

Correspondence between Arnold Schönberg and Helene Berg

Schönberg to Helene Berg

Hollywood, 1.11.1936
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Taken from: "The
Berg-Schoenberg
Correspondence:
Selected Letters", ed.
by Juliane Brand,
Christopher Hailey,
and Donald Harris.
New York: Norton,
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Dear Helene,

I still cannot believe that my dear Alban is gone. I still talk to him in my thoughts, as before, and imagine his answers, and it still seems to me as if he were only as far away as Europe is from America. And I can imagine your pain, since I know how affectionately the two of you always lived together. It is terrible, that he had to die so young, particularly from the human, but also from the artistic standpoint.

Just now, when he had gained renewed artistic recognition with his Lulu Suite, which would surely have led to a performance of the entire opera very soon – and though that will probably happen soon now, it would have been recompense for what he had to go through in Germany and Austria. For here in America he is highly respected. I realised that not only from the numerous obituaries, so full of esteem, but also from the sympathy that has been shown to me, as I am one of the people who are suffering the most. And you can see to what extent the public sympathises from the fact that a radio programme broadcast all over America brought a dramatised scene from his life, in which he himself, the conductor Richard Lert, and I were cast as characters.

I unfortunately did not hear the programme myself because I knew nothing about it. But I will write to the American magazine "Time" in Chicago, Ill. and ask for a copy of the manuscript, which I will send to you. Perhaps you would

like to write as well, in case they do not send it to me. It is supposed to be very good.

Is that any consolation? I doubt it, but I know that it will do you good to focus on everything to do with his posthumous reputation and I'm convinced that the consciousness of your duty to collect everything that can aid his posthumous reputation and that concerns him – and this concern with everything that brought this work to life – will help you to bear the pain. One can do no more: than mourn for the dead and make oneself strong, so that one has the strength to mourn for him as he deserves! Am I to tell you of my sympathy – but I think you can imagine it.

But I do have one request: please write and tell me in detail how it all came about. Did he suffer much? Was he conscious? Was it really a fatal illness or a fateful accident?

A thousand heartfelt regards
Your
Arnold Schönberg

I must add the following:

When I read in a New York paper that the orchestration of Lulu is not finished and that Krenek or someone else is to do it, I had the spontaneous idea to ask you whether I should do it. But then my wife reminded me that this would surely harm the work, given the present situation in Germany. But if Alban happened to express the wish that I orchestrate the rest, and if you yourself consider it the best solution, then I would naturally be at your disposal, naturally without any costs. Of course in all other respects, too, artistic, personal or financial. I hope that Klemperer will perform the Lulu Pieces here, presumably at the memorial concert. I've also persuaded Maurice Zam to give a recital where he'll perform the sonata and give a talk about it. Perhaps I can arrange something myself too.

Again most warmly
Arnold Schönberg



Helene Berg (1885–1976) was Alban Berg's wife. They married on 3 May 1911. She was officially the daughter of Franz and Anna Nahowski. However, various well-known figures such as Alma Mahler-Werfel, Peter Altenberg, Bruno Walter and Soma Morgenstern described her quite naturally in a range of publications as a biological daughter of Emperor Franz Joseph I. She founded the Alban Berg Foundation in 1968. The photo was taken in 1909.

Helene Berg to Schönberg

Vienna, 14.1.1936

Most esteemed friend!

I thank you for your dear letter and your wonderful friendship that extends beyond death itself. I still cannot believe that Alban has gone for ever, but when such a moment of realisation comes I feel as if I were plunging into an abyss. Alban suffered so dreadfully and his death was hard. On the day I wrote to you he spoke so warmly of you and pressed me to hurry. He retained

consciousness until the end and his death struggle was frightful. More than 4 hours. I constantly see his desperate face before me and those sad eyes! I constantly ask myself: why not me?

That into this desperation of mine you, esteemed friend, have sent your wonderful suggestion to take over the completion of orchestrating the last act of Lulu – that was the 1st ray of light in my darkness! How can I thank you! I know that Alban would be happy that Lulu is to become something whole and that it is possible to disregard prejudice and politics where a work of art is concerned!

I thank you with all my heart.

All the very best to you and your dear wife.

Your Helene

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