

**SEXUAL POLITICS AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
IN BERG'S *WOZZECK***

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## Sexual Politics and Autobiography in Berg's *Wozzeck*

Alban Berg's second opera, *Lulu*, contains overt themes of homosexuality, in particular lesbianism; this is considered by several writers including McClary, Clément and Pegley<sup>1</sup>. The gender issue of the feminine victim in *Lulu* is likewise considered by these writers, as is the female victim figure of Marie in *Wozzeck*. What is not considered by these writers is the extent to which Berg may have sought to address male homosexuality<sup>2</sup> and male gender issues. In this essay I consider this proposition in the context of Berg's first opera *Wozzeck*. Moreover, I consider the extent to which this was autobiographical, and whether such a theme (if indeed it is present in Berg's *Wozzeck*) originates in the original *Woyzeck* of Büchner. The questions, then, that I will consider below and draw conclusions from, are:

1. In critical terms, what are the gay and male gender issues in Berg's opera *Wozzeck*, specifically in the character of Wozzeck?
2. Could such issues be in any way autobiographical?
3. How does the original *Woyzeck* differ from *Wozzeck* in this respect?

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *Femme fatale and lesbian representation in Alban Berg's Lulu*, Karen Pegley in *Encrypted Messages in Alban Berg's Music*, Siglind Bruhn (ed.), 1998.

<sup>2</sup> "Male homosexuality" is also referred to herein as "gay" sexuality, in line with contemporary musicological convention.

## Gay and male gender issues in *Wozzeck*

In order to address any gay and / or male gender issues in the character of Wozzeck, it is useful to pose the – perhaps provocative – question, “Is Wozzeck gay?”. In answering this question, it is useful to examine whether Berg, through his portrayal of the character, is exploring a ‘gay agenda’, and whether or not this is deliberate. Several elements in the opera *Wozzeck* supply potentially telling indications<sup>3</sup>:

### An Outsider

Wozzeck is a definite ‘outsider’. In group or crowd scenes, he is alone: for example, Act II Scene 4, in which he sits by himself while the hunters dance (and the Drum Major dances with Marie).

### A Male Confidant

The relationship with Andres: he is Wozzeck’s confidant, in both Act I Scene 2 and Act II Scene 5, Wozzeck discusses his bad dreams with Andres; when Wozzeck sits alone in the tavern in Act II Scene 4, it is Andres who asks him why he is alone, and not Marie.

### A Subordinate Figure

Wozzeck is a subordinate figure, and moreover, he is a downtrodden figure subordinate in every possible way. The subordinators are all men: the Captain (his rank and class superior), the Doctor (his moral superior), and the Drum Major (his physical superior).

### The ‘Alpha Male’

Wozzeck is tormented by an ‘alpha-male’ figure, in the Drum Major (“*Ich bin ein Mann, ein Mann!*”<sup>4</sup>, “*Was bin ich für ein Mann!*”<sup>5</sup> – Act II Scene 5). Wozzeck expresses overly-macho behaviour that never stands a chance of matching up to the ‘alpha male’. For example, Wozzeck sees the Drum Major carousing with Marie in Act II Scene 4, but fails when he unwisely tries to woo Margret in Act III Scene 3 – an attempt to demonstrate his

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<sup>3</sup> Quotes from the libretto are given in the original 1909 Franzos / Landau German (as adapted by Berg) in the main text, with translations in footnotes. The translations are from the libretto supplied in the opera guide *Wozzeck*, John Calder / English National Opera, 1990. This is a performing translation by Vida Harford and Eric Blackhall.

<sup>4</sup> “I am a man, a man!”

<sup>5</sup> “That’s what I call a man!”

masculinity. Earlier, in Act II Scene 5, the Drum Major fights with Wozzeck, who meekly yields to the beating.

## Immorality

Wozzeck is constantly accused of “immorality” by the Doctor (and also the Captain). The accusation specifically refers to his out-of-wedlock child, but the insinuation is cast broader that Wozzeck is in general of immoral character. Wozzeck defends himself from the charge of immorality related to his bastard child, on the grounds that: “*der liebe Gott wird den armen Wurm nicht drum ansehen, ob das Amen darüber gesagt ist, eh er gemacht wurde*”<sup>6</sup> (Act I Scene 1). However on the more general – unspecified – charge that Wozzeck is somehow immoral but the Captain is “*ein guter Mensch*”<sup>7</sup>, Wozzeck simply responds that: “*Sehn Sie, wir gemeine Leut’ – das hat keine Tugend; es kommt einem nur so die Natur*”<sup>8</sup>.

Later, in Act I Scene 3, Wozzeck is talking about his disturbing visions in Act I Scene 2 of a shape in the sky and a noise in the ground. He then (“mysteriously” according to the stage direction) quotes from the Bible: “*Und sieh, es ging der Rauch auf vom Land, wie ein Rauch vom Ofen*”<sup>9</sup>. This quote – unattributed in the text but surely familiar to Berg – is from Genesis 19:28, which reads in the King James Version as:

And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the land of the plain,  
and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace.<sup>10</sup>

This verse describes the view of Abraham of the aftermath of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. It is the conventional (Christian<sup>11</sup>) interpretation that the sins which God sought to punish were homosexual sins; as this was the established view as early as AD50<sup>12</sup>, it is plausible that this is the nature of the reference by Wozzeck – “mysterious”, perhaps, because he cannot explore the issues troubling him with Marie directly. Could his terrifying visions be a result of his self-questioning, and perhaps the denial, of his true sexuality? It is

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<sup>6</sup> “... the good Lord will not spurn the poor little mite just because the Amen was not spoken before a child was made.”

<sup>7</sup> “a good person”

<sup>8</sup> “Look, common people like us don’t have any virtue; we just do what comes naturally”

<sup>9</sup> “Behold, the smoke did rise from the Land, as if from a furnace”

<sup>10</sup> *The Bible* (King James Version), Genesis chapter 19 verse 28.

<sup>11</sup> Jewish and Islamic views on this Old Testament event are slightly different. A comparison and analysis of the differing views may be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodom\\_and\\_Gomorrah](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sodom_and_Gomorrah).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.; in the *Quaestiones et Solutiones in Genesim* (“Questions and Answers on Genesis”), Philo interprets the Genesis word *yādhā* as “servile, lawless and unseemly pederasty.”

noteworthy that *Wozzeck* is able to discuss his nightmares with his male companion Andres (Act II Scene 2, Act II Scene 5) but never with his female partner Marie.

### Women and Madness

*Wozzeck* is ultimately driven mad by women: by Marie, but also Margret in Act III Scene 3. In this sense *Wozzeck* is almost a gender inversion of Lucia di Lammermoor: an isolated figure, murdering his spouse, driven mad by the opposite gender, leading finally to death. The opposing sexuality (not only the gender) is the cause of the madness of both Lucia (Edgardo) and *Wozzeck* (Marie... or a man?).

In summary, *Wozzeck* is portrayed as an 'outsider' figure who is accused of immorality, who tries to match up to a physical and sexual caricature of masculinity but repeatedly fails, who confides in a close male friend, and kills his wife when he risks losing her to a 'real' man. At the very least, Berg raises overt questions about *Wozzeck's* masculinity. Given that the flaws in *Wozzeck's* character are also the traditionally alleged deficiencies in gay men, it is not a great leap to suggest that Berg actively sought to portray *Wozzeck's* sexuality as questionable, at the least: *Wozzeck* in the closet, unable and unwilling to come out even to himself, and driven to madness and finally murder and suicide by his confinement.

### Symbols

There are a number of significant symbols which are exploited by Berg dramatically and musically which lend further weight to this proposition; foremost is the symbolic use of blood. Blood is a central feature to *Wozzeck*, and is present by proxy in several forms:

- When the Captain asks *Wozzeck* to take care when shaving him with a 'cut-throat' razor: blood from shaving accidents.
- In the military context of the plot and characters; *Wozzeck* is after all a soldier: blood spilt in war.
- Hunting, and the hunters' chorus: the blood of animals.

The first appearance of blood itself in the opera is in Act II Scene 5, when *Wozzeck* is beaten "black and blue"<sup>13</sup> by the Captain, but this does not seem to trouble *Wozzeck*. In none of these examples does *Wozzeck* show any fear or dislike of blood; it is the blood of

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<sup>13</sup> "Dunkelblau"

murder and of his nightmares which terrifies him (*"Blut? Blut, blut!"*<sup>14</sup> – Act II Scene 4). When blood itself is finally present in significant quantity, it is in the form of a woman's blood, when Wozzeck murders Marie: the blood of his nightmares. This scene (Act III Scene 2) is laden with symbols. Wozzeck and Marie walk by the light of a red moon: *"Wie der Mond rot aufgeht!"*<sup>15</sup>. The moon is symbolic on two levels; first as the moon goddess Diana / Venus, portrayed in Roman mythology as a perpetual virgin. Second, as a symbol of monthly cycles of menstruation – the moon is specifically red – another proxy for blood. The knife used to kill Marie is also a traditional phallic symbol, which Wozzeck plunges into Marie, and with which he kills her. This is not merely an attack on Marie, but an attack on the broader idea of "woman", signified by the moon / Venus, menstrual cycles / woman's blood, and the penetrative power of the knife. Wozzeck's given reason (in Act III Scene 2) for the murder is that if he cannot have a woman (for example, Marie) then no one can have this woman, that is, Marie (*"Und kein Andrer auch nicht!"*<sup>16</sup>). There is an implication here that it is not just the possession of Marie (or any woman) by the Drum Major which means that Wozzeck 'cannot have' Marie, but something else within Wozzeck himself that denies women to him.

### **"Blood" in the music**

Musically, Berg consistently uses an E-flat minor chord with a major 7<sup>th</sup> to portray 'blood':



**Figure 1: The 'blood' chord**

At virtually every instance of the utterance *"Blut"*<sup>17</sup> in the opera (and also at the word *"rot"*<sup>18</sup>), Berg uses either this chord or the notes of this chord<sup>19</sup>. He does not, however, use the chord for any of the proxies for blood: shaving, soldiers, hunters.

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<sup>14</sup> "Blood? Blood, blood!"

<sup>15</sup> "How the moon rises red!"

<sup>16</sup> "If not me, no one!"

<sup>17</sup> "Blood"

<sup>18</sup> "red"

<sup>19</sup> This is discussed in detail in Douglas Jarman: *The Music of Alban Berg*, University of California Press, 1979.

## Autobiography in *Wozzeck*'s gay and male gender themes

It is unusual to read an account of the moment at which a masterpiece musical work was conceived, but in the case of *Wozzeck*, a member of the audience and acquaintance of Berg – Paul Elbogen – witnessed Berg's reaction to the Vienna performance of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, and wrote down his account of the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> May 1914:

We young people knew the play very well from Franzo's [*sic*] publication. A German actor, Albert Steinrück, rude and rather brutal, played Wozzeck. I sat in the gallery of the little Kammerspiele. Four rows behind me sat Alban Berg, whom I greeted as I came in because I had known him very well for years. They played the drama for three hours without the smallest interruption in complete darkness. Indescribably excited and enthusiastic, I stood up amidst wild applause and met Alban Berg a few steps behind me. He was deadly pale and perspiring profusely. "What do you say", he gasped, beside himself. "Isn't it fantastic, incredible?" Then, already taking his leave, "Someone must set it to music".<sup>20</sup>

Clearly the play affected Berg deeply, but his reaction appears different from the "excitement and enthusiasm" of Elbogen and the rest of the audience. An ashen face, heavy perspiration, gasping, "beside himself": these are perhaps the reactions of shock and realisation, rather than excitement. Why was Berg affected in this way by the play? Could it be that he immediately saw something of himself in the character of Woyzeck, and parallels to his own life in the plot?

Berg, like Woyzeck, was the father to an illegitimate child; Albine Scheuchl, in 1902. The mother – like Woyzeck's partner, also named Marie – was a member of the Berg household staff. Berg was just 17 years old at the time of the affair, and the child was kept a secret from his wife Helene until she learned of it from Berg's papers, after his death. Indeed, Berg wrote to Helene in 1918, during his military service (when he too was an unwilling soldier): "There is a bit of me in his character [i.e. Wozzeck]. I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact, humiliated".<sup>21</sup>

The intellectual and artistic centre of Vienna society in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was Café Griensteidl. Berg mixed with such figures as Altenberg, Loos, and Kraus, and the culture

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Elbogen, quoted in Douglas Jarman: *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge Opera Handbooks, 1989.

<sup>21</sup> Berg, *Letters to His Wife*, trans. Bernard Grun, St Martin's Press, 1971.

was one of heated discussion and passionate intellectual debate.<sup>22</sup> All issues were discussed, including those which may have been taboo in polite society during the previous century. Notably, sexuality was a favourite topic of conversation and experimentation, including ideas of homosexuality and lesbianism.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault dates the idea of homosexuality as a binary opponent of heterosexuality to c.1870.<sup>23</sup> Homosexuality had not previously been conceived as a distinct condition, according to Foucault, but rather homosexual acts were considered as part of a spectrum of sexuality. Homosexuality was not considered in opposition to procreative sex; indeed, homosexual acts were commonly associated with otherwise 'heterosexual' (this term was not commonly used until the notion of 'homosexual' required a contra-distinction) men as far back as ancient Greece, when pederasty was an accepted practice. This difference from the "bare choreographies of procreation"<sup>24</sup>, which, (an assumed premise in Foucault), was argued by Freud: that sexuality is the (binary) opposite of chromosome-based sex, or rather, gender. Sedgwick, in her discussion of these notions, constructs further binary oppositions: biological / essential; immanent / cultural; constructed / relational.<sup>25</sup> Discussion in Berg's pre-*Wozzeck* Vienna would have explored these new ideas; it is entirely possible that Berg consciously sought to explore the idea of sexuality in opposition to gender in his opera, and that his reaction at the performance of *Wozzeck* marked a crystallisation of these thoughts in his mind in relation to himself.

There is a further – coincidental – parallel with the character of *Wozzeck* in Berg's life. When Benjamin Britten (a composer later well-known as 'a homosexual') wanted to study with Berg, he was refused permission by his parents. The authorities at the Royal College of Music had apparently told Britten's parents that Berg was immoral: the very charge levied against *Wozzeck* by the Doctor. The reasons for the accusation of immorality were rather different, and unrelated to bastard children or homosexuality: the Royal College of Music had a policy against serial music, which the powers-that-were regarded as immoral. Britten's parents were then led to believe that Berg, like *Wozzeck*, was an immoral individual, rather than the 'musically immoral' character alleged by the College.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Andrew Barker: *Berg and the cultural politics of 'Vienna 1900'*, Cambridge Companion to Berg, Anthony Pople (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault: *History of Sexuality*, Pantheon, 1980.

<sup>24</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> This episode is recounted in White, Eric Walter: *Benjamin Britten: A Sketch of his Life and Works*, Boosey and Hawkes, 1954.

## Critical differences between *Woyzeck* and *Wozzeck*

In preparing *Wozzeck*, Berg reduced Büchner's play to his own 3-act libretto. Large parts of the play were cut by Berg, although the remaining text is mostly loyal to the Franzos version of Büchner's play. An examination of the differences between Büchner's play *Woyzeck* and Berg's opera *Wozzeck* may shed light on any secondary agenda which Berg may have sought to address: what did Berg remove, and what did he leave in? The first and most important point in linking *Wozzeck* with Berg's own agenda is the simple fact that Berg chose *Woyzeck* as the subject for his opera, adapted the plot, and prepared his own libretto. The opera is therefore not a work of Büchner but a personal creation of Berg, based on Büchner's work.

There are several scenes (that is, 'scenes' as opposed to 'Scenes': there are no formal scenes in the original play) which are present in *Woyzeck* but not in *Wozzeck*; their deletion was a conscious decision by Berg. The following sections present the major sections which were cut or substantially changed, and examine possible reasons for these changes.

1. Between Act I Scene 4 and Scene 5, two scenes are deleted; one in which Marie and Woyzeck go to a fair, and the second in which Marie and Woyzeck watch a performing donkey (at the fair).

**Comment:** The fair scenes serve the function in *Woyzeck* of reinforcing the closeness of Woyzeck and Marie's union. Furthermore, the performing donkey supplies a political and moral metaphor for Büchner in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century which was not relevant to Berg in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

2. Between Act II Scene 3 and Scene 4, a scene in a guard room between Andres and Wozzeck, who is informed by Andres that the women and men are dancing and sweating in the hot weather; Wozzeck says he must go and see them dancing, saying that "*Wird sie heiss haben!*"<sup>27</sup>. The "she" in question is not specified, but is called a "slut" by Andres.

**Comment:** This scene promotes Woyzeck as a functioning heterosexual; this is not the blundering, paranoid Wozzeck of the opera, desperate to prove his masculinity, but a slightly nervous, voyeuristic young man, eager to indulge with his fellow soldier in the male heterosexual pastime of watching dancing, sweating women. If Berg wanted to question the

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<sup>27</sup> "She'll be hot!"

sexuality of *Wozzeck*, then the inclusion of this scene – and the fair scene between *Woyzeck* and Marie – would be counter-productive.

3. After Act II Scene 4, there is a short scene in which *Woyzeck* is in open country at night, hears voices and music in his head, which are apparently instructing him to “*stich die Zickwölffen todt*”<sup>28</sup>.

**Comment:** This short scene may have been deleted for the purpose of the drama; the material (dreams and visions) are well covered in Act I Scene 2 (and elsewhere) by Berg. This scene, and the new symbol of the “she-wolf”, would not have added to the opera. In dramatic-emotional terms, *Wozzeck* is not a character that hates Marie: he does not kill her out of hatred, but ostensibly jealousy, and perhaps also self-loathing. This deleted scene sets up Marie as a figure of hate – a she-wolf – whom *Wozzeck* must kill.

4. After Act III Scene 1, *Woyzeck* buys the knife he later uses to kill Marie from a Jew in a junk shop. The Jew is a caricature – that of the stereotypical hand-rubbing Jewish moneylender – who, knowing that the knife will be used for killing (“*Das kann mehr als Brod schneiden*”<sup>29</sup>) takes the money, laughing: “*Hihi! Als ob’s nix wär! Und s’is doch Geld. Hihi.*”<sup>30</sup>

**Comment:** The scene in the junk shop introduces a new character, the Jew – and a potentially anti-Semitic caricature – which, given his Jewish friends and the nature of Vienna society at the time, Berg may have felt uncomfortable with, and irrelevant to his opera. A further anti-Semitic inference was also removed, from Act II Scene 4, where in the original the First Apprentice says: “*lasset uns noch über’s Kreuz pissen, damit ein Jud stirbt!*”<sup>31</sup>

5. After the junk shop scene, there is a scene on a street in which an Old Woman tells a fairy tale to some children, watched by Marie and her child. The fairy tale revolves around a boy whose father and mother have died, who then visits the sun, moon, and stars to seek friendship, but finds nothing but death. The fairy story is incorporated into Act III Scene 1. In the original, the children sing the “*Ringel, Ringel Rosenkrantz*” song of the final scene of Berg’s libretto.

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<sup>28</sup> “Stab the she-wolf dead”

<sup>29</sup> “It’ll cut more than bread”

<sup>30</sup> “Hihi! As if it was nothing! But it’s money, after all. Hihi.”

<sup>31</sup> “Let’s piss on the Cross so that another Jew will die!”

**Comment:** This scene may have been deleted for brevity and dramatic pacing; most of the material is re-used elsewhere, and the dramatic effect of moving the first (and only) hearing of the children's song in the final scene is powerful.

6. After the fairy tale scene, there is a further deleted scene in which Woyzeck gives up some of his possessions to Andres.

**Comment:** In this scene, Woyzeck appears to be giving away his possessions to Andres because he has no further need of them: i.e., he has planned to kill Marie, and possibly planned to kill himself too. In *Wozzeck*, the crime is not premeditated, and is presented as an immediate crime of passion or of madness (or both). This scene would undermine Berg's thesis and portray Woyzeck as reasonably coherent and capable of planning a murder in cold blood despite his mental state; Berg's *Wozzeck* murders because of his mental affliction(s), not despite it.

7. Finally, after the final scene (Act III Scene 5) there is a deleted scene in which the Judge (a character not in *Wozzeck*) comments on the murder, calling it "*Ein schöner Mord*"<sup>32</sup>.

**Comment:** To include this short scene would change the point of Berg's opera; it would confirm the opera as primarily 'about' the worker's struggle against institutions (the characters present are the Surgeon, Doctor, and Judge). On the other hand, Berg's opera ends with the deeply tragic and moving scene of Marie's child running off with the other children to inspect the spectacle of his dead mother floating in the water. This affirms Woyzeck's crime, or crimes, as the central theme of Berg's version of the drama.

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<sup>32</sup> "A beautiful murder"

## Conclusions

The story of Büchner's *Wozzeck* is – below the straightforward plot – about institutions and institutionalisation: the formal institutions of army, medicine, and marriage, and also social constructs, from the band of hunters to the drinkers at the inn, to the concept of 'manliness' and even the idea of heterosexuality. This is Foucault's interrogation of institutional truth, the constructed nature of institutions, the dependence of meaning upon dialectics between two bodies: state and citizen, factory and worker, sex and gender. *Wozzeck* portrays the struggle of the worker, the ordinary man, indeed, the Everyman, against the institutions and structure of society which oppress him. This is clear to the extent that, for example, a Marxist discourse may be easily read into the play.

However, Berg chose to take *Wozzeck* and to write an opera, with a libretto adapted by himself from Büchner. As has been shown above, he significantly changed aspects of the play, and he chose to compose the music with specific characterisation (of both people and ideas) in mind. As Adorno illustrated, there is a unique dialectic between Subject (composer) and Object (composition); the relationship between Büchner and the *Wozzeck* of the theatre and the 19<sup>th</sup> century is very different to the relationship between Berg on the one hand and Büchner, *Wozzeck*, and the opera house on the other. It is logical to propose that Berg presented a different thesis to Büchner, a proposition which is supported by the arguments above. For Berg, the Foucauldian question of institutional truth interrogates the constructed dialectic of (hetero)sexuality and homosexuality.

The central question is what, specifically, Berg's thesis might have been. The arguments above advance a case that, in *Wozzeck*, Berg was – (self-)consciously – exploring the idea of sexuality, specifically that part of the spectrum of sexuality labelled 'homosexuality'. We know that the play powerfully moved Berg, and we know the circumstances of his life and the cultural environment in which he lived. Furthermore we know what Berg stripped out of Büchner's play in making his libretto, and we can draw inferences from Berg's possible reasoning for the adaptations. We can also uncover associations and symbols in this musical material; it has been shown (by Perle<sup>33</sup> and Jarman<sup>34</sup>, in for example the *Violin*

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<sup>33</sup> George Perle: *The Secret Programme of the Lyric Suite*, in *The Musical Times*, no. 118, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> In, among other texts (see for example the following footnote), Douglas Jarman: *The Music of Alban Berg*, University of California Press, 1979.

*Concerto*) that Berg developed a habit of hiding programmes in his music. As Jarman has pointed out, it is significant “that there is not a single work after *Wozzeck* that does not – and not a single ... work before it that does – have a [detailed autobiographical programme]”.<sup>35</sup>

The programme I have identified and debated above forms only one of the discursive composer-composition dialectics in *Wozzeck*. The work also protests against physical and mental torture, for example, and the struggle of Wozzeck (and indeed Berg) against institutions is still a strong theme, inherited from Büchner. As I have argued, however, it is plausible to conclude that Berg intended to present or at least include a (Foulcauldian) discourse on immanent homosexuality in *Wozzeck*, and that this could have been consciously autobiographical.

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<sup>35</sup> Douglas Jarman: *Secret Programmes*, Cambridge Companion to Berg, Anthony Pople (ed.), Cambridge University Press, 1997.