

alban berg (1885-1935): wozzeck [Revision Notes]

References: Musical Languages of Wozzeck (A.Pople, Cambridge Companion to Berg)
ENO Guide: Wozzeck
Cambridge Companion to Wozzeck

Tonality = Structure

Chromaticism (difficult to structure with regard tonic)

Atonality (impossible to structure with regard tonic)

12-tone method, a thematic device that also causes structure: the rationalisation of atonality.

Berg, working outside tonality; how does he structure his music? Pupil of Schoenberg; the most romantic/lyrical of the 2nd Viennese School, but was the most likely to use structural devices from outside the music: numbers or letters, for example. Also:

- use of melodic, rhythmic, harmonic motifs
- traditional forms
- characterisation of themes (thematic identity)

Vienna (location)

Political turmoil – the Austro-Hungarian Empire was crumbling

There was a quest for sincerity in art ? Expressionism - a heightened sense of subjectivism – the search for internal truth, the logical extension of German romanticism.

- artificial exaggeration to find an inner condition

Büchner (libretto)

- Early 19th-century writer (1813-1837)
- A revolutionary who advocated violence

His play, 'Woyzeck' based on a real murder case, in Leipzig between 1821-24. The first case in history where the defence pleaded diminished responsibility.

Themes: Poverty & sexual jealousy. It's rooted in dark, irrational parts of human nature.

Wozzeck, an antihero (one of the earliest examples); he is a character to whom things happen.

Idiom

Part atonal, part diatonic, with other scale patterns used. Passages of Sprechgesang (sung speech).

Structure

An elaborate musical structure: traditional forms incorporated in an overall pattern of symphonic complexity. Compared with the 'symphonic' second act, the first and third are more loosely constructed, but still in a series of established forms.

In some scenes the musical material is of a kind that is traditionally associated with the kind of activity depicted on stage: the military march and lullaby (Act I Scene 3), the landler and waltz in the tavern (Act II Scene 4), the piano polka of the pub scene (Act III Scene 3).

In other scenes the musical form has a symbolic significance: In the final act, the various obsessions which dominate Wozzeck's thoughts are symbolised in single musical elements which dominate each of the three scenes in which he is present (e.g. in the murder-scene of Act III Scene II – 'Invention on a note' – the extent to which the ever-present B natural recedes into or emerges from the musical texture reflects the

extent to which the idea of murder fluctuates in Wozzeck's mind, finally coming to the fore only at the moment when he draws the knife and stabs Marie.

Expositions: Wozzeck in relation to his environment	ACT I	Five Character Pieces
W & Captain	Scene 1	Suite
W & Andres	Scene 2	Rhapsody
W & Marie	Scene 3	Military March and Lullaby
W & Doctor	Scene 4	Passacaglia
Marie and Drum Major	Scene 5	Andante affettuoso (quasi Rondo)
Dramatic Development	ACT II	Symphony in 5 movements
Marie & her child; later Wozzeck	Scene 1	Sonata movement
Captain & Doctor; later Wozzeck	Scene 2	Fantasia and fugue
Marie & Wozzeck	Scene 3	Largo
Garden of a Tavern	Scene 4	Scherzo
Guard room in the barracks	Scene 5	Rondo con introduzione
Catastrophe and epilogue	ACT III	Six inventions
Marie & her child	Scene 1	Invention on a theme
Marie & Wozzeck	Scene 2	Invention on a note
A low bar	Scene 3	Invention on a rhythm
Death of Wozzeck	Scene 4	Invention on a hexachord
Orchestral interlude: invention on a key		
Children playing	Scene 5	Invention on a regular quaver movement

Set forms are used primarily to give each scene or interlude a rounded-off and finished character. Other musical devices used to individualise them:

- vocal characteristics
- combinations of characters
- memorable orchestration/sonorities
- characteristic range of tone colours (by reduction of the orchestra in some scenes)

Leitmotivic structure

- ♣ The 1st subject of the sonata form of Act II Scene I (associated with the earrings) functions as a leitmotif symbolising Marie's guilt
- ♣ The coda theme to which Wozzeck enters in Act II Scene 1 will become the basis of his fugue subject in the triple fugue in the following scene
- ♣ Reordered to form an ascending five-note collection, the first phrase of the sonata movement becomes a symbol of Marie's guilt, appearing (transposed up a fourth) later in Act I Scene 3, to the words 'Bin ich ein schlecht Mensch?' ('Am I a wicked person?') and in retrograde to the words 'Ich bin doch ein schlecht Mensch' ('I am a wicked person'). The same phrase is recalled in Act III Scene 3, when Wozzeck cries out 'Bin ich ein Mörder?' The leitmotif returns in the following scene as Wozzeck, searching for the knife, sees Marie's body.
- ♣ The relationship between the murder of Marie (symbolically projected by the 'blood' chord), poverty (symbolised by the 'Wir arme Leut' motif), and Wozzeck and Marie is already implicit in the relationship between their associated leitmotifs
- ♣ At Marie's death, all the important musical configurations associated with her are played very rapidly...as at the moment of death the most important images of her life pass through her mind distorted and at lightening speed

Act I, Scene I = Baroque suite

The separate juxtaposed movements of the suite of Act I Scene 1 form a fitting musical parallel to the way in which the conversation between the Captain and Wozzeck jumps from one topic to another.

The choice of 'old-fashioned' dance forms is a comment on the captain's out-dated traditional and bourgeois moral stance (i.e. not just straightforward antiquarianism) [this is mirrored in Lulu, where Dr Schoen's desire for respectability is represented by a musette and gavotte].

Act I Scene IV = Passacaglia on 12-note theme

- mocks the Doctor's obsessiveness: his recurrent idée fixe (his dream of achieving immortal fame through his bizarre experiments)
- represents his scholarly pretensions (passacaglia a 'learned' form of composition)

Act II, Scene I = Sonata Form

3 characters (Marie, her child, Wozzeck) form the basis of 3 thematic groups: 1st subject, 2nd and coda.

The twofold repetitions of certain situations and the confrontations of the main characters lends itself to a strict musical articulation with an exposition, reprise, development and recapitulation

- takes the principles of the Straussian symphonic poem, with its ambivalent appeal to notions of absolute/programme music, into the realm of opera.

Symmetry

- ♣ ABA overall structure: two more loosely structured acts frame a 'symphonic' central movement
- ♣ Setting of red sun (Act I, Scene 2) vs. Rising of blood red moon (Act III, Scene 2)
- ♣ Act I framed by two statements of the same theme (the opening oboe melody)
- ♣ Wozzeck's exit in Act I Scene 3 (bar 454) is accompanied by an almost literal inversion of the motif by which he enters; while the scene as a whole is framed by symmetrically placed statements of the same fanfare-like figure (317–8; 480–2)
- ♣ Descending/ascending octave transpositions of a figure accompanying the respective rise and fall of the curtain in Act I Scene 4
- ♣ Act I Scene 5, G–D pedal at start and end
- ♣ Harmonic figure that closes Act I starts Act II, part of an introductory passage itself symmetrical
- ♣ Central scene of opera, Act II Scene 3, framed by two parts of a palindrome (363–7 vs. retrograde 406–11)

Why?

Symmetry perhaps representing an endlessly turning mill-wheel. Adorno: palindromes/retrogrades as anti-time (a return to the start, erasing what's happened)

Palindromes used in Berg's music for negation.

- ♣ Wozzeck's mental collapse represented by palindromes:
- ♣ Act I Scene 3 (459–60)
- ♣ Act II Scene 3 (400–2)

Tritone F–B acquires fateful significance: used in Act I Scene 1 for 'langsam' – time is one of the chief subjects of the work.

- ♣ The rigorously determined structure of the work, with its autonomous self-contained formal designs, symbolises not Wozzeck's mental disintegration, but the mechanistic and uncaring universe in which he's trapped.

...a protest against both an inhuman and sadistic social order and an uncaring and hostile world.