

Wozzeck

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Opera in three acts by Alban Berg to his own libretto, after Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck*; Berlin, Staatsoper, 14 December 1925.

Wozzeck baritone*

Marie his common-law wife soprano

Marie's son treble

Captain buffo tenor

Doctor buffo bass

Drum Major heroic tenor

Andres Wozzeck's friend lyric tenor*

Margret Marie's neighbour contralto

First Apprentice deep bass*

Second Apprentice high baritone

Madman high tenor

Soldiers, apprentices, women, children

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Berg began work on an operatic treatment of Büchner's play in 1914, after he had attended its first Viennese performance at the Residenzbühne on 5 May. It had been given in Landau's revision of K. E. Franzos's 1879 edition of the text and entitled *Wozzeck* because of a misreading of the almost illegible manuscript; Berg prepared his libretto from the Landau edition and hence preserved the misspelling in the opera. By the end of 1914 he had prepared a draft libretto and made some musical sketches, but he then set it aside to finish the *Three Orchestral Pieces* op.6. Conscription and subsequent service in the Austrian War Ministry prevented his returning to work on *Wozzeck* until 1917; he reported progress by autumn the following year, but even after the end of World War I it remained slow. Act 1 was completed by July 1919, Act 2 not until August 1921, and the entire work was finished in short score by October that year. The full score occupied Berg until April 1922; his pupil Fritz Heinrich Klein prepared the piano reduction.

Schoenberg had recommended that Universal Edition take on publication, but Berg initially published the vocal score privately in December 1922; although he signed a contract with Universal the following April no staging was immediately forthcoming. At the suggestion of Hermann Scherchen he prepared for concert performance the *Drei Bruchstücke aus 'Wozzeck'*, consisting of part of Act 1 scene iii, Act 3 scene i and the orchestral interlude between Act 3 scenes iv and v, leading into scene v itself; Scherchen conducted the first performance in Frankfurt in 1924. By then, however, Erich

Kleiber had accepted the opera for production at the Berlin Staatsoper; he conducted the première, with Leo Schützendorf in the title role, Sigrid Johanson as Marie and Fritz Soot as the Drum Major in a staging by Franz Ludwig Horth.

Performances in Prague (1926) and Leningrad (1927) followed; the first German production since the première took place at Oldenburg in 1929, conducted by Johannes Schüller, and demonstrated that *Wozzeck* was not beyond the capabilities of provincial houses. The following year seven other German houses included it in their repertoires; the Viennese première took place on 30 March 1930. Stokowski conducted the American première in Philadelphia in March 1931. Kleiber's second production, in Berlin in 1932, was the last occasion on which *Wozzeck* was seen in a German house until 1948: Berg was to be officially proscribed by the Nazi regime. Adrian Boult conducted a concert performance with Richard Bitterauf in the title role in the Queen's Hall, London, in 1934; the British stage première took place at Covent Garden in January 1952 conducted by Kleiber, with Marko Rothmüller as *Wozzeck* and Christel Goltz as Marie. In the same year the French stage première was given, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris. The first commercial recording was of a concert performance in Carnegie Hall, New York, in 1951, conducted by Dimitri Mitropoulos with Mack Harrell and Eileen Farrell; the first studio recording was conducted by Karl Böhm in 1965, with Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Evelyn Lear.

Berg himself characterized the large-scale dramatic and musical planning of *Wozzeck* as a ternary ABA structure in which the highly wrought 'symphonic' central act was flanked by the more loosely constructed outer acts. But the self-contained musical structure of each scene is precisely tied to its dramatic function. Thus the five scenes of Act 1, an exposition that introduces the five main characters in turn and delineates *Wozzeck's* relationship to them, are designated as a series of five character-pieces; Act 2, the opera's dramatic development, is a symphony in five movements, while the five scenes and final orchestral interlude of Act 3 ('catastrophe and epilogue') are a sequence of six inventions on single musical ideas.

Synopsis

Act 1.i (Suite)

The Captain's room, early morning After a brief introduction (Prelude: obligatory wind quintet), three bars in which the English horn introduces the Captain's theme, *Wozzeck* is seen shaving the Captain. He urges *Wozzeck* to work more slowly, and his words 'Langsam, *Wozzeck*, langsam!' define the tritone motif B–F that permeates the opera. After *Wozzeck's* numbed response on a single pitch the Captain continues with his lecture (Pavane: obligatory timpani and harp), but despite his enthusiastic contemplation of eternity *Wozzeck* is unmoved. 'A good man doesn't rush about', he is counselled (Cadenza 1: obligatory viola), and his refusal to react leads the Captain into derision (Gigue: obligatory flutes and celesta); *Wozzeck* agrees with everything he says. The Captain is delighted with his teasing and continues (Cadenza 2: obligatory double bass, leading to Gavotte: obligatory brass): *Wozzeck* has no moral sense because he has an illegitimate child (the Captain quotes the regimental chaplain in a parody falsetto). *Wozzeck* is finally provoked into a lyrical response: 'the Lord will think no less of him because of it' (Double 1: obligatory horns), and the Captain is confounded (Double 2: obligatory trombones). *Wozzeck* then expands on his theme (Air: obligatory strings) 'Poor folk like us, who have no money', and his first phrase, 'Wir arme Leut!', introduces the opera's most significant motif. The Captain tries to calm him (postlude) and the remainder of the scene then recapitulates the earlier conversation and its associated obligatos. The following orchestral interlude continues to review the material of the suite and builds to a fortissimo climax.

1.ii (Rhapsody)

An open field outside the town, late afternoon Andres and Wozzeck are cutting sticks, but Wozzeck is disturbed both by the brooding atmosphere, represented musically by the sequence of three chromatic chords on which the scene is based, and by what he perceives as the threatening natural world. Andres is untroubled and sings a folksong, 'Das ist die schöne Jägerei', to counteract Wozzeck's paranoia, but the scene ends with Wozzeck hearing noises under the ground and seeing the sinking sun as engulfing the world in flames. The orchestral interlude gradually dispels the atmosphere of menace with the first stirrings of the military band.

1.iii (Military March and Lullaby)

Marie's house, evening Marie, her child in her arms, is watching the military band march by. The Drum Major acknowledges her, and the march provides the background to a conversation between Marie and Margret in which the neighbour remarks on Marie's interest in him. Marie slams shut her window and the march is replaced by a lullaby, 'Mädel, was fangst Du jetzt an?', as Marie sings of her life to her child. Wozzeck interrupts them. Ignoring the child, he tries to articulate the fears he experienced in the fields, as the music quotes altered motifs from Act 1 scene ii; Marie is terrified, quoting Wozzeck's own 'Wir arme Leut!' (but to a different figure), and rushes out. The interlude portrays her agitation by developing material from scenes ii and iii into a 12-note figure.

1.iv (Passacaglia)

The Doctor's study, a sunny afternoon The 12-note theme of the passacaglia is heard as a cello recitative as the Doctor accuses Wozzeck of coughing in the street ('pissing' in Büchner's original) and goes on to question him about his diet (variations 1–5). The Doctor feels betrayed by Wozzeck's behaviour but calms himself, since anger is unscientific. Wozzeck remembers Marie and recounts his visions in the fields (variations 6–12) to music derived from scene ii; the Doctor seizes on an insight into Wozzeck's mental state (variations 13–21) and pronounces his diagnosis, 'eine schöne fixe Idee', to a slow waltz introduced by the first appearance of the Doctor's motif in the violins. As the tempo quickens he becomes more and more carried away with his dreams of scientific immortality. In the subsequent interlude fragments of the passacaglia are gradually replaced by music associated with the following scene.

1.v (Rondo)

The street outside Marie's house, twilight Marie continues to admire the Drum Major from her doorway. The ritornello theme, related to the opening of the march, represents Marie's desire both for the soldier and for a new, better life; the Drum Major's boasting occupies the first episode, his attempts at seduction the following two sections. The curtain falls as they rush into the house.

Act 2.i (Sonata)

Marie's room, a sunny morning Marie is admiring the earrings the Drum Major has given her (exposition). When the child stirs Marie sings him back to sleep with a song about a gypsy who will take her back to his native land: the two themes of her guilt (heard in the orchestra) and her slightly sinister lullaby (derived from Act 1 scene iii) form the subjects of the sonata movement. Wozzeck enters, and Marie tries to hide the earrings (development): she says she found them in the street. He is unconvinced and leaves after briefly contemplating the child. Marie is overtaken by remorse (recapitulation). The interlude, framed by a pair of harp glissandos, is a violent development of the themes of the sonata movement.

2.ii (Fantasia and Fugue)

A street, daytime The Captain and the Doctor, Wozzeck's two exploiters, meet. The Captain now counsels the Doctor not to rush; the latter (to the same waltz theme as in Act 1 scene iv) diagnoses the Captain's breathing difficulties as symptoms of 'apoplexia cerebria' and gives him four weeks to live. When Wozzeck appears they turn their attention to him and in a triple fugue – its first subject the Captain's theme, its second the Doctor's, its third (representing Wozzeck) derived from the preceding scene – begin to taunt him about Marie and the Drum Major. Deathly pale, Wozzeck rushes off. An interlude for chamber orchestra introduces the material of the following scene.

2.iii (Largo)

The street outside Marie's house, a gloomy day To chamber-orchestral accompaniment (precisely the scoring of Schoenberg's First Chamber Symphony) Wozzeck confronts Marie with his suspicions. The music is derived almost entirely from reminiscences of previous scenes, especially Act 1 scenes iii and v. This slow movement at the centre of the opera is in three sections, the first devoted to Wozzeck's accusations, the second (as Wozzeck's jealous rage almost boils over in a knife attack) to Marie's defiance: here the chamber orchestra and the full orchestra are cross-cut, and a descending series of chromatic chords represents the knife. She leaves, and in the last part of the Largo Wozzeck is left to reflect on his existence: 'Der Mensch ist ein Abgrund' ('Man is an abyss'). The music that introduces the scene returns and is gradually transformed into a slow Ländler that forms the main material for the next scene.

2.iv (Scherzo with two trios)

A tavern garden, late evening Soldiers, apprentices and local girls are dancing to the accompaniment of a stage band. Two apprentices deliver drunken soliloquies (Trio 1), and when the scherzo is resumed (with fleeting references to earlier motifs) the company is joined by Marie and the Drum Major. Wozzeck watches them and is about to launch an attack when the dancing is interrupted by an unaccompanied six-part Hunting Chorus in 7/4 (Trio 2), itself interrupted by another folksong from Andres. When the Scherzo is resumed, a madman observes to Wozzeck: 'Everybody is happy, but it smells of blood!' Wozzeck begins to see the scene swallowed up in blood-red mist. The dance music continues, increasingly grotesque, through the interlude, until it is abruptly cut short.

2.v (Introduction and Rondo)

A guardroom in the barracks, night To the sounds of snoring soldiers Wozzeck wakes to nightmarish memories of the scene in the tavern. He hears voices, as material from Act 1 scene ii is recalled, and tries to pray. The rondo begins with the arrival of the drunken Drum Major, boasting of his conquest; with each statement of the ritornello he drinks from his bottle. He and Wozzeck fight (to music first heard during Marie's struggles in Act 1 scene v); Wozzeck is knocked down, and when he struggles up he quotes Marie's 'Einer nach dem Andern!' to a whole-tone phrase from Act 2 scene iii. The two alternating chords that closed Act 1 and opened Act 2 fade away to leave an isolated B.

Act 3.i (Invention on a theme)

Marie's room, night, candlelight Still plagued by guilt, Marie is reading in her Bible the story of the woman taken in adultery. The music unfolds in a series of seven variations on the theme heard in the opening bars as she comforts her child by telling him a fairy story and returns to the Bible to find the passage about Mary Magdalen. Marie's prayer for mercy is accompanied by a three-part fugue,

which continues into the interlude, dying away in subdued orchestral colours and arpeggios for harp and celesta.

3.ii (Invention on a note)

A forest path by a pool, dusk Marie and Wozzeck are walking together. The music of the scene unfolds freely over reiterated B's, sometimes heard as a pedal or in inner parts, sometimes in the high treble. Wozzeck first talks with heavy irony of beauty and fidelity, then tells Marie that he loves her. As the blood-red moon rises, over muted brass Wozzeck draws his knife. To a prolonged crescendo on B he stabs Marie. Images from her life are swiftly recalled in the orchestra - the seduction, lullaby, earrings, march - and as Wozzeck leaves, the opera's fateful tritone is heard. The following interlude builds up to a huge climax on B, cut off by a fortissimo chord (which will form the basis of Act 3 scene iv), the opera's Hauptrhythmus hammered out by the bass drum.

3.iii (Invention on a rhythm)

A low tavern, dimly lit, night The rhythm of the polka, heard first on a honky-tonk piano, dominates the scene. Wozzeck is trying to bury his crime in drink. He attempts to silence pianist by singing a folksong (to a variant of the Act 1 lullaby) but it serves only to remind him of Marie. He persuades Margret to sing, but that also is too painful; Margret notices blood on Wozzeck's hands and goes to tell the other customers. Wozzeck rushes out. The interlude is built from the rhythm of the previous scene.

3.iv (Invention on a six-note chord)

The forest path by the pool, night Wozzeck has returned to the pool to try to recover his knife. As the orchestral hexachord is put through a spectrum of changes he falls against Marie's corpse, and as the moon rises again, blood-red, he finally loses all reason. Imagining himself covered in Marie's blood he wades ever deeper into the pool to wash himself clean, until he drowns. The Doctor and the Captain pass by hurriedly, scared and not wishing to concern themselves with others' misfortunes, while the scene returns to unearthly calm, with wind instruments simulating the sound of croaking frogs and toads. The final interlude, an invention on a key (D minor), now recapitulates the work's main themes and characters (except Marie); it builds massively on the 'Wir arme Leut!' motif, and its climactic 12-note chord resolves into unambiguous D minor for the Epilogue.

3.v (Invention on a regular quaver movement)

Outside Marie's house, bright morning sunshine Over a perpetuum mobile symbolizing the continuity of normal life, Marie's child is playing on an imaginary hobby-horse, unaware of what has happened. Another child brings news of the discovery of Marie's body, and after a moment's pause her child follows his friends to see it, as the orchestra recalls fragments of themes associated with her. The opera ends on the pair of alternating chords that closed Acts 1 and 2.

Wozzeck is a work of immense structural complexity in which musical devices and dramatic constructs are tightly integrated. Its composition marked the culmination of the first phase of Berg's development; the initial sketches were made while he was completing the Three Orchestral Pieces op.6, and the opera deploys the same language and even some of the same material: elements of the march from op.6 are quoted in Act 1 scene iii. In its use of atonality, whole-tone writing and other devices alongside passages of Mahlerian diatonicism, as well as in the vocal writing (which moves between speech, parlando, Sprechgesang and arioso), Wozzeck represents the most substantial achievement of Schoenberg and his followers in their pre-serial years.