Tone

Familiar from childhood is the last movement of Haydn's "Farewell" Symphony, that F# minor piece in which one instrument after another ceases to play and departs, until finally only two violins remain to extinguish the light. Above and beyond the work's innocuous motivation and that sphere which repellant familiarity equates with Papa Haydn's sense of humor is the intent to compose farewell, to fashion the vanishing of music and to realize a potential that for those who penetrate its mystery has ever lurked in the very evanescence of musical material. Looking back on the works of Alban Berg, who, if alive today, would be over eighty years old, it seems as though his entire oeuvre was directed toward surpassing Haydn's flash of inspiration, toward reshaping music itself into a metaphor of vanishing, and with music to say adieu to life. Complicity with death, an urbane cordiality toward his own extinction, are characteristics of his work. Only those who understand Alban Berg's music as a product of these characteristics, and not as a matter of historical style, can truly experience it. One of his most mature and perfect compositions, the *Lyric Suite* for string quartet, closes without closing, open-ended, without a final barline and with only a major third motive in the viola, which according to the composer's directive may be repeated *ad libitum* several times until becoming quite inaudible. This profoundly melancholy dissolution of the music, which is granted no affirming finality, sounds as though what in Haydn still seemed harmless play had here taken on the gravity of desolate, open infinity. But it also bears a trace of that hope which music at its Bachian heights once infused into the chorales accompanying mortals through a gateway into darkness so complete as to be capable of kindling the final light. It would be foolish to interpret the inclusion of the chorale "Es ist genug" from the cantata "O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort" in the Violin Concerto as mere poetic design or even as a concession to a formula of reconciliation. Had Berg been content with that, he could have had an easier time of it; he need not have grafted a foreign element on to his finale and left it there so conspicuously as to be more shocking than almost any

dissonance. Rather, with this quotation, whose stylistic recklessness would least of all have escaped Berg's own refined awareness, it is as if he had wearied of all the rounded forms and aesthetic internalization on which he had lavished his life; as if, directly, impatiently, he wanted to make sure to say in the last minute, indeed, to call by name – as a protest against art itself – that nameless thing around which his art was organized. Evanescence, the revocation of one's own existence, is for Berg not the stuff of expression, not music's allegorical theme, but rather the law to which music submits. Symphonic composers like Berg, composers of the large forms, are often credited with knowing how to construct their edifices with the smallest building blocks, as if out of nothing. Certainly there is a rule of proportion for large forms that makes closure and coherence dependent upon the fact that no single element within it asserts an individual identity independent of the whole. In Berg the atomization of the material and the integration granted it are, without question, in mutual accord. But in his case such atomization has an underlying motivation. Those minuscule motives, which drew nitpicking scorn from the Beckmessers during Berg's lifetime, do not really possess the ambition to establish themselves and unite into a massive and powerful whole. In immersing oneself in Berg's music one feels at times as though Berg's voice were speaking in a tone combining gentleness, nihilism, and intimate trust to the point of utter enervation: "Oh well, in the end, it's all really nothing." Under an analytic gaze this music completely dissolves, as if it contained no solid components. It vanishes even while still in its apparently fixed, objectified aggregate state. Had one drawn Berg's attention to this he would, in his own bashful way, have been as pleased as someone caught in a secret kindness. The ramified, organically luxuriant richness of many of his creations, as well as the disciplining skill to bind together the diffuse and divergent – a skill reminiscent of childish, painstakingly executed drawing-board pictures – proves at heart to be simpy a means of emphasizing the idea that all is nothing through the contrast inherent in erecting an elaborate musical structure that springs from nothingness and trickles away into nothingness. If these works expand the process of the "Farewell" Symphony to disproportionate dimensions, they are nonetheless faithful to an Austrian tradition: the note of resignation discovered by Schubert, but also the folk-like quality of Raimund's dialect, with its simultaneously foolish and wise combination of skepticism and catholicity, in *Der Bauer als Millionär* and Valentin in *Der Verschwender*. For all the austere refinement of its compositional technique, Berg's music speaks in dialect. The performance indication "wienerisch" given a theme in the Violin Concerto – anything but a superimposition of folkloric seasoning – admits as much. And yet it is this nonchalantly ingratiating

Viennese theme that then gives rise to the deadly quality that undermines the *Ländler*.

In musical material nothingness has its equivalent in the half-step that extends barely beyond the tone itself, yet establishes no melodic profile of its own – still this side of the plasticity of intervals and therefore ever ready to fall back into amorphousness. Berg, probably alone among the masters of new music, was a chromaticist through and through; at their core most of his themes can be reduced to half-steps, and that is why these themes never acquire the firm, set character befitting traditional symphonic music. Of course Berg's music, with its eminent instinct for continuity and articulation, does not exhaust itself in a monotony of chromaticism, as does for instance Reger's. Rather, Berg's compositional niveau proves itself – on a level so high that it is scarcely even perceived today – precisely in that extremely deliberate syntactical organization, which extends from the movement as a whole to the proper position of every single note, omitting nothing. This music is beautiful in the sense of the Latin concept *formosus*, the concept of the richness of forms. Its formal wealth imbues it with eloquence and with an inherent similarity to language. But Berg possesses a special technique for taking defined thematic shapes and, in the course of developing them, calling them back to nothingness. Wagner, who was the first to compose essentially chromatically, defined composition as the art of transition. Already with him chromaticism, a means for creating an imperceptible flow of events, served – at least in *Tristan* – to turn music altogether into transition, transformation, seamless self-transcendence. From that Berg developed a stylistic manner he pursued almost to the point of idiosyncrasy. He fused the art of thematic manipulation, of strict motivic economy, which he had acquired under Schoenberg's tutelage, with the principle of continuous transition. His music cultivates a favorite technique, probably dating back to the time of his studies: from each theme a remnant [*ein Rest*] is retained, ever smaller, until finally only a vanishingly small vestige remains; not only does the theme establish its own insubstantiality, but the formal interrelationships between successive sections are woven together with infinitesimal care. Berg's music, in all the lush opulence of its variety, cannot support naked contrast, the unmediated juxtaposition of opposites – as if the assertion of musical opposites might grant individual elements an existence incompatible with the metaphysical unpretentiousness, the fragile *ductus*, of all Bergian musical design. One can illustrate this Bergian manner – manner in the larger sense of Mannerism – with the children's game in which the word "Kapuziner" is disassembled and put back together again:

Kapuziner – Apuziner – Puziner – Uziner – Ziner – Iner – Ner – Er – R; R – Er – Ner – Iner – Ziner – Uziner – Puziner – Apuziner – Kapuziner. That is how he composed, that is how all of his music plays in a Capuchin tomb of whimsy, and his development was essentially a development toward the spiritualization of that manner. Even in his late works – in which, not uninfluenced by twelve-tone technique, sharp thematic contours are occasionally sought, and in which the dramatist's penchant for characterization sometimes affects the absolute character of his music – even there the themes retain a suspended, indecisive quality, ever recalling the interval of a second through the use of minimal variation and rhythmic transformation. The wistful grace of the *Ländler* theme in the two clarinets, with which the Allegro of the Violin Concerto opens, seems to say that it, too, is not really a theme at all, that it has no intention of persevering, no wish to lay claim to itself.

Berg's affinity for Wagner is delineated by all of that, by the technique no less than the tone created by that technique. In contrast to others of his generation Berg took no part, either in aesthetic attitude or in technical procedure, in the opposition to Wagner. That provoked resistance. But Schoenberg's conviction that the idea of a piece of music counts for more than its style certainly applies to Berg. Since then the impotence of mere aesthetic ideology has become abundantly apparent. The question of quality has become far more urgent than that of means, means that are often enough adopted ready-made and which in and of themselves no longer attest either to courage or to strength. Music that is densely packed and organized down to the last sixteenth note has greater significance and proves more modern than music that flows along without hesitation because it is no longer even aware of the tensions inherent in its own material. Berg did not shrink from leading-tone effects or occasional triads, but he did disdain the kind of stylistic purity whose consistency comes at the price of clatter and impoverished language. His technique absorbed not only the Wagnerian legacy, but other elements, particularly the filigree texture common to the First Viennese School, as well as Debussy and much from German Expressionism. Most important, however, is that even in Berg the function of the Wagnerian component is altered through exaggerated, highly disturbing specialization. He did not illustrate the metaphysics of death; Schopenhauer played no role in the spiritual inventory of his maturity. Rather, the urge to vanish seizes music itself, which relinquishes claim to an independent world of ideas. Despite a completely different technical approach, Berg is in this respect related to his friend Webern, whose miniatures are just as intent upon falling silent as the large Bergian forms are upon self-negation.

Tone

Insofar as one still has an ear for such categories, what distinguishes Berg from Wagner is most apparent in precisely that Bergian tone (tone, incidentally, was Berg's favorite concept, one upon which he repeatedly based his musical judgments), a tone untouched by what from the outset characterizes Wagner's tone: self-glorification. Though traces of *Tristan* can always be detected in Berg, those of *Die Meistersinger* cannot. Not only does Berg's music never actually affirm themes; it absolutely never affirms itself. Any kind of insistence is foreign to it. With Berg, energy and activity were invested into the formative process; the results, however, have a passive, acquiescent, elusive quality. Berg's music never preens at its own reflection, but is, rather, characterized by the *gestus* of largesse, a *gestus* which was also peculiar to Berg's person and which rarely attained the kind of Wagnerian ecstasy that celebrates the moment of self-extinction as that of self-fulfillment. For Wagner the unconscious always represented the highest joy [*Höchste Lust*], whereas Berg's music renounces itself and the person speaking through it, in recognition of its inherent vanity, and perhaps also in the unacknowledged hope that only that which does not keep a grip on itself will not be lost. If one were to liken Berg to any previous composer, one would have to compare him with Schumann rather than Wagner. The way the end of the C major Fantasy opens into infinity, yet without transfiguring itself to the point of redemption, indeed, even without reference to itself: that anticipates the innermost essence of Berg's tone. By virtue of such affinity, however, Berg assumes a position in extreme antithesis to that which musical tradition calls healthy, to the will to live, to the affirmative, to the repeated glorification of that which *is*. This concept of health, inherently as ineradicable a part of prevailing musical criteria as it is of Philistinism, is in league with conformism; health is allied with what in life is stronger, with the victors. Berg abstained from such assent, as had the mature Schubert before him, as had Schumann, and perhaps also Mahler, whose music came down on the side of the deserter. While it may be true that, on the surface, his patiently and lovingly polished music has fewer sharp edges for the listener than has Schoenberg's, it is radical and shocking in its partiality for the weaker, the defeated: the figure of Berg's humanity. No music of our time was as humane as his; that distances it from humankind.

This identification with the defeated, with those who must carry society's burden, determined the selection of the texts for Berg's principal works, the two great operas. In the same spirit in which Karl Kraus invoked the bygone concept of humanity against the reigning inhumanity to which language had fallen victim, Berg seized upon Büchner's drama of the tortured paranoid soldier Wozzeck, who avenges the injustices done him

by giving vent to his unrestrained nature and murdering his mistress; he seized upon Wedekind's circus tragedy of the irresistibly beautiful no-man's child Lulu, against whose unconscious omnipotence male society plots its revenge. Understandably, there is admiraton for *Wozzeck*'s scenic effectiveness, the product of the work's extremely taut construction, which, as it were, never allows the dramaturgic argument a moment's latitude. But such effectiveness would be unthinkable if Berg's constructive, musico-dramatic power were not joined with a spirit equating the human condition with suffering, a spirit that generally too easily falls victim to constructive considerations. This element in *Wozzeck* has acute contemporary relevance, for today music's right to exist hinges upon its success in giving definition to new characters [*Charaktere*]. A march penetrates into Marie's room, a musical diversion with an almost Mahlerian trio; but the strident march is askew, steeped in the mixed colors of a dream-like, alienated inwardness, as if perceived through the sightless panes of a tenement window. Thus the vulgar, blaring stage music is transformed into an archetype of the might wielded by military music over those whom it sweeps into a collective consciousness. Or, as in the symphonic centerpiece of the second act, there is a broadly drawn scherzo, tavern music with *Ländler* and waltzes, but of a profound, groping melancholy. The power of empathy is more all-embracing in *Wozzeck* than perhaps ever before experienced in opera: as if, in the place usurped in Wagner by the musical glorification of dramatic figures, there now remained nothing but compassion for them. Berg's intrinsic qualities can scarcely be better demonstrated than by comparing this tavern scene with Stravinsky, who comes to mind in the clouding and distortion of archaic forms of folk music. Yet in Berg there is no chillingly caustic wit, nothing malicious; the very fact that the merriment of such dances is false, that those caught up in it are cheated of it, that is what creates the deadly earnestness, creates, too, a multiplicity of layers transforming everything external into a metaphor for what is within, yet without forgetting how very much the mysterious, twisted inner world of those who are alienated from one another is itself simply the mark of their accursed outward existence. That is followed by a chorus of sleeping soldiers. Snores and groans are composed to show that for the unfree even sleep is warped; mutely a picture materializes of what enforced collectivization inflicts upon those incarcerated together in a barracks. And how effective, when, after the curtain rises silently upon the third act, Marie's weakly flickering, despairing yet consoling candle, and the wretchedly light, uneasy sleep of her child become music. *Wozzeck*: not the virtuoso application of the latest achievements to the long since dubious genre of grand opera, but rather the first paradigm of a music of genuine humanism.

Tone

In *Lulu* the self – from whose point of view events are seen, from whose perspective the music is heard – steps visibly onto the stage; Berg intimates as much with one of those quotations he loved to smuggle in, the way a medieval master included his self-portrait as a minor figure in a religious painting. Truly a corporeal-incorporeal suitor: united in Alwa's rondo themes is the exuberance of Schumannesque youth and Baudelairian fascination with fatal beauty. What became known as the first movement of the *Lulu Suite*, the enraptured praise of the loved one, glows in an ecstasy words cannot equal; as if the music wanted to become one of those fairy-tale gowns Wedekind envisaged for Lulu. This music, as a radiant, multi-hued jewel for the beloved body, seeks to restore human dignity to a banished, heretical yearning. Every bar of music intends salvation for the banished, for the symbol of sexual being, for a soul that in the hereafter rubs the sleep from its eyes, to quote from the most irresistible bars of the opera. In using and setting these words Berg paid his respects to the sixty-year-old Kraus, author of *Sittlichkeit und Kriminalität*. Berg's *Lulu* music thanks him in the name of that utopia which at heart motivates Kraus's critique of the bourgeois taboos that degrade love. Berg's music strikes a nerve where civilized man does not joke, and precisely this point becomes for him a refuge of the humane.

In this hymnic circus opera everything is sunnier, more supple, more elastic than in the earlier works: the *clair obscur* of Berg's orchestra is refined to a slender transparency reminiscent of Impressionism, only to surpass Impressionism's magic through greater sobriety and thus transport it into the spiritual. Seldom, to paraphrase Wagner, has the orchestra, has color, become so much part of the action as in *Lulu*; joyously the work abandons itself to the sensuous present it celebrates; once again scene and spirit are reconciled. The orchestration remained uncompleted. With Berg's death this most joyful creation succumbed to the worst of fates. Those who understand anything about theater must not deceive themselves into thinking that the fragmentary *Lulu* can only be resurrected intermittently, that it cannot be won for the repertoire, which needs this work if opera remains the least bit interested in demonstrating its right to exist as an institution. It is urgently to be hoped that the remaining portions of the third act will at last be orchestrated, if only to prevent the ambition and industry of belated defenders of the Grail from usurping a job for which they are not qualified.

To those given to categorizing, particularly in light of the euphoniousness of *Lulu* and the simplicity of the Violin Concerto, Berg could be seen as a moderate among the moderns, especially in the Schoenberg School, to which he remained absolutely loyal. He never completely severed ties with

traditional means of tonality; his last piece, that very Violin Concerto, closes clearly in B♭ major with an added sixth. To be sure, Berg created some incredibly complicated structures very difficult to penetrate. But in general his art of transition [*Übergang*], mediation in a double sense, softens the shock. And thus, to his chagrin, audiences initially proved much more kindly disposed toward him than toward Schoenberg or Webern. That is why from the outset the specialists delighted in relegating him to the nineteenth century and in exempting their bright-eyed, bushy-tailed contemporaries from the Bergian melancholy, a melancholy which in the meantime has been only too fully justified by reality. Far from denying that element of temporal disjunction in his works, Berg himself highlighted it by orchestrating and publishing the romantic Seven Early Songs. But the tension between the familiar idiom and the unfamiliar, the unknown, was eminently fruitful: it was what called forth Berg's individual, recklessly thoughtful tone. Among the exponents of new music he was the one who least suppressed his aesthetic childhood, the *Golden Book of Music*. He ridiculed the cheap objectivity [*Sachlichkeit*] based on such suppression. He owes his concretion und humane breadth to tolerance for what has been, which he allows to shine through, not literally but recurrently in dream and involuntary memory. Until the very end he drew upon that inheritance and at the same time carried its burden, one that bowed his tall frame. It left its unmistakable physiognomic features on his work. Berg's impulse toward self-effacement, toward self-obliteration is, at its very core, one with the impulse toward extricating himself from mere life through a process of illumination and awakening; and the return of what has been, passive acceptance of the inescapable, contributes no less to that than did an ongoing spiritualization. Despairingly, his music accepted separation from the bourgeois rather than holding out false hopes of a state beyond the bourgeois, which to this day exists no more than does an alternative society. Alban Berg offered himself to the past as a sacrifice to the future. That is the source of the eternity within his present, the commencement of the endlessly mediated movement he invoked again and again.

Reminiscence

Trying to find words of remembrance for Berg is paralyzed by the fact that he himself had anticipated the exercise with macabre irony. When I was studying with him he occasionally amused himself during walks we took together around Schönbrunn by imagining the obituaries Viennese newspapers would one day have in store for him. He was convinced that one of them would confuse him with a Jewish folk humorist, by the name, I think, of Armin Berg; in another, a critic we knew all too well – one whose threat to write a book had to be forestalled by the 1937 volume published by Reich, Krenek, and me – would caw his *panegyricus* about the "Bard of *Wozzeck*": "As before him our Schubert, our Bruckner, our poor unforgettable Hugo Wolf, so now he, too, has died of hunger in his supremely beloved, unappreciative native city, which nonetheless carries him deep in her heart. Yet another link in the unending chain of immortals ..." The impossibility of banishing the nightmarish visions of this feverishly wakeful dreamer – visions that have meanwhile been far surpassed by the robust stupidity of the survivors who honor and label him – compels one to confront and examine them: not with reference to the world which they so accurately reflect, but with regard to the self concealed within them. Desperate humor was the satrap of death in a life that had grown around death as around its core. If anything, this desperate humor grew more intense. During the time of the Third Reich, when he buried himself in his house on the Wörthersee so as to be able to work undisturbed on *Lulu*, he called the place where he wanted to concentrate his "concentration camp." This remark was not cynical, it was morbid. Berg, who had no illusions as to what the National Socialists were all about, imagined how easily it could happen to him. Willi Reich tells how, while being taken to Rudolf Hospital during his last illness, he cracked jokes about its already being half way to the Central Cemetery; in the same context one should mention the story told about the unsophisticated Viennese blood donor when Berg's condition was already critical: "Let's just hope I don't turn into an operetta composer." This highly idiosyncratic quality is at the same

time eminently Austrian. Reading the narrative of Schubert's last days in Otto Erich Deutsch's superb documentation, one cannot escape the impression that precisely the bleak senselessness, the combination of sublime acquiescence and irresponsible indolence of that end was repeated in Berg's case, as if in his presence, that of the avant-gardist, the past had been suddenly resurrected. That is in no way out of keeping with his music. The identity of the city, her blessed, cursed incorrigibility, may have been of greater significance for the destiny of those two musicians than the hundred years separating them; one of the paradoxical conditons of Berg's modernity is that not so very much had changed.

He did not hesitate to apply irony to his own assessment of himself or a certain skepticism, which, in the form of patient self-criticism, became so extremely fruitful in his creative work. He once laughingly told me: "While composing I always feel like Beethoven, only afterwards do I realize that I am at best Bizet." In his distrust even of his own things one sensed a quality of self-alienation. It was with the expression of a sleepwalker laboriously awakening that Berg looked up and bestirred himself with gestures of a primeval majesty. After the Berlin premiere of *Wozzeck* and the dinner at Töpfer's where he was fêted and, like an embarrassed adolescent, scarcely able to respond, I was with him until late into the night, literally consoling him over his success. That a work conceived like Wozzeck's apparitions in the field, a work satisfying Berg's own standards, could please a first-night audience, was incomprehensible to him and struck him as an argument against the opera. That is how he always reacted. His affability never for a moment made compromises with the established order; quite without warning the recluse could explode all deceptive accord. At the Vienna performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony under Anton Webern the two of us were almost thrown out for rowdiness. Berg was so carried away with enthusiasm for the music and its interpretation that he began to talk loudly about both, as if the performance were for us alone. It was not only in elevated moments that he showed this indifference toward what was happening around him. It was an immutable principle governing his life. Often I thought that nothing external, even things of consequence to him, could ever affect him to the core. Such inaccessibility proved to be a strength in his music. Equally at home with Strindberg and the orchestra of *Die glückliche Hand*, he was conscious even in the most intimate relationships of the ever present possibility of hatred and betrayal; that may not have been the least of his reasons for wanting to live permanently *in absentia*. On the other hand, he could enter cordially and gratefully into casual acquaintances; could praise provincial intellectual efforts, amazed that they were not altogether bad. He desired much, hoped