

Celebratory Speech for Alban Berg

Paul Stefan

Alban Berg was born on 9 February 1885; Universal Edition fittingly celebrated his 50th birthday. This text, from *Musikblätter des Anbruch* (No. 1, 1935), reflects the great esteem in which Berg was held. It was read aloud since Paul Stefan, the author, was unable to be present at the celebration.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The words you are about to hear are unfortunately not mine – but I hope they retain and convey their power and conviction. They are meant as a congratulation – two, actually – one for Alban Berg and one for us, who are proud to call Berg our own.

We congratulate the artist because his path led him up to the steep heights where our thoughts now turn to him. He was lucky enough to be able to act and abstain according to his genius and nothing else at a time that was particularly difficult for creative people. He was spared from buckling under the yoke of a steady job and paying toll to the diplomacy of daily life; his deliberately chosen seclusion shielded him from that.

No pale twilight sun of mundane favour shone on his life; there was no furore about him; he rendered no homage to the powerful who sought homage – and no one was privy to his personal convictions. When he felt that friends and their affairs were jeopardised, he spoke up and bore witness to them, unconcerned by the consequences, as is evidenced in his works' dedications. His appearance is that of a noble, even aristocratic man, his entire self bespeaks an exceptional persona, an outsider in a world of connections, cowardice and lies.

He was and is an artist, first and foremost – yet he has never shied away from acknowledging what was happening left and right of the narrow path which was his to pursue. Indeed, his courage was that beneficent virtue of a man wearing the armour of precise knowledge and deepest insight. If he was readying for a fight, his better position and understanding gave him the right to do so; he would not shy away from using harsh words, but it was never his intention to wound. What he said and did was in defence – it seemed he was entrusted with protecting ideas, and he was not the kind of man to leave that up to others.

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We may call all of that quixotically unrealistic in times like ours, yet he was of this world in the sense of his own, most personal accomplishments, a world in which others were obviously concerned with success – as the expression has it, he was a lifelong stranger in the strange land of ambition. As opposed to talent, which can grow and develop in any direction, genius has no option; it must follow its own precepts – and its destiny – nothing more and nothing less. Destiny, the determinant of the initial step, the guidance one trusts – then the friends one garners, and the followers who join along.

At the outset of his journey was the colossus Arnold Schönberg, whom many contemporaries believed they could bypass – but not Berg, who noticed Schönberg’s genius for teaching by learning, for finding by one’s own searching. Berg helped him to search – a pupil-teacher relationship which became a friendship. At first, the pupil followed the teacher’s lead – while the teacher took not a single step without first consulting his pupils, his fellow journeymen.

It was not long before the teacher could act on his pupils’ behalf – in public, most notably – Schönberg conducted a concert featuring Berg’s Pieces for Orchestra. It caused the audience (one particularly longing for bygone times) to burst into unseemly jollity. Even those with the best of intentions made a pact to agree with public opinion, but adding privately among themselves that Berg had really gone too far. But the arbiters deciding on the question of “too far” are not people of compromise, but those with a prophetic sense – those who can reckon beyond their own wishes and needs and bear the responsibility for their judgements as well.

“It is work in its strictest form, cognitive work, something utterly new.”

The war broke out and the avant-garde became quiet, its former implacability forgotten. When it returned, decades away from what had happened only a few years before, Berg was once again at the forefront. Some of his pieces were already familiar – the Piano Sonata, his string quartet, his early Lieder – strange, how knowledge of significant works of modern music seeps through everywhere – underground, as it were. Wherever communities formed to cultivate that new art, they attempted to propagate Berg's works; they accorded with the many music festivals in the first postwar years, students attended in droves, duellists in the Berg Affair. But the young master's popularity was founded above all on two of his later major pieces, the Lyric Suite for string quartet (which of course drew performers of a very special kind) and the opera *Wozzeck*.

Perhaps it is only possible to write the story of that masterpiece from one's own reminiscences; the years of quiet, cloistered work: more years when the finished score wandered from theatre to theatre, evoking only appalled responses and protestations that it was impossible – until Kleiber finally took it on in Berlin, plunging to the point of self-sacrifice into that opera, unquestionably the paradigm of modern times and new music. *Wozzeck* premiered after 10 years – and it was so overwhelming that a prearranged scandal backfired in its manipulators' hands – triumph arose from chaos. Another scandal erupted at the third performance at the Czech National Theatre, one which resulted in a demonstration of support for Berg's art by Prague's best artists; the government even bestowed honours on the conductor.

There things rested once again – until the alarm suddenly sounded at home and abroad – *Wozzeck* was performed in the U.S.A., then Holland, Belgium and England.

Dispute still surrounded the first performance of another of Berg's theatre-pieces – reshaped from works by Wedekind (not a very popular writer today) – or rather portions of the music to that text. Here again, a miracle occurred – the audience, apparently querulous to the point of protest, did not protest; they were so overwhelmed by the force and the unexpected beauty of the music that they burst into ovations.

The magic of the artist and the work – it is work in its strictest form, cognitive work, something utterly new, which is being acclaimed – in spite of everything and because it must be so, because of the inner imperative, felt in all its indomitable power. Interpreting Berg's art is a matter for knowledgeable connoisseurs – whereas the least sophisticated listeners can believe in it, love

it. There is an infallible indication of genuineness, that it is passed along from one person to another, recognised or perhaps less recognised than sensed. "The heart created you," says a poet, a creator of immortal figures and one immortal work. That is the issue with Berg, too, and all his listeners experience it. A great heart is beating along, a great man is speaking – and the language and the medium are ultimately inconsequential; discerning minds will endorse them and welcome them as veritable innovations. But the age-old wisdom still holds true; despite all appearances and forms, the arts are essentially one and the same – and something eternal and unique is noticeable in humankind when such a man has spoken thus.

