at some length on how he views the opera. In the Met program, ignoring all social and historical elements, he describes the opera as "about the fragility or impossibility of desire ... in each case, this impossibility of desire ends in disaster..."

"It's about the realpolitik of sex, the engine that drives desire," Kentridge continues. "And it's a real opera in the sense that, by the end, there are many bodies strewn across the stage."

The director apparently thinks dead bodies are a quintessential feature of grand opera. There are certainly many dead bodies in operas of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but they are far from their only feature, or even the main one. Indeed, opera is often unfairly caricatured in the fashion suggested by Kentridge's comment.

The above approach also found expression when Kentridge attempted to bring back the kind of animation he used for the Met's production of Dmitri Shostakovich's early opera *The Nose* back in 2010. For *Lulu* he worked with the same team, including co-director Luc De Wit, set designer Sabine Theunissen, projection designer Catherine Meyburgh and lighting designer Urs Schönebaum.

The combination of animation and screen projections on walls, along with sliding panels, worked at least a portion of the time in Shostakovich's experimental opera based on Gogol's famous satire of bureaucracy. In *Lulu*, however, it was much less successful. The more complex libretto, not to mention the music, demands close attention, and

Kentridge's images and projections posed something of a dilemma. The different elements of the production seemed at war with one another. One could either allow the fast-moving projections, evoking the era of German Expressionism, to slide by as a form of vague background, or one could try to pay closer attention to them—at the expense of the opera itself!

It must be said, as far as the opera itself, that hours of the unrelieved twelve-tone musical language becomes monotonous. The overwhelmingly bleak mood and message also threatens to become tedious.

The latest revival of *Lulu* was an opportunity to see a work of some significance in musical history. One came away with an appreciation for Berg's genius, a feeling for the period in which this work was composed, but also the conclusion that the musical language represented something of a blind alley. Berg's softening of atonality was in its own way an admission that the twelve-tone method was in part an artificial schema, a cry of frustration and a turning away from the challenges of writing for a broader audience.



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