

# *Wozzeck* at New York's Metropolitan Opera: Alban Berg's opera on the tragic fate of an impoverished soldier

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The new production of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* at New York's Metropolitan Opera shows that the work deserves its secure place in the repertoire, almost a century after its premiere. The opera remains challenging and has lost none of its ability to shock. Its depiction of the impact of war and inequality on the lives of the poor is timelier than ever.

Berg, the Austrian composer who was the best-known pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, based his only completed opera on a work by the brilliant poet, playwright, scientist and socialist Georg Büchner, who was born in 1813 and died in 1837, not yet 24 years old. In addition to his dramas, Büchner co-authored, in the words of Georgi Plekhanov, a "revolutionary call to the peasantry," the *Hessian Courier*, in 1834.

Büchner's play *Woyzeck*, left unfinished when he died, was only discovered nearly four decades later, in 1875, when the title was rendered as *Wozzeck*, apparently because the playwright's handwriting was difficult to decipher. The work was completed and first produced in 1913 in Munich, and Berg saw it in Vienna a year later. The young composer was shaken, and immediately inspired to turn this story of a soldier driven insane by the conditions of his life into an opera.

Berg set to work, but was interrupted by the First World War, most of which he spent in the Austro-Hungarian Army after having been conscripted in 1915. He suffered a physical breakdown soon after his service began, and was transferred to the War Ministry in Vienna. Resuming systematic work on *Wozzeck* in 1917, his own experience had only sharpened his appreciation of the horrors of war that formed the background of the story. As he wrote to his wife in 1918, "There is a little bit of me in his character, since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact, humiliated." The opera was finally completed in 1922, and first staged in Berlin in 1925.

The structure of the opera is remarkable in many respects. Six major characters are brought to life in only about 90 minutes. These include, in addition to *Wozzeck* and Marie (the mother of his child), *Wozzeck's* fellow soldier Andres, the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum-Major, who seduces Marie. The story is told in a fast-moving three acts comprising 15 scenes,

without any interruption or intermission in this production. The scenes themselves are set off by brief orchestral interludes that effectively delineate both the characters and the action. The humanity of the central characters, *Wozzeck* and Marie, is powerfully communicated throughout.

Drawing partly from his own experience and adapting the Büchner play into his own libretto, Berg uses the first five scenes to introduce the characters. *Wozzeck* and the Captain appear first, the superior officer a disagreeable mixture of pedant and bully. When he taunts *Wozzeck* about his illegitimate child, the soldier responds humbly but powerfully, "Wir arme Leut" (We poor people). The poor cannot afford morality, he explains, in language that anticipates the famous materialist anthem, "What Keeps Man Alive?" from Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera* of only a few years later.

Later the scene shifts to Marie. The young woman is devoted to her baby, yet her later seduction by the Drum-Major is believable, as is her defiance when *Wozzeck* confronts her over her infidelity. Much of Marie's music approaches tonality and even lyricism at several moments.

The sinister Doctor is another character whose description owes something to Berg's own wartime experiences. He is paying the impoverished soldier, desperate for money, to submit to sinister medical experiments. Later the Captain and the Doctor combine to ridicule *Wozzeck*, taunting him about Marie's infidelity, thus setting up the tragic finale, with the soldier stabbing the mother of his child to death and drowning himself soon afterwards.

The final two scenes in the second act, between *Wozzeck's* confrontation with Marie over his suspicions of her infidelity and the scene in which he kills her, are especially effective in this production. In a tavern, to the accompaniment of a remarkable on-stage band, which includes a clarinet, accordion, fiddle and tuba and plays a raucous waltz, *Wozzeck* sees Marie and the drum-major. The next scene, in the barracks, witnesses a fight between the two men in which *Wozzeck* is thrown to the floor. The murder follows soon after.

*Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, the opera left unfinished after Berg's

death from sepsis in 1935, share much in common, but there are also significant differences. In *Wozzeck* the listener is always aware of the social conditions behind the grim subject matter, and *Wozzeck* and Marie are treated with empathy. *Lulu*, while partly a commentary on capitalist decay, gives far greater emphasis to the psychological and sexual elements. Both works end bleakly, but Berg has become more pessimistic in the period of the Great Depression and above all the rise of Hitler. Both works use the kind of adaptation of atonal techniques, the use of certain tonal elements, the “latent tonalities” for which Berg became known, but *Lulu*, nearly four hours in length, is not nearly as effective.

Berg uses speech, *Sprechstimme* (a kind of intermediate between speech and singing) and singing, along with elements of tonality and atonality. The use of specific motifs associated with definite emotions and experiences in the plot, along with the more tonal orchestral interludes, helps provide a structural coherence to the score. Although most of the music is not tonal, it always serves the drama, effectively counterposing the orchestral and vocal elements, and using dissonance to illustrate the actual conditions portrayed. Above all, Berg is able to write expressively and to communicate emotion, more so than in most music associated with the twelve-tone technique, such as Schoenberg’s opera *Moses and Aron*, for instance.

Since its premiere about 95 years ago, *Wozzeck* has rarely left the opera stage. Its early productions included Prague and, significantly, Leningrad in 1927, at a time when the Stalinist vise had not yet tightened its grip on avant-garde and experimental work. This was precisely the time when Shostakovich was at work on his 2nd and 3rd symphonies. The Nazis banned Berg’s music, along with so much else, but in the post-World War II period *Wozzeck* appeared in London, Paris and New York. The current production is the third since its Met premiere in 1959, where it has been performed dozens of times over the last six decades.

The performances in the current *Wozzeck* production are all on a very high level, including the title role, sung by Swedish baritone Peter Mattei, and Marie, by South African soprano Elza van den Heever. Mattei is outstanding in communicating *Wozzeck*’s despair as well as his growing mental instability. Van den Heever excels in her brief scene with the drum-major, as well as in alternately expressing devotion and defiance when with *Wozzeck*, and in conveying tenderness and love for her child.

Other significant roles included Gerhard Siegel as the Captain and Christian Van Horn as the Doctor. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, now in his second season as music director at the Met, while he continues as music director of the Philadelphia Orchestra as well, continues to impress.

The production as a whole exhibited some of the same problems as that of *Lulu*, also directed by the South African artist and animator William Kentridge. Kentridge’s use of drawings, animated videos and projections is by now becoming

fairly well known at the Met in New York, following his direction of Shostakovich’s *The Nose* in 2010 and *Lulu* in 2016. As indicated, *Wozzeck* is a compact and complex undertaking. Characters come and go, amidst a set evoking in general terms the horrific conditions of war facing both soldiers and civilians. In addition to the main roles there are also several non-singing actors who make appearances at regular intervals. The massive videos and other backgrounds too often convey an air of busyness rather than effectively serving the music and the action.

It is interesting to compare *Wozzeck* with *Porgy and Bess*, another 20th century opera brought back to the Met this year after a long absence. The operas were premiered within ten years of one another, and they have somewhat similar subject matter. They both examine relations between men and women under conditions of social and economic oppression, but of course they emerged under different circumstances.

Berg’s opera, though based on a nearly century-old play, was shaped by the devastation of the first world war. George Gershwin, the Brooklyn-born son of immigrant parents, based himself on a novel dating from 1925, set among an oppressed African-American community in Charleston, South Carolina. He composed his opera in an entirely different idiom, including elements of jazz, popular and Broadway tunes.

Despite the obvious differences in story and above all in musical language and style, both of these operas speak to the universal concerns of the working class of all races and backgrounds in the face of poverty and war.

This highlights the timeliness of the new production of *Wozzeck*. Anthony Tommasini, the music critic of the *Times*, does not often venture into social commentary in his reviews, but the second paragraph of his piece on *Wozzeck* deserves to be repeated:

“The issues that drive this wrenching, profound opera are especially timely: the impact of economic inequality on struggling families; the looming threats of war and environmental destruction; the rigid stratification—almost the militarization—of every element of society.”

The *Times* is right for a change. *Wozzeck* is yet another reflection of the “unfinished 20th century.” The horrors that inspired Berg are finding contemporary expression all over the world.



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