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Abstract

Images in Western art of the tragic hero meeting his end typically conjure Romantic topics of honour, stoicism, and transcendence, yet it is questionable whether these projections of artistic death translate to the lived experiences of the dying. The titular protagonist of Alban Berg’s 1922 opera, *Wozzeck*, experiences death in a way that starkly contrasts Romantic ideals. Wozzeck does not die the honourable, ‘masculine’ death that might be expected from a tragic hero; rather, he capitulates to madness, misery, and poverty. Spurned by those who socially outrank him, Wozzeck is condemned to a shameful death, his fate sealed by his destitution and the sanctimonious prejudice against his ‘immoral’ life. These considerations provide a fascinating starting point for an examination of Berg’s poignant representation of Wozzeck’s death — a death that reflects early twentieth century attitudes that shaped and stigmatized the death experience. In this article I will frame my discussion of *Wozzeck* by considering the history of death in Western society, particularly the stigmas surrounding the gender and class of the dying individual. This history will inform my analysis of the symbolism in Berg’s music. Detailed analysis of *Wozzeck* sheds a critical light on the social stigma and class structure mapped onto the suffering, madness, and death of Wozzeck and his lover Marie.

Keywords

Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, twentieth-century opera, Death, Second Viennese School

“Wir Arme Leut”: Undignified Death and Madness in Berg’s *Wozzeck*

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None heeded him; he choked
And fought the flapping veils of smothering gloom,
Lost in a blurred confusion of yells and groans...
Down, and down, and down, he sank and drowned,
Bleeding to death.
—Siegfried Sassoon, “Counter-Attack”¹

Images in Western art of the tragic hero meeting his end typically conjure Romantic topics of honour, stoicism, and transcendence. One mourns the sad loss of a great man who died nobly, but it is questionable whether these projections of artistic death translate to the lived experiences of the dying. The role of the actuality of death in the shaping of artistic representation is unclear. The titular protagonist of Alban Berg’s 1922 opera, *Wozzeck*, experiences death in a way that starkly contrasts Romantic ideals. Wozzeck does not die the honourable, masculine death that might be expected from a tragic hero; rather, he capitulates to madness, misery, and

1. Siegfried Sassoon, “Counter Attack,” in *Counter-Attack and Other Poems* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1918), 13.

poverty. Spurned by those who socially outrank him, Wozzeck is condemned to a shameful death, his fate sealed by his destitution and the sanctimonious prejudice against his immoral life. This context provides a fascinating starting point for an examination of Berg's poignant representation of death that reflects attitudes of his time that, in turn, shaped and stigmatized the death experience. In this article I will frame my discussion of *Wozzeck* by considering the history of death in Western society, particularly the stigmas surrounding the gender and class of the dying individual. This history will inform my analysis of the symbolism in Berg's music. Through the analysis presented in this article, I will illustrate and critique the social stigma and class structure mapped onto the suffering, madness, and death of Wozzeck and his lover Marie.

Until the Great War, Western society enjoyed a gradual estrangement from the physical presence of death. Medical improvements resulted in better pain management and better hospitals. The creation of public cemeteries removed gravesites from church courtyards, preventing churchgoers from being disturbed by reminders of mortality. In "The Alienation of Death in Vienna and Budapest," Péter Hanák explains, "enlightened citizens also wanted to be rid of the daily presence of death."² This repulsion of the physical signs of death reveals the gradual shift in consciousness towards what Hanák calls an "aestheticized picture of individual death."³ Historian Philippe Ariès, in his extensive

2. Péter Hanák, "The Alienation of Death in Vienna and Budapest," in *The Garden and the Workshop: Essays on the Cultural History of Vienna and Budapest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 98.

3. *Ibid.*, 108.

study on the history of Western attitudes towards death, demonstrates that this alienation is the product of a growing dichotomy between dignified and undignified death. The dignified death is comfortable, personal, and well managed—a concept that Ariès has defined as the “tame” death. As Ariès has detailed, this tameness hinges on the social class and monetary value of an individual. Thus, the tame death is a privilege of the bourgeois and upper classes. Undignified death, on the other hand, is shameful, rife with suffering and solitude.⁴ These socially stratified attitudes provide an interesting framework for examining music dealing with the subject of death—a central concern of *Wozzeck*.

In his study, *The Social History of Death*, Allan Kellehear contends that the converse of a tame death must be a “wild” death: “The image of death as a ‘wild’ thing suggests chaos, disorder, violence, and the unpredictable and unexpected.”⁵ This idea accords with Ariès’s account of deaths that were deemed undignified: sudden death, unexpected death, violent death, murder, and madness. Robbing death of its expected course, these undignified ends “destroyed the order of the world in which everyone believed; it became the absurd instrument of chance...ignominious and shameful.”⁶ Even from medieval times, the notion prevailed that those unlucky victims of wild death were “inescapably dishonored by the vileness of [their] death.”⁷ Ariès attributes this shame to the distaste among so-called “enlightened citizens” for corporeal

4. Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981).

5. Allan Kellehear, *A Social History of Dying* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 170.

6. Ariès, *Hour*, 10.

7. Ibid., 11.

baseness. The presence of blood particularly defiled the death. Ariès references the account of the thirteenth-century bishop of Mende, and the “primitive beliefs regarding the pollution of sacred places by the liquids of the human body, blood, or sperm: ‘Those who have been killed are not brought into the church for fear their blood will soil the floor of the temple of God.’”⁸ Members of the lower classes, existing in more violent communities and lacking money for good medical care, experienced the majority of undignified deaths.

Another division between dignified and undignified death is the notion of fate and forewarning. In medieval Europe, the idea of fate as a governing entity was widely accepted. Ariès’s stories of medieval nobility illustrate a complete submission to fate: even kings and knights calmly accepted supernatural signs of their impending death. As education separated the working class from the intellectuals, however, subscription in the idea of fate and the premonition of death was deemed a commoner’s belief.⁹ Ominous warning signs and unnatural premonitions of impending death became the products of an uneducated mind, a concept disdained by the upper echelons of society. This concept evolved from the pursuit of a more scientific, detached, and controlled understanding of death and pain management: the triumph of man’s free will over nature, “taming” death.

For Alban Berg, however, the revival of Georg Büchner’s socially vital play coincided with a time when Europeans, Berg included, could no longer alienate death from everyday life. They were forced into a closer acquaintance with death in the destructive wake of the Great

8. Ariès, *Hour*, 13.

9. *Ibid.*, 7.

War. Berg was not the only one who identified with the shamed and broken ex-soldier that embodied the character of Wozzeck—Wozzeck's plight struck a chord with many Europeans traumatized by the intrusion of violent death into everyday life.

Wozzeck's Death: Loss of masculinity, sanity, and dignity

Wozzeck's death is the crowning manifestation of his deeply shameful life: it embodies the final loss of his struggle to reclaim his masculinity and human dignity. Based on the trial and execution of murderer Johann Christian Woyzeck, Büchner's play centers on Wozzeck, a common soldier living in poverty with his mistress, Marie, and their child. Wozzeck and his dysfunctional family unit embody an archetype of the lower class. Out of desperation he is driven to servitude, even submitting to degrading medical experiments. Two characters that epitomize the upper hierarchy of social structure administer these torments: the Captain, representative of political and moral authorities, and the Doctor, representative of intellectual and scientific bodies. Wozzeck is relentlessly traumatized and humiliated by these characters and is driven to homicidal madness by the taunting infidelity of Marie with the Drum Major, a higher ranking soldier and a figure of bombastic masculinity. In the last act, Wozzeck finally succumbs to death and madness: after murdering Marie in a frenzied passion, he drowns in a pond, convinced that the water is blood.

Writer George Steiner referred to the opera as the "first real tragedy of low life," and it is clear that Wozzeck's

death and social status are inextricably related.¹⁰ The loss of his dignity, masculinity, and sanity is triggered by the oppressive drudgery and the overbearing shame of his life. From the opening curtain, and ostensibly for years before, Wozzeck is downtrodden and belittled by masculine authority figures. This humiliation harshly illuminates his own inadequacy as a provider for his mistress and child.

Wozzeck's masculine identity is a central issue throughout the opera, especially in light of his role as the central male character. Dramatic tradition would suggest that, as the title character of the opera, Wozzeck's role is that of the tragic hero, a once-great man whose glory is brought to ruin by some hubris. Wozzeck defies this role, as he commands no respect, has no glorious past, and demonstrates no pride. Though we can see that Wozzeck is a good and simple man, by the time we encounter him he is demoralized beyond recognition. The hyper-masculine foil of the Drum Major further destroys his vacillating masculinity. All that remains is, in Douglas Jarman's terms, a "psychotic anti-hero," making the character of Wozzeck all the more striking, puzzling, and strangely relatable.¹¹

Wozzeck's madness betrays one of the fundamental chinks in his masculine identity. Susan McClary, like many other scholars, notes that from the nineteenth century onwards, "madness came to be regarded as a peculiarly female malady—usually as a manifestation of excess female sexuality. The socially perceived differences between male and female

10. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 274, quoted in George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, vol. 1, *Wozzeck* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 37.

11. Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989), 2.

were, in other words, often mapped onto the differences between reason and unreason.”¹² It follows that Wozzeck’s deviation from reason is atypical of his sex, and especially atypical of his operatic masculine lead role. The traditional opera role designed to project mental instability is that of the madwoman—such as Donizetti’s Lucia, a prime example.¹³ McClary and Mary Ann Smart demonstrate that in opera, feminine madness manifests through vocal excess: the exorbitant coloratura of the Lucia’s final scene proclaims madness.¹⁴ This feminine madness seeps through the gaping holes in Wozzeck’s role as masculine hero. Musically, the key to Wozzeck’s madness is not excess in coloratura, but excess in repetition: the relentless recapitulation of fragmentary and symbolic musical ideas.

The interaction between the Doctor and Wozzeck in act 1, scene 4 illustrates the obsessive nature of Wozzeck’s mind. The Doctor berates Wozzeck for his lack of reason and dismisses him for being “obsessed with an *idée fixe*.” This prompts his gleeful diagnosis of a contrived mental disorder: “An excellent aberratio mentalis partialis, second species!”¹⁵ The Doctor does not name Wozzeck’s *idée fixe*, but through

12. Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1991), 81.

13. See McClary, *Feminine Endings*; Mary Ann Smart, “The Silencing of Lucia,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4, no. 2 (1992), 119–141, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/stable/823740>; and Catherine Clément, *Opera, Or, The Undoing of Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis, 1989) for more detailed discussion of Lucia’s madness.

14. Smart, “The Silencing of Lucia,” 120–140.

15. Alban Berg, *Georg Büchner’s Wozzeck: Oper in 3 Akten (15 Szenen)* Op. 7, rev. ed., libretto by Alban Berg, trans. Eric Blackhall and Vida Harford (Wien: Universal Edition, 1955), 134–135. “Er hat eine schöne fixe Idee, eine köstliche aberratio mentalis partialis, zweite Spezies!”

the musical and textual associations discussed below I will demonstrate that Wozzeck's *idée fixe* is death: both Marie's, and his own. The weight of this *idée fixe* increases as Wozzeck's fortunes decline.

The conceptual significance of repetition is reinforced by George Perle's discussion of the verbal leitmotif, "One thing after another,"¹⁶ which the Captain introduces in the opening line of the opera: "Slowly, Wozzeck, slowly! One thing after another."¹⁷ The Captain means to chide Wozzeck into taking his time, but his unwanted advice has greater implications. He emphasizes the great expanse of repetitive drudgery and servitude that stretches out before Wozzeck: "Thirty years; that's three hundred and sixty months to go, and how many days and hours and minutes!"¹⁸ The motive returns at the close of act 2; Wozzeck, deranged by the clamorous realization of Marie's infidelity in the preceding waltz scene loses a fistfight with the Drum Major while surrounded his peers in the army barracks. Wozzeck's despair crystallizes now that he has been both sexually and physically bested by the Drum Major. Here is the penultimate moment, where the events of the first two acts have cumulatively battered Wozzeck until he has reached a breaking point: the precise instant where the *idée fixe* of death is "irrevocably established in his mind," presaging Marie's murder.¹⁹ The

16. Either "Eins Nach dem Andern!" or "Einer Nach dem Andern!"

17. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 6. "Langsam, Wozzeck, langsam! Eins nach dem Andern!"

18. Ibid. "Dreißig Jahre: macht dreihundert und sechzig Monate und erst wieviel Tage, Stunden, Minuten!"

19. Perle, *Wozzeck*, 95; This mental shift is confirmed by Büchner's original play—though not in the libretto: the next scene in

chilling reiteration of the leitmotif marks the end of Wozzeck's struggle against his *idée fixe* as he lies defeated and bleeding in the barracks: "One thing after another."²⁰ Wozzeck's explicit statement of the motive is doubled in the stage direction, as the sleeping soldiers, losing interest after the fight, turn their backs "one after the other." Berg's specific wording announces the finality of Wozzeck's isolation—his complete detachment from humanity and his surrender to fateful death as the *idée fixe* trumps any remaining connection to life.

Four Motives: Shameful Death in Music and Text

Berg's use of repetition pervades every structural aspect of the work, not only with leitmotifs in the Wagnerian sense, but also through symbolic topical and textual associations. For the purposes of this discussion I will focus on four motives that form the centripetal forces that draw Wozzeck into complete madness. These motives gain significance when viewed in light of Ariès's discussion of class as a dividing factor between dignified and undignified death: Wozzeck's low station reflects the baseness and shame of his death as well as its inevitability.

which Wozzeck appears (act 3, between scenes 1 and 2) reveals him buying a knife from a "junk shop," sold to him by the unflatteringly stereotypical Jewish shop owner (perhaps one reason the scene was excluded). This scene links the choice of the symbolic murder weapon with Wozzeck's financial straits: the knife, chosen for its low price, provides "a cheap death but not a free one." See Alban Berg and Georg Büchner, *Wozzeck*, ed. Nicholas John, (London, J. Calder, 1990), 102.

20. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 380. "Einer Nach dem Andern!"

The “Fate” Dyad: Warning Signs

Berg’s symbolic use of the B–F dyad as a harmonic and melodic atom accumulates significance throughout the work. It associates foremost with the concept of fate: the premonition and inevitability of death. Perle connects the dyad with Wozzeck’s morbid *idée fixe*, confirming the fateful relationship.²¹ The *idée fixe* serves as an indicator that Wozzeck and Marie are fated to die. The inevitability of these deaths runs as a thematic thread through the entire work, indicated musically by the overarching use of this “Fate” dyad, and thematically by Wozzeck’s submission to the power of nature. Thus, the concepts of the omnipotence of fate and nature are synonymous here. This surrender to nature solidifies Wozzeck as an individual of low social status and intelligence, and emphasizes his innate humanity and subsequent mortality.

The Doctor’s derision of Wozzeck bolsters the association between Wozzeck’s forbearance to nature and his low social value in their introductory dialogue in act 1, scene 4. The Doctor, fuming at Wozzeck for violating the terms of his experiment by urinating without his consent, quickly demolishes Wozzeck’s attempt at self-defense—claiming that he was “forced to it by Nature”: “By your nature, by your nature! Superstition, ridiculous superstition! Have I not proved quite clearly that the muscles are subject to the human will? Nature’s force, Wozzeck! Man’s will is free! In man,

21. For further detail see Perle, “Representation and Symbol in the Music of *Wozzeck*,” *Wozzeck*, 93–129.

individuality is sublimated into freedom!”²² With this speech, the Doctor asserts his dominant position and superior intelligence. As Ariès’s account indicates, the relegation of fate—and thus nature—to the realms of common superstition widened the gap between the educated and uneducated classes. The interactions of Wozzeck and the Doctor demonstrate this gap.

The B–F “Fate” dyad permeates Berg’s music from start to finish. The original dyad sounds in the first measure of act 1, scene 1, outlined in the string section with a descending tritone glissando, as well as in melodic form in the second violins (ex. 1). The dyad reappears in the first vocal line of the same scene, farcically emphasized with the Captain’s “Langsam!” (ex. 2, highlighted). Berg features this dyad so often that examples are too numerous to discuss in detail, but one particularly significant setting is used in the key turning point discussed above—the final line of act 2, scene 5. Berg uses the “Fate” dyad in the orchestra to underscore Wozzeck’s pronouncement of “One after the other” (ex. 3), the phrase he defined as the “prophetic last words” of the scene.²³ Here, the descending vocal line, beginning on F, subsides, completed by the low B in the harp. The juxtaposition of the “Fate” dyad with Wozzeck’s mumbled capitulation, as his comrades slowly turn their backs, creates a striking atmosphere of finality. The close of act 2, scene 5

22. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 111–114. “Einem die Natur kommt”: “Die Natur kommt! Die Natur kommt! Aberglaube, abscheulicher Aberstition! Hab’ ich nicht nachgewiesen, daß das Zwerchfell dem Willen unterworfen ist? Die Natur, Wozzeck! Der Mensch ist frei! In dem Menschen verklärt sich die Individualität zur Freiheit!”

23. Alban Berg, “A Lecture on Wozzeck” (1929), quoted in Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 155.

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clearly stands out as pivotal in Wozzeck's surrender to mortality. The harp, ringing like a death toll through the closing measures, executes the break in his spirit. Berg uses this scene to seal Wozzeck's fate, illustrating the role of social stigma and rejection in Wozzeck's eventual demise.

Example 1: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 1, Scene 1, m. 1, emphasis added.

Sehr mäßige Viertel (♩ = 60)

1. Violine o.D. *2* *p < poco* *gliss.* *1*

2. Violine o.D. *4* *p < poco* *gliss.*

Viola o.D. *2* *p < poco* *gliss.*

Violoncello o.D. *4* *p < poco* *gliss.*

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Example 2: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 1, Scene 1, mm. 5–6, emphasis added.

5

p

Langsam, Wozzeck, lang - sam - !

Langsam, Wozzeck, lang - sam - !

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Example 3: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 2, Scene 5, mm. 812–817, emphasis added.

Wozzeck *p*

bleibt sitzen und starrt vor sich hin.

Ei-ner nach dem An-dern!

Die anderen Soldaten, die sich während des Ringkampfes etwas aufgerichtet hatten, haben sich nach dem Abgang des Tambourmajors-einer nach dem andern- niedergelegt. und schlafen nunmehr alle wieder.

pp Pos u. 3 K B pizz

ppp

Hfe Tamtam

alle Vel K B Hrn Tub pizz

pppp

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“Wir Arme Leut”: The Role of Poverty in Wozzeck’s Death

The musical motive associated with the text “Wir Arme Leut” (Poor folk like us) potently symbolizes the correlation between Wozzeck’s class and his death. Wozzeck blurts out the motive (D#–B–E–G) (ex. 4) in act 1, scene 1 as he reacts to the Captain’s condemnation of his “unblessed” child: “Poor folk like us! Money, you see, sir, money! With no money...Let one of us try to bring his own kind into the world, in a good moral way!...If I were a gentleman, Sir, and wore a top hat, and had a watch, and an eyeglass, too, and could talk politely, then I would be virtuous too!”²⁴ The solo violin reiterates this leitmotif as Wozzeck speaks wistfully of how “beautiful it must be to have virtue.”²⁵ Here, virtue is interchangeable with wealth and social status. This motive, which Janet Schmalfeldt calls a “verbal keynote, or motto,” is only expressed explicitly four times, but haunts the rest of the opera in several varied and disguised forms.²⁶

24. Berg and Büchner, *Wozzeck*, 62–63. “Wir arme Leut! Sehn Sie, Herr Hauptmann, Geld, Geld! Wer kein Geld hat! Da setz’ einmal einer Seinesgleichen auf die moralische Art in die Welt!...Ja, wenn ich ein Herr wär, und hätt’ einen Hut und eine Uhr und en Augenglas und könnt’ vornehm reden, ich wollte schon tugendhaft sein!”

25. Ibid., 63. “Es muss was Schönes sein um die Tugend.”

26. Janet Schmalfeldt, *Berg’s Wozzeck: Harmonic Language and Dramatic Design* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1983), 87.

Example 4: Berg, *Wozzeck*, “Wir arme Leut!” Motive, Act 1, Scene 1.

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Thematically, the words and melodic figure of “Wir Arme Leut” are associated with the opprobrium of poverty. For Marie, it expresses fear and despair as she broods over Wozzeck’s erratic behavior and the future of her child. In act 1, scene 3, it bursts forth as a cry of anguish as she stands “deep in thought” contemplating Wozzeck’s visit: “Ah! Poor folk like us! I can’t go on...I’m trembling...” (ex. 5).²⁷ For Wozzeck, the motive proclaims his shameful social status and endless toil. To borrow Schmalfeldt’s words, “Wozzeck’s membership in the *arme Leut* class gives him no time to slow down, since he is driven from one menial task to the next in a frenzied effort to make enough money to survive.”²⁸ In act 2, scene 1, appalled by the sight of beads of sweat on his sleeping child’s face, Wozzeck laments: “All our days spent endlessly toiling...even sweat in sleep...Poor folk like us!”²⁹ The motive poignantly expresses the distress of both Wozzeck and Marie, as their membership in the lowest class

27. Berg and Büchner, *Wozzeck*, 69. “Ach! Wir arme Leut. Ich halt’s nit aus...Es schauert mich...” See Berg, *Wozzeck*, 103–104.

28. Schmalfeldt, *Berg’s Wozzeck*, 93.

29. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 196–197. “Nichts als Arbeit unter der Sonne, sogar Schweiß im Schlaf. Wir arme Leut!”

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affords them no opportunity to escape hardship and undignified death.

Example 5: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 1, Scene 3, mm. 467–486.

The image shows a musical score for a scene from Alban Berg's opera *Wozzeck*. It includes vocal parts with lyrics in German and piano accompaniment. The vocal lines are marked with dynamics like *mf* and *ff*, and the piano part features complex textures with various instruments like Solo Br., Holz, and Trom. The tempo/mood is indicated as 'ausbrechend' and 'rascher'.

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The Waltz: A Mockery of Love and High Society

The topic of the waltz is introduced in act 1, scene 4, as the Doctor belittles Wozzeck's mental capacity. Perle notes that the Doctor's pronouncement of Wozzeck's "excellent *aberratio mentalis*," is given a "cheerful waltz-like setting" in measures 564–572.³⁰ This waltz's gaiety and refinement proves ironic: it serves as a reminder of Wozzeck's unhappiness, signifying his unstable mental state, while simultaneously mocking the verbosity of the Doctor's negative diagnosis.

Dance figures in *Wozzeck* hold ironic class associations. In particular the waltz mocks the destitution of Marie, Wozzeck, and the cast of lowly characters at the tavern in act 2, scene 4; its association with Viennese high society

30. Perle, *Wozzeck*, 119.

throws a bitter shadow over their meager enjoyment of the dance. The tavern waltz that Marie dances with the Drum Major stages a threadbare scene compared to the glittering velour of Viennese waltz. Berg transforms a dance form that traditionally reflects a sense of gaiety and merriment to reflect derision. Berg's waltz is low, stained with the misery of the "dreary world."³¹ Notably, in the tavern scene, the waltz torments Wozzeck, flaunting Marie's infidelity.

The mockery of the waltz is most acidic in light of the degradation of Wozzeck's masculinity. The tavern scene sets the stage for the Drum Major to parade his overblown masculinity. His peacocking and physical boldness with Marie on the tavern dance floor are more than Wozzeck can bear. The sneering and fragmentary waltz music reflects Wozzeck's disintegrating mental stability as he watches the Drum Major usurp his relationship with Marie, who is all he has in the world.³² The romance of the waltz is particularly caustic when applied to the relationship between Marie and Wozzeck. Presumably there was once enough romance for Wozzeck to resort to humiliating work in order to provide for Marie and their child. As Marie and the Drum Major dance together, we see the only stable and comforting piece of Wozzeck's lifestyle slip from his grasp.

Berg's instrumentation of the waltz speaks volumes of class associations. The tavern waltz is driven by an onstage folk ensemble—the "drunken pub-band"—and underscored by the orchestra, which wafts in and out, fragmented as

31. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 298. "Welt so traurig."

32. *Ibid.*, 250. "Hab' sonst nichts auf dieser Welt!"

Wozzeck's mental state.³³ Berg scores the waltz using identifiable folk instruments, such as the clarinet and accordion, communicating its relegation to the low class realm of the tavern.³⁴ Waltz forms throughout *Wozzeck* ironically underscore the role of class in Wozzeck's death.

Red-Blooded "Poor Folk": The Shame of the Body

The symbol of blood first appears in the opening scene, as Wozzeck's defense of his illegitimate child against the Captain: "Man has only his flesh and blood!"³⁵ The simple, sensitive Wozzeck ventures that he is only "flesh and blood," does things "naturally," and thus is incapable of "virtuous" physical self-control. Here, the symbol of blood obtains an association with nature. This association extends to blood and its signifier, the colour red, as a marker of "Fate." Wozzeck's identification with flesh and blood also connotes the association of blood, mortality, and humanity with the working class. Wozzeck and his social equals are merely corporeal beings, beneath the lofty scientific and moral ideals of the Doctor and the Captain.

Wozzeck's explanations, however, offend the Captain, who retorts that he is also "flesh and blood," yet he remains virtuous. The Doctor reacts similarly when presented with

33. Berg, "A Lecture on Wozzeck" (1929), quoted in Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 165.

34. See Julie Pedneault-Deslauriers, "Waltzing in the Shadows: Alienation, Perversion, and Madness in Three Modernist Waltzes." Chap. 1 in "Music on the Fault Line: Sexuality, Gender, and the Second Viennese School, 1899–1925" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2010). <http://search.proquest.com/docview/808406933?accountid=12339>.

35. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 30. "Man hat auch sein Fleisch und Blut!"

Wozzeck's early premonition of death, a vision of the symbolic colour red. As Wozzeck muses on the "red glow" he sees coming from the West, he incenses the Doctor, who dislikes Wozzeck's ominous superstitions.³⁶ The Captain and the Doctor are both engaged in a futile quest to outwit the physical body by virtue of their pompous ideologies. Wozzeck's willing subscription to the powers of nature emphasizes the social gap that has arisen between the educated and uneducated classes. This is validated by Wozzeck's acceptance of the important symbolic nature that the concepts of red and blood hold for his fate.

The colour red is also associated with Marie's sexuality and her class: "But look—I have surely as red a mouth, as the noble rich ladies."³⁷ Wozzeck also references Marie's red lips as visual sign of her sexuality when he confronts her with suspicions about her infidelity in act 2, scene 2 ("But, see, you have such fine red lips, Marie, such fine red lips—and no blister there?").³⁸ The tavern scene is riddled with ironically idyllic folk-tune references to promiscuous peasant girls, garnering the connotation that Marie's sexuality is degradation, sealing her in her low station.

The ominous, atmospheric descriptions of the colour red foreshadow the violent deaths of the protagonists. The

36. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 129. "...und nur noch ein roter Schein im Westen, wie von einter Esse" (...and from out the west red light is glowing, as from out a chimney). In this scene, the Doctor recalls the "enlightened citizens" described in Hanák's account of early nineteenth-century Vienna.

37. Ibid., 184–185. "Und doch—hab'ich einen so roten Mund, als die großen Madamen."

38. Berg and Büchner, *Wozzeck*, 89; Berg, *Wozzeck*, 270–271. "Aber Du hast einen roten Mund, einen roten Mund—keine Blase drauf?"

unstable tavern scene brings Wozzeck's madness to a head as the colour red swirls around him. The apprentices' waterlogged exclamation that the "whole world is rosy red" proves ironic when the Idiot hisses to Wozzeck "everyone's happy, but it smells of blood."³⁹ The "rosy red" world turns to a "red mist" before Wozzeck's eyes, as Marie and the other patrons dance, "rolling all over each other."⁴⁰ This atmospheric red reaches its zenith in the red moon that witnesses the death of both Marie and Wozzeck.

The choral attack on Wozzeck, at the tavern after the murder of Marie (act 3, scene 3), is a particularly interesting setting of the blood/red symbol. Wozzeck is bombarded on all sides by the accusation of "Menschenblut!" (human blood) set to the intrusive, short-short-long rhythmic figure that provides the structural element for the scene.⁴¹ Originally emphasized in the driving stage piano (ex. 6), the rhythm mutates with each repetition of "Menschenblut" (ex. 7a and 7b). This is underpinned by the steady, insistent repetition of the figure in the orchestra (ex. 8) as a ragtag group of maids and laborers—members of his own class—corner him. Wozzeck succumbs to this tormenting repetition and is swallowed in the guilt of Marie's blood, driving him to run back to the scene of the crime, and to his immersion in imaginary blood in his final scene.

39. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 301–302; 336. "Die ganze Welt ist rosen-rot!"; "Lustig, lustig,...aber es riecht—Ich riecht, ich riech Blut!"

40. Ibid., 337–338; 340–341. "Mir wird rot vor den Augen."; "Alle übereinander."

41. Ibid., 432.

Example 6: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 3, Scene 3, m. 125.

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Example 7a: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 3, Scene 3, m. 209.

Men - schen - blut! _____

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Example 8: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 3, Scene 4, mm. 210–212.

*) Siehe Anm. Seite 431

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Wozzeck's Death, Act 3, scene 4: Return of the Four Motives

In Wozzeck's death scene, Berg culminates and recapitulates all of the above motives, which serve as reminders of the past that bombard the fragile Wozzeck. The musical structure of the scene, "Invention on a Hexachord" is pointedly repetitious. Berg skillfully works the meaningful motives into this framework, making them even more pronounced. The invention begins with agitated repetitions of the scene's structural hexachord (ex. 9). These repetitions indicate Wozzeck's manic state both here and with their return at the end of the first section.

Example 9: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Structural hexachord of Act 3, Scene 4, T⁰.

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The “Fate” dyad, which structurally dominated Marie’s murder scene, is still present, but the emphasis has shifted to the B of the B–F tritone, due to the absence of an F in the structural hexachord of the scene’s invention form.

Schmalfeldt suggests, “If the ostinato B $\sharp$ of Act III/Scene 2 represents Wozzeck’s obsession with murdering Marie, the ostinato idea of Act III/Scene 4 now underlines Wozzeck’s obsession that he has in fact committed that crime.”⁴² A notable exception is an emphasized reiteration of the dyad in Wozzeck’s vocal line as he remarks on the eerie atmosphere “All is still and dead.”⁴³ The word “dead” is set on a pianissimo B, and the silence after it is immediately broken by Wozzeck’s cries of “Murder! Murder!” on a stringent high F. This F is the highest note of the vocal line, only exceeded by a high G at the penultimate moment of the scene; Wozzeck’s cries of “Weh!” (Woe/Pain) as he hallucinates that the water he is bathing in is blood.

42. Schmalfeldt, *Berg’s Wozzeck*, 62.

43. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 439. “Alles still und tot.”

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The waltz music also returns to mock Wozzeck as he stumbles deliriously over Marie's corpse, in a form almost identical to its original appearance in act 2, scene 4. This coincides with the repetition of the symbol of red as Marie's sexuality, as Wozzeck asks the corpse if she earned the red necklace like the earrings given her by the Drum Major.⁴⁴ The last thread of Wozzeck's sanity breaks with the *molto espressivo* intrusion of a variant of the painful "Wir Arme Leut" motive in the violins at the peak of Wozzeck's mental crisis (ex. 10). Wozzeck cries out in terror, as he believes he is washing himself with blood: he has lost himself completely.

Example 10: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 3, Scene 4, mm. 278–279.

The musical score for Example 10 from Berg's *Wozzeck*, Act 3, Scene 4, measures 278–279. The score is written for three staves. The top staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "klagend: Weh!" and a melodic line. The middle staff is a piano line with various markings including "molto espr.", "ff", "poco f", and "sfz". The bottom staff is a bass line with markings "hoch" and "tief". The score includes complex rhythmic patterns, triplets, and dynamic markings.

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44. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 443–444. "Hast Dir das rote Halsband verdient, wie die Ohringlein mit Deiner Sünde!"

Conclusion: Wozzeck's Disgrace Cemented

Wozzeck's dignity is finally obliterated by the entrance of the Captain and the Doctor at the close of act 3, scene 4 as he slowly drowns. The Captain, ruffled by the eeriness of the blood-red moon, cowers in fear of the moaning water as the Doctor coldly observes, "Someone is drowning."⁴⁵ The Captain's fear of the bloody scene and the Doctor's clinical disgust deprive Wozzeck of any recognition or respect for his death: there is no element of tame death here. After the Doctor confirms that the victim has fully drowned ("Stiller, now completely still"),⁴⁶ the Captain rushes him away, and for the first time in the whole play, replaces his motto of "Langsam" with "Kommen Sie Schnell!" (Come quickly).⁴⁷ This lack of compassion at Wozzeck's death shows their complete dismissal of his life: as a member of the low class, his death does not concern them.

The only respect for Wozzeck's humanity comes from Berg himself. In "Lecture on Wozzeck" (1929), he reveals that the heartrending orchestral interlude after act 3, scene 4 was the "confession of the author who now steps outside the dramatic action of the stage. Indeed it is, as it were, an appeal to humanity through its representatives, the audience."⁴⁸ Berg explains that the orchestral interlude is woven from "a thematic development of all the important musical ideas related to Wozzeck," the most immediately audible of which is the "Wir Arme Leut" motive in the strings.⁴⁹ Berg felt the

45. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 463. "Da ertrinkt Jemand."

46. Ibid., 464. "Stiller, jetzt ganz still."

47. Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 58. Translation mine.

relation between class and death deeply, for he commented in “A word about ‘Wozzeck:’”

What I do consider my particular accomplishment is this. No one in the audience, no matter how aware he may be of the musical forms contained in the framework of the opera, of the precision and logic with which it has been worked out, no one, from the moment the curtain parts until it closes for the last time, pays any attention to the various fugues, inventions, suites, sonata movements, variations, and passacaglias about which so much has been written. No one gives heed to anything but the vast social implications of the work which by far transcend the personal destiny of Wozzeck. This, I believe, is my achievement.⁵⁰

Berg’s opera showcases a clash between dignified and undignified death. The Captain’s and the Doctor’s refusal to acknowledge Wozzeck’s death robs his life of dignity, proving that class is the ultimate dividing factor between dignified and undignified death. Yet, their reaction to the violent spectacle of Wozzeck’s death is revealing, exposing fear and denial of the reality of death: they prefer to imagine it as ‘tame.’ In act 2, scene 2, the Captain fantasizes about his own death: “Right

48. Berg, “A Lecture on Wozzeck” (1929), quoted in Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 169.

49. *Ibid.*, 169.

50. Alban Berg, “A word about ‘Wozzeck’” (1927), quoted in Jarman, *Wozzeck*, 153.

now I see the mourners with their handkerchiefs at their faces. And they will all be saying: He was a worthy man, a worthy man.”⁵¹ The Captain’s utopian vision of his own dignified death rings false against the rawness of Wozzeck’s undignified death: Wozzeck has no one to remember him, nor notice his death. Despite the calamity of Wozzeck’s death, it is he that is relatable as human, while the Captain’s version of “tame” death is ultimately revealed as fallacy. Berg’s own struggle with the legitimacy of dignified and undignified death through Wozzeck proved extremely resonant in the climate of a continent facing the devastating aftermath of the First World War.

51. Berg, *Wozzeck*, 232–233. “Ich sehe schon die Leute mit den Sacktüchern vor den Augen. Aber sie werden sagen: Er war ein guter Mensch, ein guter Mensch.”

Appendix

Example 7b: Berg, *Wozzeck*, Act 1, Scene 4, mm. 210–214, emphasis added.

210 *ev. mit der Altstimme* Vorhang fällt rasch..... **Verwandlung**

Frei - lich nach Men - schen-blut!

wer zum Teu - fel!

port Men - schen - blut!

Frei - lich nach Men - schen-blut!

Blut!

ff (mit 1. Horn) Da stinkt's nach Men - - -

ff (mit Pos) Men - - - schen-blut!

stürzt hinaus

(mit Flöten) *ff*

Blut

(mit Trp) *ff*

(get) Da

bei geschlossenem Vorhang

schon

ver - hal - lend

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