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## FRIEDRICH'S LULU

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The world premiere of the complete, three-act version of Berg's *Lulu* in Paris in February 1979 generated what, for a 20th-century opera, must have been an unprecedented amount of interest. Performances were broadcast and televised, radio programmes were devoted to discussions of the work and the background to the opera was described in detail in the press. Nor was this interest confined to the specialist periodicals and music programmes, the arts pages of the 'quality' newspapers or those other sections of the media that one might expect to concern themselves with an artistic event of this magnitude. It would be naïve to assume that the enormous amount of publicity that preceded the premiere sprang entirely from an interest in Berg's music. The risqué subject of *Lulu* and its tortuous posthumous history – the composer's death while scoring the last scene of the opera, the intervention of the Nazis when engraving was already under way, the eventual refusal of the composer's widow to allow anyone to complete, or even to see, the score of the final act (and the intriguing and newly revealed possibility that this refusal could, in some way, be linked to her knowledge of her husband's extra-marital affairs), and finally a scholarly dispute that, in one way or another, involved many of the most respected composers and musicians of our time – had all the elements of a perfect press story.

The first night was universally acknowledged as an event of historic significance. *The Observer*, for example, described it as 'a red-letter day in the annals of opera' while *The Guardian* declared it to be 'the musical event of the decade, if not of the post-war years'. Yet, despite their recognition of the importance of the event, the critics were unanimous in their condemnation of the production which the work received at the Paris Opéra. Patrice Chereau's staging, said *The Observer*, was 'the real weakness of the evening', and according to *The Financial Times* it created 'more problems than it solved'. It was, said *The Guardian*, a 'wilful... perverse... and finally defective production', a production which, *The Sunday Telegraph* observed, 'perversely contradicted the stage directions of the libretto'. Arthur Jacobs, in *Opera*, questioned how Pierre Boulez, who conducted the premiere, could have 'tolerated (indeed presumably nominated) a producer prepared to distort the composer's essence'.

Many critics must have hoped that the Covent Garden production of the complete *Lulu*, which received its first performance on February 16, 1981, would obliterate the memory of the disastrous Paris production. They seem not to have been disappointed for, with few exceptions, the critics greeted Götz Friedrich's production with considerable enthusiasm. 'First rate... with many subtle touches of character', 'outstanding' and 'a production that shows itself true to Berg' are typical of the comments with which most critics favoured Friedrich's production. 'For the whole achievement of the production there can be little but gratitude and admiration', said *The Times*, while *The Spectator* headed its review of what it called 'a thoroughly responsible production of a twentieth-century masterpiece' with the title 'Thank You'.

The critics' enthusiasm and gratitude are misplaced. Friedrich's production may, as *The Guardian* said, be 'a smashing piece of theatre' but it is by no means a production that is 'thoroughly responsible' or 'true to Berg'. Indeed, it is a production that displays a shocking ignorance of the most elementary principles of Berg's musico-dramatic organisation.

Throughout Berg's score the entrances and exits – sometimes even the individual movements – of the different characters are precisely indicated. In Act II scene 1, for example, the points at which the Manservant enters, the Schoolboy and the Acrobat move, and Countess Geschwitz appears and disappears are all clearly marked in the score, and each of these movements on the stage is accompanied by a fragment of the music associated with the character concerned. Throughout the opera there is no entrance or exit that is not musically indicated in this way. In Friedrich's production, however, Berg's stage directions count for nothing: Berg's characters appear before or after their musical cues and wander freely around the stage when they should be invisible to the audience. Moreover Friedrich introduces a host of figures (dancers, workers, attendants to the Prince) who have no place in the opera and thus, unlike all

the characters in Berg's score, no musical identity.

To insist that a producer respect Berg's demands about the way in which a scene is staged is not pedantic. The musical structure and the dramatic effect of Berg's score depend on the observation of his stage directions. Berg's directions are not unworkable, 'academic' requirements of a kind that can be ignored by those who regard themselves as 'practical men of the theatre'.

Towards the beginning of Act 2 scene 1 there is a moment when, Dr Schön having departed for the Stock Exchange, the stage is empty. Countess Geschwitz, who has left the stage some time before, re-enters, crosses the stage and hides behind the firescreen, where she remains undetected until much later in the scene when Schön pulls it aside to reveal her whereabouts. The moment at which Geschwitz re-enters is clearly indicated in the score by six bars of the music associated with her, which accompany her movement across the stage. As she disappears behind the firescreen her characteristic music disappears also, and it is not heard again until she reappears from her hiding-place later in the scene. In Friedrich's chaotic production of this scene, however, the Countess is unremittingly active – she appears in the background during the number which precedes Schön's departure and prowls around ceaselessly during that section of the scene when she is supposed to be hidden from view. Indeed, almost the only time when the Countess is not on the move is during those bars when Berg specifically requires her to cross the stage: the music of the six bars which should accompany this movement thus loses its *raison d'être* and is reduced to a meaningless accompaniment to an action performed by another character.

The correlation of music and stage action, to which Berg devoted so much care and which he took great pains to indicate precisely in his score is totally destroyed in Friedrich's production. 'Sometimes I feel that there's almost no connexion between what's happening on the stage and what I'm doing in the pit', remarked Sir Colin Davis in an interview that appeared in *The Times* on the morning of the Covent Garden premiere. In the event it proved to be a comment that had a significance other than the one intended.

Such a cavalier attitude to the composer's requirements inevitably changes the dramatic effect of the whole opera. According to Berg's directions for the second half of Act 3 scene 2, Schigolch goes off to the pub leaving the Countess alone on stage. The Countess sings a short solo number which ends as Jack and Lulu enter, exchange some remarks and cross the stage. Jack and Lulu then go into another room leaving the Countess alone once more. The Countess, kneeling in front of Lulu's portrait, sings her 'Nocturno'; this ends with the words 'I'll go back to Germany; I must study law and fight for women's rights' – words that draw attention to one of the main subjects of the opera. Immediately Lulu, off stage, screams. The Countess rushes to help Lulu, meets Jack in the doorway and is stabbed. Jack washes his hands and leaves. The dying Countess, once more alone on stage, sings her final 'Liebestod'. Thus, in any authentic production of this scene Countess Geschwitz – the only person to help Lulu and the character who, as much as Lulu herself, is the tragic heroine of the opera – is the centre of the audience's attention. Alone on stage for much of the scene, she becomes the emotional and dramatic focus of the last moments of the opera.

In Friedrich's production of this last scene, however, the figure of the Countess (whose presence was so noticeable in the scene in Act 2 when Berg required her to be hidden) is all but lost from view. Instead of being alone in the centre of the stage she is relegated to a corner of the set (and, indeed, nearly disappears into the wings) while, accompanied by the 'Nocturno', Jack attempts to destroy the portrait and then, in the centre of the stage, dances a slow waltz with Lulu. Since the set does not allow for the existence of another room to which Lulu and her clients can retire, Lulu is murdered in full view of the audience. The entire emotional and dramatic balance of the scene is thus destroyed, and Berg's score is again reduced to background music.

One of the few features of the Covent Garden production to which most critics took exception was Friedrich's handling of the Animal Trainer, a figure who, in Berg's Prologue, introduces us to the different beasts in the menagerie but who, in this production, also appears repeatedly, whenever a character dies. The real objection to such a treatment of the figure of the Animal Trainer is not, however, as the critics said, that it is a 'vexing intrusion', or that it makes impossible one of the doublings required by Berg, or even that it is insultingly crude (which it undoubtedly is), but that it destroys

one of the basic ideas underlying the opera. In Wedekind's two *Lulu* plays Alwa is a writer, the author, it is revealed in the second play, of the first. In Berg's opera Alwa is a composer, the composer of the very opera we are watching. 'One could write an interesting opera about this', muses Alwa in Act 1 scene 3; as he does so the orchestra quotes the opening chords of *Wozzeck*, thus specifically identifying the composer Alwa as Alban Berg himself. Consequently, of all the characters in the opera only Alwa is not identified as one of the beasts in the Animal Trainer's menagerie. As the composer of the opera Alwa owns the menagerie and, by rights, Alwa himself should appear as the Animal Trainer and introduce his beasts to us in the Prologue. But Alwa has to sing the opening words of Act 1 scene 1 when the curtain rises immediately after the Prologue. Thus, the Animal Trainer has no real identity of his own but simply acts as Alwa's representative, as is made quite clear by that fact that on the occasions when Alwa's music does appear in the Prologue it always does so in association with the figure of the Animal Trainer. In Friedrich's production the Animal Trainer, by appearing throughout the opera, acquires a separate existence and usurps Alwa's role. The appearances of Alwa's music in the Prologue become meaningless and it no longer matters whether Alwa is a composer, a writer or anything else.

Faced with such basic mistakes it hardly seems worth mentioning those details of the production to which one might otherwise have taken exception. Given Friedrich's apparent lack of understanding of even the most essential features of Berg's opera, such things as the amplified rain sounds which make inaudible every appearance of the barrel organ music in Act 3 scene 2, the absurd handling of Alwa's death at the hands of Lulu's second client, and Schigolch's constant asthmatic wheezing (when the points at which he is supposed to gasp for breath are precisely indicated in the score and are always accompanied by a characteristic 'asthma rhythm') are little more than minor irritants.

Patrice Chereau's Paris production fully deserved the adverse critical reception that it received, but it is difficult to see in what ways the Covent Garden production can be regarded as superior to, or as having taken 'far fewer and far less flagrant liberties' than that of the Paris Opéra. The 'circus' set at Covent Garden is as destructive of Berg's intentions as were the widely criticised sets designed for the Paris performance, while Friedrich has not only adopted some of the more vulgar details of Chereau's production (such as having Lulu astride Schön's back at the end of the letter-writing scene of Act 1 scene 3) but has actually surpassed Chereau in the number of irrelevant extras he has managed to introduce into the opera.

If Friedrich has respected Berg's demands about the way in which the performers playing the roles of Lulu's husbands in the earlier acts are to reappear as her clients in the final scene of the opera (Chereau gave the role of Lulu's first client to a dwarf, a performer who had not appeared before in the production), he has, nonetheless, introduced other, unrequired doublings of his own. Friedrich's use of the same performer for the Wardrobe Mistress (Act 1 scene 3) and the Mother (Act 3 scene 1) and, even more mysterious, his doubling of Schigolch and the Clown in the Prologue are totally meaningless and only serve to undermine the significance of those double and triple roles that Berg stipulated, and which play such an essential part in the musical and dramatic design of the work.

Having waited so long for a complete *Lulu* in Great Britain, we shall now, in all probability, have to wait much longer before we have a chance to see a 'thoroughly responsible production' – one which enables us to appreciate the extraordinarily detailed and perfect fusion of music and action that Berg achieved, and the overwhelming emotional and dramatic effect of this, his final masterpiece.