



## UNDERSTANDING STRUCTURE AND EXPRESSION IN BERG'S WOZZECK

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### ABSTRACT:

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is considered a turning point in twentieth-century opera, combining strict formal structures, radical atonality, and socio-political critique. This study examines the opera's formal architecture, expressive orchestration, and historical significance in shaping the discourse of modernist music. Through detailed analysis of the opera's fifteen scenes and their corresponding classical forms such as fugue, passacaglia, and rondo the research explores how Berg integrates psychological expression with structural discipline. Positioned within the framework of the Second Viennese School and German Expressionism, *Wozzeck* is highlighted as a depiction of individual fragmentation in a crisis-ridden society. The opera is regarded not only as a musical innovation but also as an artistic critique of social oppression and existential alienation.

### KEYWORDS:

ALBAN BERG, *WOZZECK*, ATONALITY.

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## INTRODUCTION

Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck* is widely regarded as one of the seminal works in the history of twentieth-century modern opera (Perle, 2023; Jarman, 1979). By masterfully blending traditional musical forms with an innovative atonal language, the work profoundly addresses the social and psychological challenges of its time (Whittall, 1999; Simms, 2000). Adapted from Georg Büchner's play of the same name, the opera musically depicts the tension between internal psychological conflict and external societal pressure (Ross, 2007; Head, 2014). This study aims to analyze the formal structure of *Wozzeck* in order to elucidate how Berg integrates dramatic expression with structural form within the context of modern music (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007).

In this research, Berg's original orchestral scores for *Wozzeck* have been examined in detail. Each of the opera's fifteen scenes is individually evaluated, with particular attention paid to formal construction, thematic development, and harmonic language. Special focus is given to how Berg employs classical musical forms such as fugue, passacaglia, and rondo within an atonal framework. Furthermore, the orchestration techniques and use of *Klangfarbenmelodie* are assessed in terms of how they enhance character psychology and atmospheric setting. The analysis is supported by both music-theoretical and

historical perspectives, enriched with relevant musicological sources and interpretations.

## THE AIM OF THE RESEARCH

This study aims to explore the integration of atonal musical language, classical formal structures, and expressionist dramaturgy in Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*. By examining the opera's musical and dramatic architecture, the research seeks to uncover how psychological states of the characters are musically expressed and how these are shaped by the socio-historical context of the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the study investigates how these compositional strategies serve as a vehicle for artistic critique and contribute to redefining the aesthetic parameters of modern opera.

## METHODOLOGY

This research is a qualitative study that conducts a scene-by-scene formal and structural analysis of *Wozzeck* based on its orchestral score (i.e., the written musical text). In addition to the score, historical documents, letters, theoretical writings (e.g., Adorno, Schönberg, Perle), and secondary sources are also examined. The study interprets the relationship between the opera's musical structures

and its broader socio-cultural and philosophical contexts.

Therefore, this study can be classified as an interpretive qualitative research based on document analysis. Furthermore, given its theoretical framework and reliance on aesthetic-philosophical inquiry, it may also be secondarily categorized as a qualitative case study. In this context, the “case” refers to the specific artistic work, *Wozzeck*, which is examined in detail within its historical and aesthetic context.

## 1. ALBAN BERG

Alban Berg (1885–1935), born in Vienna, was a student of Arnold Schoenberg and a leading figure of the Second Viennese School in Austria (Wikipedia, 2025). Although he was not sent to the front lines during the war, instead working at the Ministry of War, Berg was deeply affected by the devastating consequences of the First World War (Perle, 2023). In 1914, after attending a performance of Büchner’s *Woyzeck* in Vienna, he resolved to adapt the play into an opera. The eight-year composition process allowed Berg to deeply engage with themes of war, authority, and individual struggle (Hailey, 2010).

In Berg’s letters, his personal identification with the character is clearly evident: “There is a piece of me in his figure, since I have been... just as dependent on hated people... humiliated...” (Elbphilharmonie, 2024). Thus, the figure of *Wozzeck* can be seen as a projection of Berg’s own psychological and political experiences.

### 1. A. ALBAN BERG’S COMPOSITIONAL TRAJECTORY AND AESTHETIC DEVELOPMENT

Alban Berg’s compositional career evolved between early lyrical Romanticism and the atonal and twelve-tone techniques developed under the influence of Arnold Schoenberg. His first significant work, *Sieben frühe Lieder* (1905–1908), composed during his student years, reveals a lyrical texture influenced by Richard Strauss and Hugo Wolf (Perle, 2023). Although tonal centers remain intact in these early works, the harmonic boldness, expressive melodic writing, and dramatic intensity foreshadow the hallmarks of Berg’s mature style.

The *String Quartet, Op. 3* (1910), marks a pivotal transition in Berg’s move towards atonality. Composed under Schoenberg’s guidance, the work employs a free atonal language in which tonal relations are entirely abandoned, though thematic coherence is still maintained (Jarman, 1979). His *Three Orchestral Pieces, Op. 6* (1913), represent Berg’s first large-scale demonstration of orchestral mastery and dramatic expression. Here, Berg merges Mahler’s late-Romantic orchestral power with Schoenberg’s structural experimentation. This orchestral suite, characterized by harmonic density and timbral variety, can be seen as a precursor to *Wozzeck*. Completed in 1925, *Wozzeck* stands as Berg’s most aesthetically radical and politically engaged composition. Despite its strict formal architecture—fifteen scenes constructed on traditional models such as fugue, passacaglia, and rondo—the opera’s harmonic language departs entirely

from tonal centers. In this work, Berg achieves a synthesis of dramatic and analytical modernist expression (Hailey, 2010).

Berg’s mature opera *Lulu* (1929–1935), though left incomplete, demonstrates the flexible dramatic application of the twelve-tone system. In *Lulu*, Berg manipulates twelve-tone rows in ways that simulate tonal centers to support character development (Watkins, 1995). This compositional strategy is often cited as a key distinction between Berg and Schoenberg (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007).

His final work, the *Violin Concerto* (1935), is a testament to both Berg’s personal and artistic maturity. Subtitled “To the Memory of an Angel” and dedicated to the memory of Manon Gropius, the piece fuses the twelve-tone technique with tonal references, resulting in a lyrical and profoundly moving work (Watkins, 1995). Built upon tone rows derived from the Bach chorale “*Es ist genug*,” the concerto explores themes of death and mourning, showcasing Berg’s emotional depth and expressive clarity within the modernist idiom (Jarman, 1979).

Berg’s compositional trajectory thus extends from early lyrical Romanticism, through free atonality, to a dramatically expressive application of twelve-tone technique. Each work marks a milestone in his ongoing aesthetic search to articulate the psychological complexities of modern existence through sound.

### 1. B. KLANGFARBENMELODIE AND ORCHESTRAL COLOR: DEEPENING THE EXPRESSIVE TEXTURE

Berg’s approach to orchestration stems from a desire not only to create formal and harmonic coherence, but also to utilize timbral color as a vehicle for dramatic expression. In this regard, it can be argued that Berg expanded upon Arnold Schoenberg’s concept of *Klangfarbenmelodie* (“tone-color melody”). This technique involves distributing a melodic line across various instruments, resulting in shifting timbral colors that render the line as a kind of aural palette (Schoenberg, 1984).

In *Wozzeck*, Berg applies this technique to support both character psychology and scenic atmosphere. For example, scenes depicting *Wozzeck*’s mental disintegration are marked by glissandi in the strings and piercing gestures in the woodwinds, creating fluid, kaleidoscopic textures. While tonal clarity is often absent, the expressive use of timbre intensifies the dramatic effect (Hailey, 2010).

Berg’s sense of orchestral color extends beyond *Klangfarbenmelodie*. Grotesque brass fanfares that parody military bands, gentle harp accompaniments to Marie’s lyrical moments, and music-box-like timbres in the children’s scenes all contribute to a multi-layered sonic landscape. These techniques confirm Berg’s identity not only as a composer, but as a painter of sonic drama.

### 1. C. ALBAN BERG AND THE SECOND VIENNESE SCHOOL

Alongside Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, Alban Berg was one of the three principal figures of the Second

Viennese School, which played a decisive role in the transformation of modern Western music. This school represented not merely a technical revolution but also a profound rupture in the aesthetic and philosophical foundations of music. Free atonality and, later, twelve-tone technique (*Zwölftonmusik*), developed in response to the crisis of tonality in the early twentieth century, constitute the core contributions of this school (Whittall, 2003).

Schoenberg's twelve-tone system, formally articulated in 1923, abandoned the concept of tonal center and instead built on the equal treatment of all twelve chromatic pitches. His aim was to approach musical material with greater rationality and structural coherence. Berg, however, fused this systematic method with his personal lyricism and dramatic sensibility, forming a unique expressive language.

Berg's music exhibits greater flexibility and emotional depth compared to the general tendencies of the Second Viennese School. In *Wozzeck*, he combines free atonality with strict formal structures; in *Lulu* and the *Violin Concerto*, he integrates twelve-tone rows with tonal allusions. These approaches reflect his distinctive position within the school (Hall, 2011; Perle, 2023). Unlike Schoenberg's more doctrinal stance, Berg employed serial structures as expressive devices, bridging structural discipline with emotional resonance (Adorno, 2007).

The aesthetic legacy of the Second Viennese School extends beyond technical innovation. It was deeply embedded in the intellectual atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, psychoanalysis, German idealism, and the crises of cultural modernism. Traces of this context can be discerned in Berg's works: the fragmentation of the self, alienation, and the spiritual devastation wrought by social authority are not only articulated through sound but also through structural and philosophical dimensions (Hall, 2011; Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007).

Hence, Berg's position within the Second Viennese School must be understood not merely as a follower but as a transformative figure who derived a dramatic aesthetic language from a technical system. In his music, structure, emotion, and historical consciousness are inseparably intertwined.

#### 1. D. ATONALITY AND TWELVE-TONE TECHNIQUE

The twelve-tone technique (*Zwölftonmusik*) is a systematic method of composition developed by Arnold Schoenberg in 1923 in response to the collapse of tonal music and the need for a new structural framework. In this method, the twelve semitones of the Western chromatic scale are organized in a non-hierarchical sequence in which no pitch holds dominance over another. This sequence, or tone row (dodecaphonic series), uses each note only once before repetition (Schoenberg, 1926). The tone row can be manipulated through four primary operations: prime, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion. These permutations allow the composer to base the entire structure of a work on a single row, thereby ensuring both

coherence and variety. The twelve-tone system aims to grant music a new form of internal consistency by structuring harmony and form according to a logic that lies outside traditional tonality (Perle, 2023).

Although Alban Berg adopted this technique from Schoenberg, he distinguished himself by employing it with personal and dramatic flexibility. Rather than treating rows as purely abstract constructs, Berg used them as expressive tools. For instance, in his opera *Lulu*, he blends the serial structure with tonal allusions; some rows are designed to produce cadential effects. In his *Violin Concerto*, Berg incorporates a row derived from J.S. Bach's chorale *Es ist genug*, establishing a symbolic and emotional bridge between historical tradition and modern technique (Jarman, 1979; Steinskog, 2005).

In *Wozzeck*, Berg had not yet fully implemented the twelve-tone technique, but the opera's freely atonal structure and thematic consistency laid the groundwork for his later serialist developments (Perle, 2023). In Berg's musical language, tone rows function not only as formal devices but also as expressive means for articulating characters' inner worlds and dramatic tensions. In this regard, Berg transforms Schoenberg's system into what Adorno famously called "dissident lyricism": conflict within order, spiritual depth within structure (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007).

Alban Berg's compositional career evolved from early lyrical Romanticism into atonality and twelve-tone technique under Schoenberg's influence. While his early works still preserve a sense of tonal center, they increasingly exhibit atonal characteristics and free-form constructions. Completed in 1925, *Wozzeck* represents a unique synthesis of free atonality with traditional formal models. Its fifteen-scene structure is built upon classical forms such as fugue, passacaglia, and rondo, yet its harmonic content abandons any tonal center. In this opera, Berg deepens psychological expression through atonal language and dense orchestration (Haimo, 1990; Steinskog, 2005; Hailey, 2010).

Berg's orchestration reflects Schoenberg's concept of *Klangfarbenmelodie* (tone-color melody). In this technique, a melodic line is distributed across various instruments to create a timbral continuum, perceived like a shifting palette of colors (Schoenberg, 1911). In *Wozzeck*, this approach is frequently used to portray psychological states and stage atmospheres. For example, in scenes depicting *Wozzeck's* mental disintegration, glissandi in the strings and shrill woodwind attacks alternate to form vividly expressive orchestral textures (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007; Hailey, 2010).

In sum, Berg's engagement with twelve-tone technique and atonality functions both as a structural discipline and a medium for dramatic expression (Perle, 2023). Through these methods, he articulates the psychological fragmentation, social alienation, and internal conflict of modern man (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007; Jarman, 1979; Hall, 2011). Thus, Berg's music is not only

technically and aesthetically innovative but also offers a profound narrative of the complexity of the modern human psyche (Whittall, 1999; Head, 2014).

German Expressionism, emerging in the early twentieth century, was an artistic movement that aimed to externalize inner reality, particularly through distorted and emotionally intense forms in painting, theatre, and music (Kaes, 1989). Berg's *Wozzeck* is considered one of the purest manifestations of this aesthetic in music (Haimo, 1990; Hall, 2011; Aytimur, 2019). The character of *Wozzeck* represents the fragmented individual trapped within capitalist, authoritarian, and militarist systems. Büchner's *Woyzeck*, written in 1836, was already a radical social critique for its time; Berg reinterpreted this drama through the existential crisis of post-World War I Europe (Borchmeyer, 2003; Aytimur, 2019).

While Büchner's text was fragmentary and unfinished, Berg transformed it into a fifteen-scene dramaturgical structure that vividly conveys the character's interiority. *Wozzeck*'s paranoia, madness, and isolation are musically rendered through harmonic dissonance and the absence of tonal grounding (Perle, 2023). His struggle to survive on a meager military salary, his objectification in medical experiments, and his hopeless relationship with Marie exemplify existential alienation at both psychological and sociological levels. In this light, *Wozzeck* is not merely a personal tragedy, but a representation of modern European humanity (Watkins, 1995; Aytimur, 2019).

Berg's goal was not simply to narrate the character's story, but to immerse the audience in his mental state. The cyclical conclusion, underscored by children's voices, conveys that individual suffering has become a social destiny. This circular structure aligns with the despair-driven aesthetic of Expressionism (Hsieh, 2020).

## 2. WOZZECK AS MUSICAL MODERNISM AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and politically charged operas of the twentieth century. Composed between 1914 and 1922 and premiered in 1925, the opera is based on Georg Büchner's fragmentary yet socially explosive drama, which chronicles the psychological descent and tragic fate of Franz *Wozzeck*, a destitute soldier driven to murder and suicide. Through a seamless synthesis of atonal modernism and formal rigor, Berg crafts not only a psychological case study but also a profound critique of early twentieth-century European society (Jarman, 1979; Perle, 2023; Gorshin, 2023).

Structurally, *Wozzeck* is meticulously organized into three acts, each containing five short scenes. Each act is underpinned by a distinct formal model: the first act follows the structure of a Baroque suite, the second mimics a four-movement symphony, and the third consists of a set of variations. These classical forms provide a stark counterpoint to the opera's dissonant harmonic language, reflecting a world in chaos that desperately clings to the

illusion of order (Haimo, 1990; Perle, 2023). Rather than limiting expressive capacity, this structural clarity intensifies the psychological and sociological resonance of the music (Gorshin, 2023; Hsieh, 2020).

Berg's harmonic idiom, largely atonal, creates a musical environment that mirrors the characters' mental states. While not employing Schoenberg's twelve-tone method, Berg constructs coherence through the extensive use of leitmotifs, recurring intervals, and thematic transformations (Whittall, 1999; Hall, 2011). Each character is sonically encoded: the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major are associated with grotesquely exaggerated motifs; Marie is represented through sensuous yet conflicted melodic figures; and *Wozzeck* himself is musically fractured, haunted by dissonant intervals and rhythmic instability. Of particular symbolic significance is Berg's use of the tritone and minor third intervals historically charged with emotional and spiritual meaning to depict alienation, guilt, and doomed love (Simms, 2000; Gorshin, 2023).

The orchestra in *Wozzeck* does not serve merely as accompaniment but functions as an active commentator. It anticipates action, reflects psychological undercurrents, and transforms physical environments into sonic landscapes. For example, glissandi in the strings and shrill woodwinds accompany *Wozzeck*'s hallucinations, while a watery, undulating musical figure foreshadows his ultimate drowning. Such vivid orchestral writing intensifies the opera's expressionist qualities, portraying the inner worlds of the characters in heightened musical terms (Hsieh, 2020; Jarman, 1979; Gorshin, 2023).

Importantly, *Wozzeck* is not merely a psychological portrait but also a trenchant social critique. The opera presents a world in which the working class is subject to relentless exploitation by indifferent bourgeois institutions. Figures of authority the Captain, the Doctor, the Drum Major embody various forms of power: moral, scientific, and military. They systematically humiliate *Wozzeck*, exploiting his labor, body, and dignity under the guise of discipline, science, or virility (Aytimur 2019). Berg's decision to dramatize this class dynamic, set against the sociopolitical unrest of the interwar period, reflects his acute awareness of systemic inequality and the dehumanizing effects of industrial capitalism (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007; Hall, 2011, Gorshin, 2023).

Marie's role further complicates the socio-gendered dimensions of the opera. As a poor woman raising a child out of wedlock, she is marginalized both economically and morally. Her relationship with the Drum Major, while adulterous, is motivated by survival, not passion—a desperate attempt to secure a future for herself and her son. Berg captures this ambivalence musically, particularly through her lullaby and the symbolic use of intervals such as the minor third (B ♭ -D ♭), associated with sorrow and maternal anxiety (Head, 2014; Gorshin, 2023).

The final scenes of the opera are especially poignant. Marie's murder, *Wozzeck*'s suicide, and the child's

abandonment are presented not as isolated tragedies but as consequences of a broken social order. The opera closes with children playing near the site of the murder, oblivious to the trauma that surrounds them. This cyclical ending underscored by a return to tonal ambiguity suggests that the conditions that destroyed *Wozzeck* remain unchallenged, perpetuating generational suffering (Harper-Scott, 2012; Hall 2011 Gorshin, 2023).

*Wozzeck's* reception history also reflects its provocative character. Initially met with polarized reactions, the opera was later banned by the Nazi regime under the label of *Entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art"), further affirming its status as a politically subversive work. In the decades since, it has earned its place in the operatic canon, celebrated for its innovative form, emotional intensity, and incisive social commentary (Ross, 2007).

In sum, Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* transcends the boundaries of conventional opera. Through its fusion of classical form and avant-garde expression, psychological depth and political critique, it emerges as a complex and disturbing vision of modernity. The opera's enduring relevance lies in its ability to expose the mechanisms of oppression class, gender, institutional power while capturing the emotional fragility of those caught within them. As such, *Wozzeck* remains not only a masterpiece of modern music but also a timeless indictment of social injustice.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is a landmark in twentieth-century opera, not only for its musical innovation and dramatic intensity, but also for its unique fusion of aesthetic form and socio-political critique. Through its use of expressionist idioms, atonal language, and rigorously structured classical forms, *Wozzeck* articulates a world in crisis a world in which the subject is shattered by poverty, alienation, and institutional violence. It is a work that resists both musical convention and ideological complacency, making it one of the most intellectually and emotionally provocative operas in the modern repertoire (Perle, 2023; Whittall, 1999).

From a historical perspective, *Wozzeck* represents a seismic shift in the operatic tradition. Emerging in the aftermath of World War I and amid the collapse of long-standing political and cultural orders, the opera broke decisively with the conventions of nineteenth-century Romanticism. In contrast to the grandeur and emotional saturation of Wagnerian opera, Berg offered a music drama that was fragmentary, dissonant, and brutally realistic. The everyday suffering of a low-ranking soldier became the focus of an operatic work a radical redefinition of operatic subject matter that replaced kings and gods with the proletariat. In doing so, *Wozzeck* expanded the expressive range of the genre and aligned it with the aesthetics of modernism (Hall, 2011; Jarman, 1979).

Moreover, *Wozzeck* was one of the first operas to incorporate elements of cinema, psychology, and silent

internal suffering into its narrative and musical language. Its dramaturgy, built on short scenes with tightly structured musical forms, anticipates montage techniques and psychological fragmentation found in later art forms. Its impact can be seen in the subsequent works of composers such as Shostakovich, Britten, and Henze, who drew on Berg's innovations in form, orchestration, and thematic gravity (Head, 2014).

The opera's importance is also evident in its reception history. Although its premiere in 1925 provoked controversy and polarized audiences, *Wozzeck* quickly gained a reputation as a seminal modernist work. It was banned by the Nazi regime under the label *Entartete Kunst* ("degenerate art"), which further cemented its place in the canon of politically significant works. Its post-war revival underscored its enduring relevance, particularly in a century marked by unprecedented violence, displacement, and ideological extremism (Ross, 2007).

Among the most profound theoretical interpretations of *Wozzeck* is that of Theodor W. Adorno, for whom the opera exemplifies the dialectic of form and content in modern art. According to Adorno, *Wozzeck* is not merely a modernist masterpiece that expands the boundaries of atonal musical language; it is also an aesthetic echo of the fragmented existence of the modern individual. The rigid formal schemes employed in the operafugue, suite, rondo, passacaglia are not mere exercises in compositional virtuosity, but the auditory reflection of objectified human fate (Paddison, 1993; Adorno, 2007. As Adorno contends, in *Wozzeck*, form becomes "social destiny itself."

Atonality, for Adorno, does not only represent the breakdown of tonal hierarchy, but also signifies the disintegration of the autonomous subject in a reified, late-capitalist world. The opera's fractured musical landscape, interspersed with silences, glissandi, and piercing orchestral gestures, reconstitutes the very language of pain in a historical moment where individual speech is rendered impotent (Adorno, 1993; Simms, 2000). In this context, *Wozzeck's* musical portrayal is not a psychological sketch but a musical allegory of social dissolution and existential despair. As such, the opera becomes what Adorno calls a form of dissident lyricism (*widerständige Lyrik*): a space where pain is not simply expressed, but formalized and resisted through the very structure of the music.

Thus, *Wozzeck* is not only important because of its groundbreaking musical language or dramaturgical innovations. It is a work that redefined what opera could be: a site where art becomes critique, where structure embodies suffering, and where the silenced are given a new voice—through dissonance, fragmentation, and form (Whittall, 1999; Perle, 2023). The autonomy of the artwork, in this sense, becomes not a retreat from the world but a critical confrontation with it (Harper-Scott, 2012).

Ultimately, *Wozzeck* remains a vital and disquieting presence in the operatic canon. Its themes poverty,

madness, power, guilt, and systemic violence—are tragically persistent. Its sound world, though nearly a century old, continues to disturb, provoke, and enlighten. It is a testament to the power of music to not only reflect human experience but to shape and transform our understanding of it. In a world still marked by inequality and estrangement, Berg's *Wozzeck* endures as both an artistic milestone and a philosophical statement—one that compels us to listen not only with our ears, but with historical consciousness.

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