

Alban Berg, 50, Dies; Composer Of 'Wozzeck'

His Opera, First Sung in
1925, Was Rated Most
Important of Decade

Studied With Schonberg

Member of the Prussian
Academy of Fine Arts

By The Associated Press

VIENNA, Dec. 24.—Alban Berg, composer and member of the Prussian Academy of Fine Arts, died today. He was fifty years old. He composed many operas, the best known being "Wozzeck" and "Lulu." His widow, Helene, survives.

Prominent Disciple of Schönberg

Alban Berg, whose grim and pitifully eloquent lyric drama "Wozzeck" was generally considered the most important opera of the post-war decade, was born in Vienna on February 9, 1885, and began to compose as a child before he had had any instruction in music. After leaving school, and while supporting himself as a clerk for the first two years, he studied composition with Arnold Schönberg from 1904 to 1908, and was a leading member of the Society for Private Performances of Music, founded by Schönberg, for which he acted as conductor. In later years, he has been generally regarded as the most prominent of Schönberg's disciples, and one of the outstanding representatives of modern expressionist tendencies. Among his early activities were the arrangements for piano of Schönberg's "Gurrelieder," for whose premiere he wrote an elaborate introduction and analysis, and of Schreker's opera "Der Ferne Klang" and of Mahler's eighth symphony, known as the "Symphony of a Thousand." He married Helene Nahovska in 1911.

A retiring figure, not seeking personal publicity, Berg did not become internationally known as a composer until the production of his opera "Wozzeck" at the Berlin State Opera, after 137 rehearsals, in December 14, 1925, with Erich Kleiber conducting.

Opera Sung in New York in 1931

The libretto of "Wozzeck" is a drama by Georg Buchner, who died in 1837. Extraordinarily modern in its outlook, considering the date of its composition, the drama tells the story of the much-abused soldier, Wozzeck, a victim of fate and his superiors, who, after learning that his mistress has been unfaithful to him, stabs her and finds death in a pond. While Berg's music reflects the style and influence of Schönberg, it was regarded by critics as the expression of an independent personality of strong character, with a notable, while not obvious touch of romanticism. In its construction Berg employed various classic instrumental forms, although these were not readily noticeable by the average listener.

"Wozzeck," which Lawrence Gilman, music critic of the New York Herald Tribune, described as, after Debussy's "Pelleas et Melisande," "the most original and seizing thing in the lyrico-dramatic art of the last half-century," was first performed in the United States by the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company, with Leopold Stokowski conducting, on March 19, 1931. Anne Roselle sang the leading soprano role of Marie, while the Russian singer, Ivan Ivantsoff, sang Wozzeck. The Philadelphians brought the production here for a single performance at the Metropolitan Opera House on November 24, 1931.

Suite Played by Philharmonic

Berg's second opera, "Lulu," is based on two dramas, "Erdegeist" and "Buchse der Pandora," by Frank Wedekind. It had never been performed as a stage work, but a suite of excerpts from the score was first performed in Berlin under Mr. Kleiber on December 1, 1934. In view of the official prejudice against modernistic music in Germany, this was considered a daring step on Kleiber's part. Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra introduced the suite to the United States last March, and gave it here on April 4. It was performed by the Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra under Otto Klemperer on November 28 and 30.

Writing of the Philharmonic performance, Mr. Gilman described the work as "music whose passionate sincerity is as unmistakable as its uncompromising purity of intention; whose poignant intensity of feeling is as little to be resisted as the exalting tenderness of its pity and grief.

"To the studious, considerate and discriminating ear, his music, at its best, has a veritable beauty and expressiveness. Berg is no ersatz Schönberg. He has his own musical personality, a definite and individual one. . . . The layman, if he can accustom himself to a doubtless indisposing idiom, will find in this music a lacerating beauty, a piercing expression, often overwhelming, which reveals Berg for what he is, a poet, a man of tormenting sensibility, even (let us whisper it) a shameless romanticist—a social and spiritual rebel, no less than an esthetic one."

When the suite was introduced to America last spring the opera was virtually finished except for the instrumentation. It is not yet known whether Berg had time to make the finishing touches on the opera.

His "Lyric Suite" for string quartet has been heard here both in its original form and in its orchestral transcription, which was played here by the Philharmonic-Symphony under Kleiber in October, 1931. An early piano sonata was played here by Hortense Monath a few years ago. The aria with orchestra "Der Wein," composed in 1929, is to be heard here for the first time in a concert of the League of Composers at Town Hall on January 11.