

MUSICAL EVENTS SEPTEMBER 13, 2010 ISSUE

NIGHT VISION

Alban Berg, out of Schoenberg's shadow.



By Alex Ross

September 6, 2010



In August, a mist of fin-de-siècle decadence settled over the Hudson River Valley as the Bard Music Festival—two well-stuffed weekends of concerts at Bard College, north of Rhinebeck—bestowed its attention on the soulful Viennese modernist Alban Berg and on composers associated with him. Much musical eeriness transpired. Meadows rustled, forests murmured, and summer nights became abysses. Eyes peered from darkness, lips were stained with blood. One female operatic character, a Jazz Age socialite, despaired of modern existence and walked into a lake. Another, an erotomaniac nun, stripped Christ of his loincloth. A third—the heroine of Franz Schreker’s 1912 opera “Der Ferne Klang”—descended into prostitution, while her composer lover went in search of a “distant sound.” A fourth—the heroine of Berg’s “Lulu”—descended into prostitution and met her death at the hands of Jack the Ripper.

Berg, who was born in Vienna in 1885, is classified in most music histories as an epigone of Arnold Schoenberg. The label is dubious, because Berg displayed a profoundly ambivalent attitude toward the ideology of progress which his teacher articulated. Although Berg followed Schoenberg in abandoning conventional tonal harmony and, later, in adopting twelve-tone composition, his works reverberate with echoes of Wagner, Strauss, and, especially, Mahler, whom Berg worshipped to the point of stealing a baton from the maestro’s dressing room. A prefatory essay by Christopher Hailey—who served as scholar-in-residence at Bard this summer, and edited a companion anthology titled “Alban Berg and His World”—sets forth the aim of “unyoking Berg from Schoenberg,” and framing him as an independent thinker with his own eclectic web of influences. If Schoenberg always seemed to be marching in a straight line, Berg moved in majestic loops, lunging forward and then swinging back.



In that spirit, the “Berg and His World” festival presented a dizzying *mélange* of early-twentieth-century styles: the late-Romantic outpourings of Mahler, the gilt-edged impressionism of Schreker, the Brucknerian bombast of Franz Schmidt (his Last Judgment oratorio “The Book with Seven Seals”), the brittle sonorities of Paul Hindemith (his “Sancta Susanna” and *Kammermusik* No. 1), and the semi-jazz escapades of the young Kurt Weill (his one-act opera “Royal Palace”), as well as works by such greater and lesser Schoenberg disciples as Anton Webern, Ernst Krenek, and Theodor W. Adorno. I heard nine of the twelve programs, and although the quality of the music and of the performances varied, the immersive nature of the experience lived up to the festival’s title. You were able to experience the period almost as Berg lived it, before a real-life apocalypse wiped out the aesthete’s paradise in which he came of age.

In the ranks of major composers, Berg is a strange, almost freakish case. In his youth, he merely dabbled in music, his songs and piano sketches showing facility but no extraordinary talent. Then, after becoming Schoenberg’s pupil, at the age of nineteen, he developed with startling swiftness; the String Quartet,

Opus 3, his final student work, is at once lavishly expressive and fiercely disciplined, its character defined at the outset by two contrasting figures, one a flighty violin motif and the other a rugged rhythmic motto in the viola and cello.

(At Bard, the Daedalus Quartet offered a cleanly argued, vital account of the piece.) From then on, Berg was in full control of his creative faculties; only ten more works followed, most of them masterpieces. He died on Christmas Eve, 1935, leaving the unfinished “Lulu” as a premonition of future catastrophe.

Berg has the reputation of being the “accessible” Schoenbergian, the one who sweetened the bitter pill of atonality. He is said to have done so by never quite leaving tonality behind; the Violin Concerto, his final work, begins in G minor, more or less, and ends in B-flat major. Yet such tonal leanings don’t explain fully Berg’s power to hypnotize general audiences, which first became evident at the première of “Wozzeck,” in Berlin, in 1925, and remained in force during a triumphant series of performances of “Lulu” at the Met this past May. Many composers of the period mixed tonal and atonal elements: Ernst Toch’s Eleventh Quartet, which the Flux Quartet valiantly essayed one afternoon at Bard, is a typical, if overstrenuous, example of the trend. What set Berg apart was his flamboyantly decisive manipulation of whatever material he seized upon, whether it was a yearning Mahlerian phrase or a murderous twelve-note chord. As the String Quartet attests, Berg knew how to turn an idea into a gesture—almost a physical jolt.

Fabio Luisi, who led the latest run of “Lulu” at the Met, organized its heaving textures with a confident, poetic hand; the company has chosen wisely in naming Luisi its principal guest conductor. Leon Botstein—the furiously multitasking president of Bard, co-director of the festival, and music director of the American Symphony, the resident festival orchestra—is less authoritative on the podium. An attempt at the fiendishly difficult Three Pieces for Orchestra nearly fell apart at the seams. But no sensible person arrives at Bard expecting feats of orchestral

precision; the idea is to deliver, with limited rehearsal time, good enough readings

precision; the idea is to deliver, with limited rehearsal time, good-enough readings of offbeat repertory. And several of the performances shone: the violinist Soovin Kim and the pianist Jeremy Denk brought out the smoldering drama in Berg's

Chamber Concerto, and Akiko Suwanai was a darkly focussed soloist in the Violin Concerto.

Botstein was at his best in Schreker's "Der Ferne Klang," which he and the American Symphony first presented three years ago, in a concert performance at Lincoln Center. For a few years during and after the First World War, Schreker enjoyed sensational success in Central Europe, his operas exceeding even Strauss's in popularity; they then faded from view, to the point of being almost forgotten. Berg, however, surely remembered Schreker when he wrote "Lulu"; he had prepared the vocal score of the second and third acts of "Der Ferne Klang," and in the process made a close study of its luminous orchestration and cinematic structure. In a strange twist, Berg's own life took on a Schrekerian tinge: like the composer hero of "Der Ferne Klang," he died with the last act of his opera unfinished.

"Der Ferne Klang" may lack the icy genius of "Lulu," but the music is bewitching from beginning to end. In the Venetian bordello sequence of Act II, Schreker achieves a layering of elements—choral serenades, barcaroles from gondolas, the strumming of a Gypsy band—that represents nothing less than an alternative vision of modernism, one that embraces the familiar instead of banishing it. The opera received a thoughtfully provocative production from the gifted young director Thaddeus Strassberger, who drew on the iconography of the late-imperial era and of the Weimar Republic. Yamina Maamar, as Grete, stood out in a hardworking cast. Botstein led securely, earning the gratitude of Schreker's scattered but slowly multiplying admirers.

Since the founding of the festival, in 1990, Bard has prided itself on offering "rediscoveries"—pieces that have dropped from circulation but may be worth

a second listen. Falling into the category of neglected gems were Karl Amadeus Hartmann's laconic First Quartet (1933) and Krenek's ironically brooding song cycle "Durch die Nacht" (1930-31). Other selections provided opportunities to look out the windows at the foliage: two such instances for me were Karl Weigl's blandly lyrical Third Quartet and Sandór Jemnitz's militantly nondescript Trio for Guitar, Violin, and Viola. Schmidt's "Book with Seven Seals," by contrast, certainly held the attention, its steel-plated climaxes and gruesome colorings showing skill and imagination. A lot of people enjoyed the score, but it gave me a chill: I couldn't quite forget that at the première, in Vienna, in 1938, Schmidt reportedly gave a Nazi salute. I felt as though I could hear the moment at which the Romantic longing for annihilation—what Thomas Mann called "sympathy for death"—degenerated into nihilistic kitsch.

Of far greater magnitude is Othmar Schoeck's song cycle "Notturmo," for baritone and string quartet, which John Hancock and the Bard Festival Chamber Players performed with much feeling the following day. Schoeck, an emotionally chaotic Swiss who lived from 1886 to 1957, has long lingered on the edge of the repertory, remembered chiefly because Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau promoted his songs and because James Joyce declared himself a fan. The music is generally conservative in style but uncommonly intricate in its literary resonances, as Joyce recognized. According to Schoeck's biographer, Chris Walton, Berg himself had words of praise for "Notturmo," which was finished in 1933. Until the final song, all the texts are by the troubled Romantic poet Nikolaus Lenau, proceeding from glistening landscapes to shivery interior realms. The central song, "An Autumn Evening," speaks much the same language as Berg's Lyric Suite, taking us on an unnerving walk of existential doubt.

At the end comes a turn toward serenity, in the form of a slow chaconne. In tones of cosmic resignation, the baritone declaims a prose fragment by the Swiss poet Gottfried Keller, in which a wanderer prays to the constellation Ursa Major, or the Great Wagon, as it was once known in German: "And if I am tired, you may

the Army wagon, as it was once known in German: And if I am tired, you may take my soul, which is light in worth and also in ill will, gather it up and let it go with you, guiltless as a child, it will not weigh down your shafts of light.” The music is wrenchingly beautiful, its C-major tonality complicated by accidentals that sound almost like blue notes. It is also notably mature in mood—somehow wiser than anything else I heard at Bard last month. After many hours of decadent male hysteria on the subject of women, death, and fate, an artist finally sounded at peace with the world. ♦

Published in the print edition of the September 13, 2010, issue.



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