



Alban Berg's *Lulu*

It would not be fair to say that opera was always and completely an escapist art, but contemporary relevance was often obscured by the trappings of another time and place. For those wishing only to be entertained, it was easy to ignore any analog to current political or cultural reality; the more sordid or mundane aspects of existence were not even considered as subject matter.

But the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century changed that. Verismo, *Salome*, and *Wozzeck* (Berg, 1925) introduced sensational material and the contemporary experience of everyday life as proper concerns of the musical stage.

In *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century*, Alex Ross' fascinating account of modern music, he has this to say: "*Lulu* embodies all the raging contradictions of Central European culture on the eve of the Hitler catastrophe." (p. 207)

And concerning Lotte Lenya, the wife of Kurt Weill, another musical interpreter of life in the Weimar Republic, Ross observes

Lenya was in every sense a woman of the world. The product of a poor background and an abusive father, she found employment variously as a dancer, a singer, an actress, a stage extra, an acrobat, and, briefly, a prostitute – a profession that ensnared countless German and Austrian women during the years of chaos and inflation. (p. 189, emphasis added)

Thus *Lulu* vividly represents its time and place and, further, it is a direct critique of contemporary bourgeois society. Karl Kraus (1874-1936) was the satirist of Vienna and the idol of Berg and Schoenberg (Berg's mentor and teacher, the founder of 12-tone and serial music). Kraus noted that society hypocritically encouraged its men to seek sexual satisfaction from prostitutes while condemning these same women as bearers of disease and degradation. In his words, *Lulu* "became the destroyer of all because she was destroyed by all." (Ross, p.206)

Alban Berg was at the lecture at which Kraus spoke these words, presented before a performance of *Pandora's Box* (1905), one of the plays by Frank Wedekind (1864-1918) on which *Lulu* is based (the other is *Earth Spirit*, 1895).

But opera does not live by social relevance or shock value. If *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* continue to move audiences it is because Berg, contrary to the aspirations of his mentor Schoenberg, succeeded in giving voice to human emotions. Ross calls the chord of 12 tones played by the orchestra when

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Lulu is killed "...a prolonged assault on the senses...[which] has the effect of putting us in Lulu's place..."

In an opinion reportedly shared by others, Schoenberg said about Berg after his death,

I always had the impression that he had experienced beforehand what people close to him were going through, as though he had already suffered with them what they were suffering, so that when they came to tell them of it did not catch him unawares but rather on the contrary reopened old wounds. Wounds he had already inflicted on himself by his powerful sympathy. (Quoted in Ross, p. 211)

The character Berg created is owned today by Marlis Petersen, the German soprano who first sang the role 20 years ago, and who recreates Lulu for the tenth time in this Met production. She says,

The critics always say, 'Oh, this femme fatale and man-murdering person,' and I can't agree. For me, she's a young girl in puberty, has grown up in very dirty surroundings and can't even define herself. She's ungraspable for all the men and this is why they get crazy about her. ...they can't understand...Their empathy doesn't reach where she is."

And on directors of the opera she's worked with,

"Very interesting to me is whether it's done by a woman director or by a man, or by a gay person. Usually men have more of the observing, distant view of her. The women, they have a part of Lulu themselves inside."

Interview in Opera News, November, 2015, p. 23.

Yet another perspective is given by George Martin, in Twentieth Century Opera: A Guide. He asserts that after the death of Dr. Schon the drama has essentially ended, because the only potentially tragic figure, the man who resists Lulu's pull, is gone. In *Wozzeck*, Martin continues, the hero suffers, and the end of the opera is cathartic. "Lulu, on the other hand, never suffers, and the opera's thesis presupposes that she cannot. The bond between her and the audience is more of interest than of sympathy. Many may be curious to see how she dies, but few weep for her." (p. 321.)

Is this opera still "a song of love and death?" Or are these characters merely caught in a game of sexual attraction and repulsion? As with so much else, the answer is in the eye of the beholder.

- Carol Crocca for the Opera Guild of Rochester