Adorno's study of Alban Berg is a unique document. Itself now a part of music history, it is a personal account, by a pre-eminent philosopher and aesthetician, of the life and musical works of his mentor, friend, and composition teacher.

Beyond the analyses of individual pieces, the book explores the historical and cultural significance of Berg's music and its relationship to that of other nineteenth- and twentieth-century composers and to the larger issues of contemporary life.

Alban Berg

Alban Berg a few weeks before his death

Alban Berg

Master of the smallest link

THEODOR W. ADORNO

Translated with introduction and annotation by

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Translators' introduction

Theodor Adorno's study of Alban Berg is not a central work of his music-aesthetic oeuvre. It has neither the breadth of his Mahler and Wagner monographs, nor the didactic focus of his *Philosophy of Modern Music* and *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*. It is, instead, a personal document, consisting of reminiscences about a mentor who became a friend, and analyses of works with which the author had lived a lifetime. And yet, because this relationship was of such crucial importance to Adorno, these works so decisive in shaping his aesthetic precepts, *Alban Berg*, its modest scope notwithstanding, provides a key to understanding the philosopher and his thought – as well as offering a unique perspective on one of this century's most representative creative artists.

In many ways, *Alban Berg: Der Meister des kleinsten Übergangs*, published near the end of its author's life, is a reflection upon and testimonial to a fondly remembered starting point. For Adorno (1903–1969) that starting point was an encounter with the world of the so-called Second Viennese School that had crystallized around the teaching, music, and personality of Arnold Schoenberg. In a post-war era surfeited with "novelty," the works of Schoenberg seemed genuinely "new," an eruptive creative presence marking a crossroad one could ignore only at the peril of losing one's way into the future. Yet it was not Schoenberg with whom Adorno chose to study, but his student Alban Berg, a composer who struck Adorno as a synthesis between Schoenberg and Mahler, between the bracing "air of another planet" and the bittersweet ache of memory.

Adorno's fascination with Berg and with the potency of that intersection of sensibilities is paralleled by his fascination with the city with which Schoenberg, Mahler, and Berg were so intimately associated: Vienna. For many young Germans of the 1920s, the restless energy of the Weimar Republic served to suppress any lingering nostalgia for or identification with the discredited Wilhelmine era. Memory – from the snug recollections of childhood to the conscious cultivation of cultural inheritance – was clouded by emotions ranging from embarrassment and guilt to disgust.

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Post-war Vienna was a world apart. Divested of its polyglot empire, its glory grown musty, this metropolis of just under two million was a helpless giant mired in the past. But it was a giant blessed with an ironic awareness of its despair. In that ironic awareness of contradictions – anticipated in the music of Mahler and ever present in the works of Berg – Adorno found a metaphor for the piquancy and ambivalence of memory, a signifier for one of the larger issues with which he wrestled his life long. Is it any wonder, then, that Adorno's personal allegiance went not to Schoenberg, who thrice left Vienna for Berlin, but to Alban Berg, who thrice declined the opportunity?

Adorno first met Berg in June 1924, during a festival of new music in Frankfurt-am-Main, at which the composer's *Wozzeck* excerpts were given their premiere. At that time the twenty-one-year-old Adorno, active as a music critic and completing a Ph.D. in philosophy, was undecided between academia and a career in music. Thanks to comfortable family circumstances the decision was not pressing, and Adorno was able to pursue composition and piano studies on the side.[1] In his first letter to Berg in February 1925, Adorno, who had been studying theory and composition with the Frankfurt composer Bernhard Sekles since 1919, explained that he had recently encountered "specific technical problems" that he wanted to address under Berg's tutelage. With Berg's encouragement, Adorno moved to Vienna in March of that year, for what were to be several months of private study.

The correspondence between Adorno and Berg begins in earnest during Berg's 1925 summer vacation, which he spent in the country; Adorno remained in Vienna for a few weeks before embarking on his own vacation and in the fall returning to Frankfurt. From Adorno's letters, which seem forcedly familiar in tone, it is apparent that the young German had readily acclimated himself to Vienna's cozy world of café rendezvous, gossip, and intrigue. He embraces with alacrity the local household gods Peter Altenberg and Karl Kraus, and scatters reverential allusions to such perennial favorites of the Schoenberg circle as Strindberg and Wedekind. In curious counterpoint with these vestiges of Vienna's pre-war intellectual ambience are Adorno's up-to-the-minute situation reports on the pitched music-aesthetic campaigns of the post-war era, many of which were directed from the offices of Vienna's own new-music publisher, Universal Edition.

1 Adorno was the only child of the successful Frankfurt-am-Main wine merchant, Oskar Wiesengrund, a German Jew converted to Protestantism, and his Catholic wife, the singer Maria Cavelli-Adorno della Piana, the daughter of a German singer and a French-Corsican military officer of aristocratic lineage.

Translators' introduction

Founded in 1901, Universal Edition had become a major force in new music when its director, Emil Hertzka, offered exclusive contracts to Gustav Mahler, Franz Schreker, and Arnold Schoenberg in 1909. A decade later, with dozens of important composers under contract, Universal launched a prestigious journal, *Musikblätter des Anbruch* (later known simply as *Anbruch*), to publicize and propagate its catalogue of works. Adorno had been in Vienna scarcely three months when the director of Universal's opera division, Hans Heinsheimer, suggested he assume the editorship of *Anbruch*. Hertzka rejected the idea, but three years later the offer was renewed and, without leaving Frankfurt, Adorno served as an associate editor of *Anbruch* from 1928 to 1931.

Adorno had been writing about music since 1921, first in a Frankfurt literary review, then, beginning in 1923, as a Frankfurt correspondent for the arch-conservative Leipzig *Zeitschrift für Musik*, and, as of 1925, for the mainstream Berlin journal *Die Musik*. While the subject matter of his music criticism ranged from concert reviews to publication notices, its focus was contemporary music. From the outset he had demonstrated a particular empathy with the works of Schoenberg and his circle, and it is not surprising that close contact with members of that circle after 1925 should affect the tone and content of his writing.

One of the first products of that closer association was an *Anbruch* essay Adorno wrote for the 1925 Berlin premiere of Berg's *Wozzeck*.[2] It is an article that already articulates key elements of Adorno's Berg interpretation, including emphasis on the composer's proclivity toward "particle-like motivic material" and "symphonic extensivity" [*Extensität*], his all-consuming preoccupation with continual transformation, his critical embrace of the past, and the tension between subjective expression and objective formal control that positions Berg's music between that of Mahler and Schoenberg. What is more, the 1925 *Wozzeck* essay marked a turning point in the evolution of Adorno's writing style. In a 23 November 1925 letter to Berg, he describes his satisfaction with the essay, in which the logic of his argument does not pursue a string of surface associations but reflects through an intellectual continuum the simultaneity and factual parity of Berg's compositional intentions. Citing Berg's own dictum that for musical analysis to be adequate to its object it must employ a "compositional mode of expression,"[3] Adorno indicates that the very nature of his language and

2 "Alban Berg. Zur Uraufführung des *Wozzeck*," *Anbruch* VII/10 (December 1925), 531–537.

3 "Warum ist Schönbergs Musik so schwer verständlich," *Anbruch* VI/8 (August/September 1924), 329–341.

argument is inspired by the expressive characteristics and inner logic of musical composition. More specifically, Adorno notes a "curious intersection" between his intellectual development and Berg's compositional procedure, confiding that it is his secret desire to develop a prose equivalent to the manner in which Berg had composed his Op. 3 String Quartet. Adorno returned often to this "intersection" of verbal and musical syntax, as in a 16 January 1931 letter to Berg, in which he describes his recently completed Kierkegaard study (*Kierkegaard: Konstruktion des Ästhetischen*) as a work deeply indebted to "our" music. With obvious relish he adds that his new book was the object of many of the same criticisms levelled at the music of the Schoenberg circle, including disjointedness, unintelligibility, and overintellectualism.

Unfortunately, Adorno's eagerness to associate his paratactic prose style with the "musical prose" of the Schoenberg circle was not always considered flattering by the objects of the comparison. Both Schoenberg and Webern expressed dismay at the convolutions of Adorno's thought, and even Berg was bemused by his student's labyrinthine locutions. Characteristic is the anecdote told by Willi Reich about an Adorno lecture he and Berg listened to on the radio, during which the transmission was briefly interrupted. "What a shame we missed that passage," Berg observed, "it was no doubt the only straightforward sentence in the entire talk."[4]

Adorno maintained – with typically Schoenbergian aplomb – that the difficulty of his style reflected the complexity of intellectual material whose guiding principle was not ingratiating effect, but truth. Yet, even given the subtleties and layered intricacies of Adorno's thought, there is an unmistakable element of willful obfuscation in his sometimes rebarbative style. His delight in creative wordplay, arcane allusions, and logical elisions reflects not only the whimsy of an agile mind, but a decided ambivalence toward his readers. This is confirmed by a letter to Berg of 24 October 1926, in which he offers to write an introductory essay for the forthcoming production of *Wozzeck* in the Soviet Union. Anticipating Berg's qualms, he assures him that for proletarian readers he is capable of writing in a clear and straightforward style, something he found impossible to do for the bourgeoisie.

Adorno was a skilled composer and sophisticated analyst, but he never made his living as a musician, and, for all his intimate knowledge of the craft of composition, he remained an observer, more critical receptor than

4 Rosemary Hilmar Moravec recounts this incident, as told to her by Willi Reich, in her article, "Dr. Adorno war nur ein Schüler von Alban Berg," *Adorno in seinen musikalischen Schriften*, Musik im Diskurs, Volume II (Regensburg: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1987), 107–137.

active participant. Something of that same "outsider" quality also characterized his relationship with the Schoenberg circle. When he arrived in Vienna in 1925 he was disappointed to find that circle not as cohesive as he had imagined, and, despite his inclination to speak about "our" music, his compositions received scant attention from his *compagnons d'armes*. And yet this oddly matched relationship between a precocious German philosopher and a loosely knit clique of Austrian musical revolutionaries a generation his senior was truly symbiotic. Beyond influencing the *style* of his writing, Adorno's compositional training and personal acquaintance with Berg, Webern, Schoenberg, and other major artistic personalities, gave the *content* of that writing an urgency and immediacy unmatched in the works of any other twentieth-century aesthetic philosopher. As a self-styled intellectual publicist for the "Second Viennese School," Adorno could speak with authority on technical matters, while at the same time abstracting from them philosophical insights which secured for this music a place of privilege for the intellectual elite of the inter- and post-war years.

It would be a gross oversimplification to reduce Adorno to a mere mouthpiece for Schoenberg and his circle, for the same technical expertise that afforded him insight into their works provided him with the criteria necessary for an independent aesthetic judgment. Adorno's misgivings about the emotional sterility of Schoenberg's early twelve-tone music, for instance, are documented in his letters and many of his later writings, including the present study. Specifically, as he wrote in a letter to Berg of 19 August 1926, Adorno was concerned that the twelve-tone technique, in which the row assures the derivation of each successive note, might prematurely abort the process of "imaginative hearing" and thereby eliminate the arbitrary, even inconsequent, decisions that are an essential element of the artist's freedom – the same freedom that Adorno reserved for himself in his writing. It is this freedom that Adorno finds preserved by Berg in such instances as the aesthetically problematic integration of a Carinthian folk song into his Violin Concerto or the clearly tonal references throughout his oeuvre. For Adorno, Berg's loyalty to the aesthetic sovereignty of "free atonality," coupled with his willingness to submit to the constraints of the twelve-tone technique, makes him a paradigm for the twentieth-century composer.

Of course Adorno's devotion to Berg went far beyond aesthetic affinity to a profound personal loyalty. He was proud that his teacher solicited his advice, going so far as to reproduce in his Berg book a facsimile of a letter in which the composer had asked his opinion about the relative merits of Wedekind's Lulu plays and Hauptmann's *Und Pippa tanzt* as subjects for

his second opera. Conversely, in 1928, he seems genuinely aggrieved when it appeared that Paul von Klenau and not he had convinced Berg to publish the Seven Early Songs. (Adorno's enthusiasm for these works – in those years he ranked them with Schoenberg's Op. 6 songs – is curious in light of the apologetic tone he adopts in the present study.)

It may well be that Adorno overstates the closeness of his friendship to Berg. While he apparently served as a kind of courier during Berg's affair with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, he was not the only student to abet Berg in his extra-marital dalliances.[5] Berg never offered Adorno the familiar "Du," and after 1925 the relationship was increasingly relegated to correspondence and occasional meetings, both of which became sporadic in the last years of Berg's life. There can be no doubt, however, of Berg's enormous respect for Adorno's accomplishments, both as a theoretician and composer. In a 1926 letter Berg wrote to his student:

> I have become absolutely convinced that you are qualified to achieve the *highest* by way of profound insight into music (in all its as yet unexplored facets, be they philosophical, art historical, theoretical, social, historical, etc., etc. in nature) and will do so through major philosophical works. Whether in the process your musical works (I mean your compositions), upon which I have set such high hopes, are neglected, is a fear I always have when I think of you. It is clear: being that you are driven toward all or nothing (thank God!), you will one day have to choose Kant *or* Beethoven.[6]

Adorno was deeply shaken by Berg's untimely death in 1935. According to a letter to Helene Berg of 16 April 1936, his principal consolation lay in being able to propagate Berg's works through his writing, an activity that included the chapters contributed to Willi Reich's 1937 Berg biography, which form the basis for the present study. The authority of these chapters rests with the fact that Adorno had consulted closely with Berg on virtually all of his analytical articles; what he wrote after the composer's death clearly builds upon this foundation. As a result, the essays in the present study, though written over a span of thirty years, can be said to represent a sanctioned, if not exclusive, interpretation of the composer's works.

5 It is a tribute to Adorno's discretion that he never publicly betrayed the secret of Berg's affair with Hanna Fuchs-Robettin – save for the veiled allusions in his discussion of the *Lyric Suite*. His tactlessness, on the other hand, in rationalizing in a 1936 letter to Helene Berg both the affair and his role as intermediary displays a degree of insensitivity that amply explains her later reserve toward him. While she helped underwrite the publication of his Berg book, she declined to provide him with a preface he had requested and generously offered to outline for her.

6 Quoted in the afterword to *Theodor W. Adorno Gesammelte Schriften 19*/Musikalische Schriften, Volume VI, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1984), 635.

Translators' introduction

In his chapter "Analysis and Berg," Adorno gives an elegant and compelling apologia of the purposes and goals of musical analysis. The hallmark of Adorno's own analyses is his uncanny ability to formulate through metaphor and analogy the essence of a work's inner dynamic. Moreover, he goes beyond the descriptive generalities of thematic analysis with detailed illustration of compositional process. And yet, as Diether de la Motte has noted, there is occasionally a discrepancy between Adorno's brilliant grasp of the whole – be it a single opus or an entire oeuvre – and his sometimes uninspired, even inaccurate discussions of specific musical details.[7] De la Motte surmises that Adorno's analyses were primarily inspired by what he *heard* and not by careful study of the score, which he seems to have found tedious. This seems plausible, for it would be fitting that as an analyst Adorno placed the same faith in "imaginative hearing" that he found so essential for the composer. As de la Motte concludes:

> Perhaps he who can hear music in this way and comes thus to love it, he who understands music in this way and can call it by name but is a failure with the score, represents a disappearing type of dilettante who once made such essential contributions to musical culture and whose disappearance we should bitterly lament. The dilettante, who precisely because of his passionate love also always invests the same engagement in passionate hate.

In its passion, in the immediacy of its author's identification with his subject, Adorno's Berg study is unlike anything else he ever wrote on music. That same passion and identification account for the limitations of the book, which can serve neither as a factual biography, nor as an introductory guide to Berg's works. It is not an objective music historical account because it *is* music history, echoing both in Adorno's fierce loyalties as well as in his disdain for figures such as Stravinsky and Hindemith and denunciations of "New Objectivity" and "Neoclassicism" battles that once raged across the landscape of contemporary music. Ironically, it was his dissatisfaction with the burgeoning literature on the Second Viennese School, and in particular the Berg biography of Hans Ferdinand Redlich,[8] that galvanized Adorno into publishing his own Berg monograph. Thus, the present volume was intended from the outset as a corrective, as a means of resisting the tendency to allow Alban Berg to slip into history, of keeping memory vital.

7 Diether de la Motte, "Adornos musikalische Analysen," *Adorno und die Musik*, ed. Otto Kolleritsch (Graz: Universal Edition, 1979), 52–63.
8 Hans Ferdinand Redlich, *Alban Berg: Versuch einer Würdigung* (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1957).

A note on the translation

Translating Adorno is a notoriously daunting task. His use of language is brilliant and idiosyncratic, drawing liberally upon a knowledge of French, English, Latin, and Greek to infuse each word with radical meaning. His argumentation is a curious mixture of close reasoning and intuitive insight, critical perspicacity and capricious self-indulgence. At times one wishes he had had the services of a ruthless editor, and, as translator, one is tempted to intervene in ways ranging from breaking up sentences and paragraphs to searching for a more straightforward vocabulary. On the whole, we have resisted the temptation, in part so as not to misrepresent the *difficulty* of Adorno's prose – which he intended – and in part because his Berg study, though containing its fair share of puzzles, is not among his most recondite books. Indeed, its warm personal tone lends it an almost lyrical quality, especially in the passages of reminiscence.

Adorno is generally quite precise in his terminology. Therefore, context permitting, we have tried to be consistent in our translation of key terms, such as *Modell* (paradigm), *Rest* (remnant), *retten* (to salvage), and *Vermittlung* (mediation). Translating such key words is not always easy, and one of the most vexing terms appears in the very title of the book, *Meister des kleinsten Übergangs*. While one might normally translate *Übergang* as "transition", we felt that this word, with its emphasis on process, missed the essentially neutral quality of what Adorno sees as the Bergian *Übergang*, which need be no more than a single tone. Hence, we have chosen "link," which can refer backward or forward and yet remain a discrete entity. Another example is *Charakter*, which, following Schoenberg, Adorno uses to denote a distinctive musical idea, whether rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, timbral, or a combination thereof. As *Charakter* derives its extended meaning from *Charakterstück*, or *character piece*, we felt it reasonable to expect English readers to accept the same extension of meaning with "character." Realizing that no translation can give all shadings of meaning, the German original of these and other key terms appear in square brackets at their first appearance in the body of the text.

A note on the translation

Adorno did not intend access to his books to be easy and in consequence disliked indices, which offer the promise of particulate bits of available information. Berg, on the other hand, to paraphrase Adorno, was well-disposed toward indexing (having indulged his own penchant for pedantry by preparing one for Schoenberg's 1911 *Harmonielehre*) and it is in deference to him – as well as to the importance of Adorno's study as an historical source – that we have readily ignored Adorno's misgivings. Furthermore, we have used the index to give brief identification of individuals mentioned in the text, though we have refrained from adding explanatory footnotes. George Perle once recalled his first meeting with Adorno, during which the philosopher played for him on the piano without, it seemed, once taking his foot off the damper pedal. The effect of reading Adorno's prose is not dissimilar. Adorno seldom gives exact dates, is often vague about factual matters, and coy about his references and allusions. While such matters warrant clarification, a preoccupation with detail can interrupt the flow of his prose and blur the overall impression. Therefore, we have relegated all annotation material to an afterword, which the reader is free to consult or ignore. The most important additions therein are derived from earlier versions of the second chapter, "Reminiscence." Finally, there are instances in which the details of Adorno's musical analyses are confusing or inaccurate. Corrections or measure numbers added for clarification are given in square brackets.

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Preface

The *captatio benevolentiae*, that an author hesitated taking up a suggestion to publish a book, is the worse for wear from persistent misuse. Usually it is invoked merely to relieve the author of responsibility. In the case of this book on Berg, however, it not only reflects the actual situation, but is crucial to an explanation thereof.

Elisabeth Lafite's kind invitation that the author, using earlier material, write a Berg monograph for the series "Österreichische Komponisten des XX. Jahrhunderts," aroused misgivings on two counts. First, he feared repeating himself, having published a great deal on Berg in the course of the forty years since coming to Vienna as Berg's student. He tried to avoid that insofar as possible, but could not eliminate all duplication between the chapter "Reminiscence" and the essay in *Klangfiguren*. Only texts that do not appear in the author's other books are incorporated into this volume.

In the meantime compendious works on the composer have been published. That raised the question whether a monograph might not be superfluous.

However, consideration of these, the author's own objections, led to his decision to accept the invitation. The bulk of his work on Berg consisted of the analyses and reflections he had contributed to the book published by Willi Reich in 1937, which was meant to be a preliminary study only. That book has long been out of print. The author deems those contributions, which in his opinion stemmed from a period of breakthrough, worthy of being made available again to the public. He thanks Willi Reich for his generous permission. Of course, the author considers what he wrote for this book in 1968 its most significant portion.

It may be above all several of the more recent publications that legitimize the book. If musicologists who once sought to neutralize Schoenberg historically as a "great isolated figure" and thus intern him in a kind of spiritual solitary confinement, if musicologists who during the years of political darkness prided themselves on their identification with folk music – if these people now begin reaching out toward Berg – then for this

author it is nothing but an attempt retroactively to extend the monopoly of their academic discipline to that sphere where decades ago they feared being compromised. The author's sympathy with that way of thinking is in inverse proportion to his hopes that the book may speak to those younger musicologists who are of a different stamp. Specifically, he would more than welcome a comparison of the chapters published in 1937 with the work of H. F. Redlich. He does not intend to praise, but rather, as a musician of the Second Viennese School, from which he never strayed, to share experiences relating to the person and oeuvre of Berg. In so doing a new concept of analysis emerged; in no way does he claim with what is presented here to have fulfilled the requirements of that concept. Nor are differences between the old and the new in any way smoothed over. The fact that the book itself documents a development is not incompatible with its subject.

On the occasion of a longer separation Alban Berg wrote the author a postcard quoting Hagen's passage from *Götterdämmerung*: "Sei treu" ("Be true"). It is the author's dearest wish not to have fallen short of that – without, however, allowing his passionate gratitude to encroach upon the autonomy his teacher and friend developed musically within him.

Frankfurt, September 1968