

Composition and Music Theory Monograph Series

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Alban Berg's Use of the Voice in an Orchestral Context

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ABOUT THE SERIES

The aim of this *Composition and Music Theory Monograph Series* is to present theoretical studies of music from the perspective of a working composer rather than from a strictly theoretical viewpoint. Theory, of course, often closely accompanies creative thought, whether consciously or not. Still, my interest and purpose is to observe and analyze certain creative solutions found in a particular composer's own work. In this way, that composer's past experience may provide guidance or points of departure for present and future composers.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Alban Berg "5 Orchester-Lieder | nach Ansichtskartentexten von Peter Altenberg | für mittlere Stimme und Orchester | op. 4" © Copyright 1953, 1997 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien/UE34123 Gesamtausgabe © 1997 by Universal Edition A.G., Wien

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Cover photograph:

Alban Berg (1914) by Dora Kallmus aka Madame D'Ora (1881-1963)

ALBAN BERG (1885-1935) is one of the significant 20th-century composers who wrote beautifully for the voice. In this monograph, I will address his composing for the voice specifically in an orchestral context. To keep within the scope of this study, I will not discuss either of his two most important such vocal works, namely, the operas *Wozzeck* (1922) and *Lulu* (1935). George Perle and Douglas Jarman, among others, have provided detailed analyses of these significant compositions. Instead, I have focused on two of Berg's works which essentially frame his compositional life: the *Five Orchestral Songs*, also known as the *Altenberg Lieder*, op. 4 (1911-12)² and the concert aria *Der Wein* (1929).

The texts for Berg's op. 4 were written by the fin-de-siècle Viennese poet Peter Altenberg. Altenberg was a "fanatical collector of postcards, amassing a collection of about ten thousand by the time of his death." In the same way his postcards reflected Altenberg's impressionistic view of the world, so is his poetry spare and fragmented in style. Berg knew and admired Altenberg, and identified with many of the themes found in Altenberg's writings, such as "the blending of masculine and feminine, the cultivation of free-spiritedness, and the virtues of isolation." Berg took five of Altenberg's *Texte auf Ansichtskarten* ("texts from picture postcards") and reordered them for his own artistic purposes. The same approach is found in Berg's text structure for *Der Wein*. In that later work, Berg extracts three poems, in German translation by Stephan George, from Baudelaire's *Les fleurs de mal* and reorders them for his composition.⁵

The Altenberg Lieder is composed in a freely chromatic idiom. Twelve-tone chords are present, but the music is not twelve-tone in the later organizational sense. In contrast, Der Wein, commissioned while Berg was composing Lulu, is fully twelve-tone and, in part, served as a study for that opera. Although these two works are distinguished from one another in numerous other ways, their individual orchestration shares certain similar characteristics, particularly in the relationship between the voice and the orchestra.

¹ George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). Douglas Jarman, *The Music of Alban Berg* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

² In German, Fünf Orchesterlieder, nach Ansichtkarten-Texten von Peter Altenberg.

David P. Schroeder, "Alban Berg and Peter Altenberg: Intimate Art and the Aesthetics of Life," Journal of the American Musicological Society, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 272.

⁴ Ibid., 264.

⁵ Helen Abbott, *Baudelaire in Song: 1880-1930* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 149. To learn how Berg created his opera librettos in the same fashion, see Jack M. Stein, "From Woyzeck to Wozzeck: Alban Berg's Adaptation of Büchner," *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 47:3 (1972), pp. 168-180; and Jack M. Stein, "Lulu: Alban Berg's Adaptation of Wedekind," *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer, 1974), pp. 220-241.

⁶ George Perle, The Operas of Alban Berg – Volume Two/Lulu (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 29.

The Altenberg Lieder was Berg's first orchestra piece. Interestingly, he chose to compose a work that included a solo voice. It has been suggested that Berg chose this particular format to "...[give] him confidence to deal with the instruments." Another possible reason was that, at the time, Berg was helping to prepare the premiere of his teacher Arnold Schoenberg's Gurrelieder (1911), a substantial composition for five vocal soloists, narrator, chorus, and large orchestra. In addition, Gustav Mahler's recent orchestral songs would have been fresh in the young composer's musical experience.⁸

Berg's orchestra for the *Altenberg Lieder* is directly related to the expanded late 19th-century Romantic orchestra of Mahler, Richard Strauss, and Schoenberg himself (at that time). Berg's orchestra includes triple winds (with the usual doublings), four horns, three trumpets (in F), four trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, celeste, piano, harmonium, and a full string section. But what separates Berg from certain of his predecessors (and some contemporaries) is that his orchestral textures are often transparent and open, in spite of the large orchestra at his disposal. He rarely uses the entire forces of the orchestra at once. As one finds in Mahler's own orchestral work, Berg's choice of timbral combinations is highly selective, as if he were writing for a variety of small chamber groups all subtly interlocked in various ways.⁹

This type of open texture creates a musical space with a lot of "air" or breathing room, allowing a solo voice, male or female, to sail freely within the orchestra. On the following page, Example 1 presents mm. 28-29 from the first of Berg's five orchestral songs. When the voice is not present, Berg does not hesitate to pull out the late 19th-century Romantic stops; the gestures are full and rich with a thick complement of strings. But when the voice appears in the last measure of this example, Berg immediately thins the ensemble. The voice here is not a part of some grandiloquent Wagnerian rhetoric, but is used by Berg almost as if it were a special sort of solo wind instrument, capable of an infinite variety of timbres and characteristics.

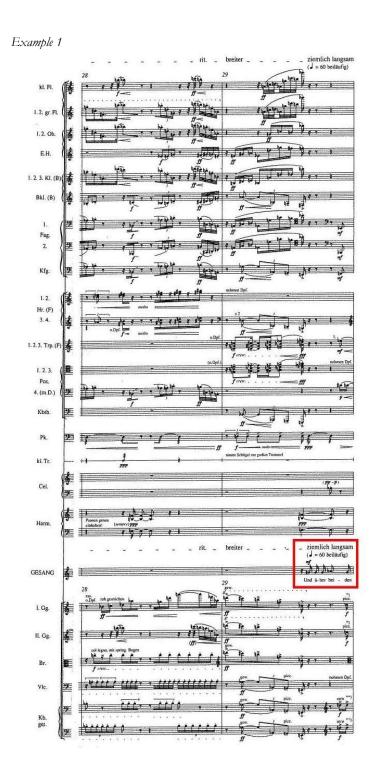
⁷ Karen Monson, *Alban Berg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), 102.

⁸ For example, Berg heard the premiere performance of Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde for two solo voices and orchestra on November 20, 1911. Mark DeVoto, preface to Alban Berg, Fünf Orchester-Lieder nach Ansichtskartentexten von Peter Altenberg, op. 4 (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1997).

[&]quot;...like Mahler, [Berg] resorted to such extravagant means in order to achieve for the most part intimate and subtle chamber effects, the immense variety of which was only possible with the use of a huge orchestra." Mosco Carner, *Alban Berg*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1983), 101.

[&]quot;In the *bel canto* character of its vocal line and in the relation between voice and orchestra, *Der Wein* strikingly exemplifies Berg's concept of the proper role of the voice in opera as set forth in a brief essay published in 1929, the same year in which he composed the aria. Emphasizing the primacy of the singer and the importance of *bel canto*, along with other styles of vocal expression, he assigns to opera the task, 'above all, of serving the human voice and promoting its rights – rights which, indeed, it has almost lost in the musico-dramatic works of recent decades in which operatic music, as Schoenberg has said, has often represented nothing else than a symphony for large orchestra with vocal accompaniment." Perle, *Berg*, 29.

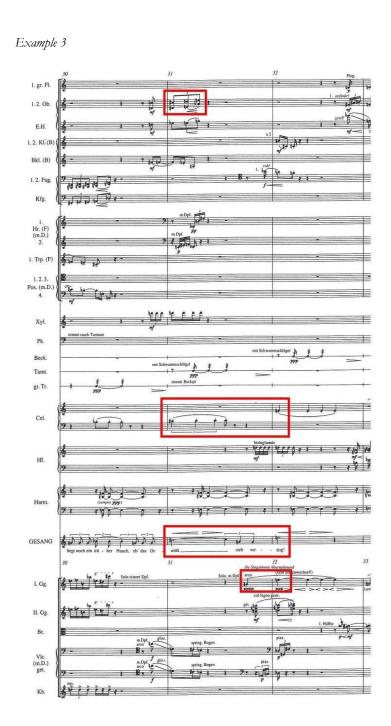
In both the *Altenberg Lieder* and *Der Wein*, Berg consistently supports the vocal line, but he rarely doubles the entire phrase. Instead, he reënforces it in a fragmented way using only certain notes from the orchestra, in particular where he demands that the singer execute wide leaps or melodic lines involving augmented or diminished intervals. There are numerous examples to be found of this practice in both works.



Example 2 shows mm. 24-25 of the Altenberg Lieder, song I. The descent in the voice of an augmented fifth from the high F# to Bb and then down an additional minor seventh to C is supported by the entrance of the English horn, which then continues its own individual melodic gesture.



Example 3 shows mm. 31-32 from the same song where the C# in the voice (an augmented fourth from the preceding G) is "focused" by being doubled by the celeste and the first oboe. Note how the first oboe quickly continues its own line while the celeste maintains its support of the C#. The continuation of the vocal line is then picked up by a solo violin, assisting the singer in making the melodic descent of the augmented fourth again to G before the phrase ends on E, colored by the celeste.



This intervallic support is also shown in Examples 4 and 5 from Der Wein. In Example 4, the ascending leap of a minor ninth is doubled by the first violins. The motivic idea of such a wide leap is then reënforced, cunningly, by the octave displacement in the violins' continuation of the vocal line.



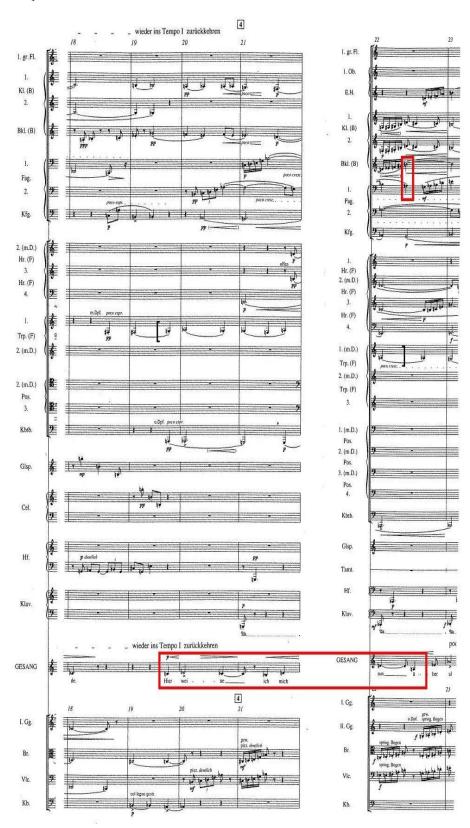
Example 5 demonstrates Berg's reluctance to leave such leaps unsupported. Although the singer's F is briefly anticipated an octave higher in the oboe and the E is present in the first horn (sounding a perfect 5th lower), the ascending major seventh leap in the voice is parenthetically cued in a solo violin.

Example 5



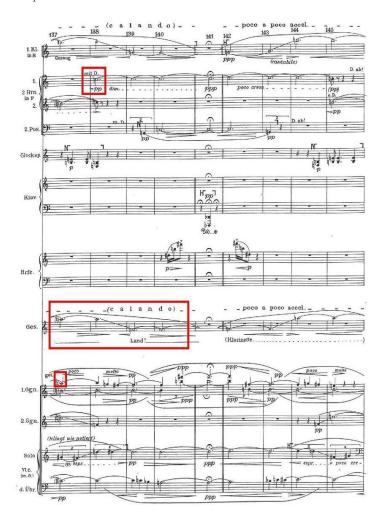
Example 6 returns to the Altenberg Lieder. In m. 18, a muted Trumpet 1 (in F, sounding a perfect fourth higher) begins a melodic figure which, in the second half of m. 19, becomes the doubling of the vocal line. This doubling continues until the middle of the second beat of m. 22. Here, the voice diverges from the trumpet's part, continuing independently. This break is underscored by the support which occurs at the time of this break. When the voice moves to A\(\beta\), it is able to find this pitch and make a clean break from the trumpet because this pitch (A) has already been reached in the first bassoon and the bass clarinet. Neither of these instruments (or any other) continues with the voice. Rather, their arrival on the A\(\beta\) half a beat before the voice is another common procedure of Berg's. By anticipating ever so slightly, certain pitches, Berg is able to give the singer some aural reference and security in a musical environment which is often either highly chromatic, atonal, or twelve-tone.

Example 6



Examples 7 and 8 show Berg continuing this procedure in *Der Wein*. Example 7 shows the first violins supporting the voice's high A. When the voice moves down a major tenth two measures later, this F has already been introduced in the first horn the measure before. Clearly, Berg wishes to present this pitch to the singer's ear to facilitate this motion down a major tenth.¹¹

Example 7

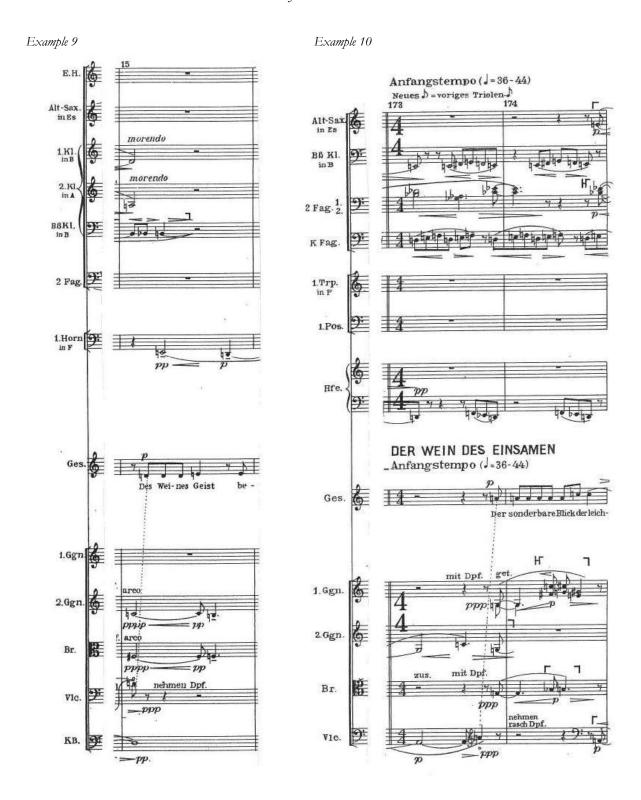


In Example 8, it is the upward leap of a major ninth (Eb-F) that is prepared in the same way. The violas anticipate the F in the voice by half a beat and then support the voice's next leap of a descending diminished eleventh by continuing the melodic line (enharmonically) as a major third below the F.

¹¹ Berg also cues the voice in the first clarinet. In addition, it is interesting to observe that the music in *Example 7* shows a direct relationship to *Lulu*. Measure 141 provides the mid-point before a retrograde of the music, a parallel to the structure of the Film Music in *Lulu*. Here, the descending tenth in the voice is complemented by the ascending tenth in the first clarinet. Such a parallel provides further support for considering Berg's composition of *Der Wein* as a study for his opera.



The concept of pitch preparation is expressly displayed by Berg himself with the use of dotted lines in the score of *Der Wein* to connect pitches from instruments to the voice. *Examples 9* and *10* show this notation, both being parts of the score which occur after orchestral passages without the voice. Each example shows the singer's entrance pitch anticipated by half a beat with a harmonic in the cellos, marked *ppp*.



There is another aspect of Berg's vocal writing which makes his chromatic and twelve-tone music particularly accessible to vocalists who perform his music. In composing his vocal lines, Berg consciously utilizes certain traditional methods of voice-leading and arpeggiation without any of the usual functional implications.

The opening vocal melody of *Der Wein* at mm. 15-17 is a striking example of such an approach.

Example 11

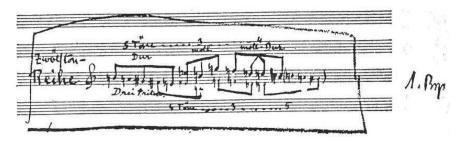


The vocal line shown in Example 11 utilizes an ascending d minor scale in a non-tonal context. It is that context which is of particular significance here. Although a singer might, under some other circumstances, believe him or herself to be lost without perfect pitch, Berg constructs a melodic line which gives the singer an abstract point of reference (a simple minor scale fragment) thus allowing the orchestra (the context of the scale) to freely depart from any sort of traditional association with that point of reference.¹²

Prior to the premiere of *Der Wein* in 1930, Berg commissioned Willi Reich to write an introduction to the work. Berg wrote out some musical examples, which he shared with Reich. These examples demonstrate Berg's own interest in retaining at certain points in his 12-tone composition some type of tonal reference within his non-tonal structures.¹³

Example 12 shows one of Berg's examples that he created for Reich, where the organization of his row includes an E major triad, a c minor triad and a Bb minor/major triad.¹⁴

Example 12



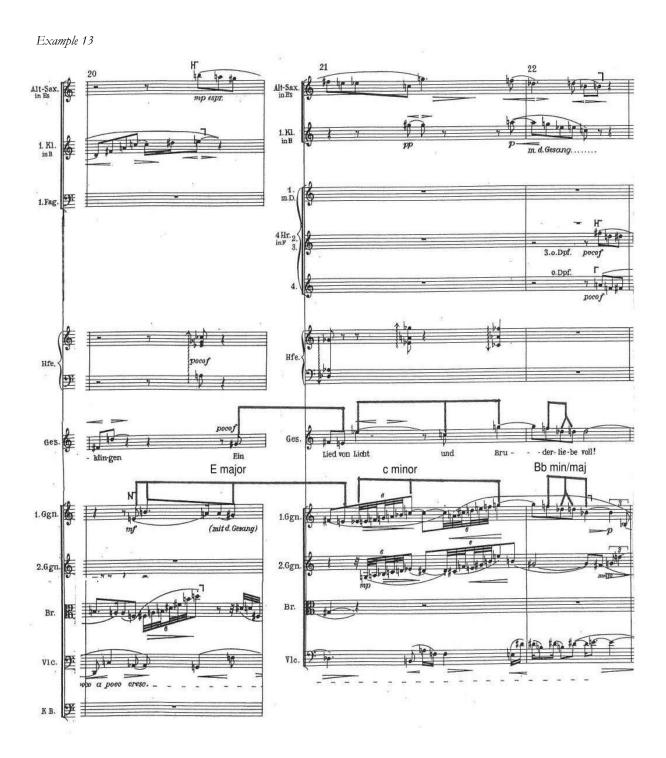
Berg makes use of these tonal references within his row at mm. 20-22 of the piece. Example 13 shows how the composition of the vocal line is anchored by an arpeggiation of these triads. The first violin part, while ornamented, specifically supports the voice with the same "progression" of arpeggiated triads. Additionally, the first violins prepare the unfolding of this succession of arpeggiations by introducing the tonal reference of E major just prior to the singer's entrance in m. 20.

12

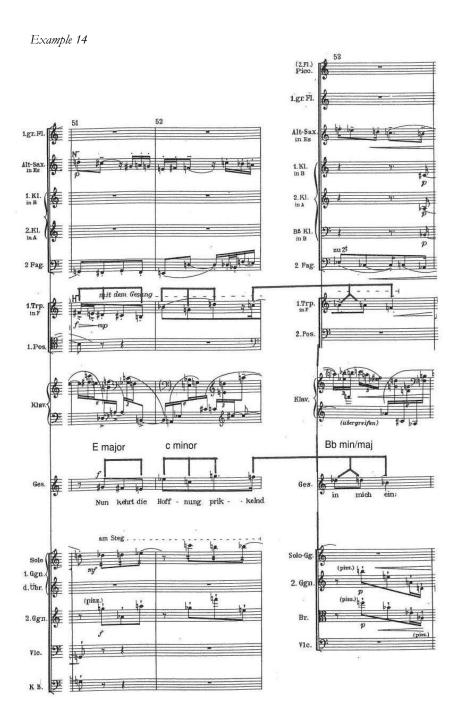
¹² "This diatonic scale segment facilitates catabile writing for the voice, as stepwise progressions are the means of best achieving a singable vocal style." Carner, 110.

¹³ Willi Reich, Alban Berg (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965), 153-54.

¹⁴ Ibid., 154.



As shown in *Example 14*, these same tonal references return in mm. 51-53, where the arpegiation of the triads unfolds in the same order. The support given to the voice by the first violins in the previous passage is now provided by the first trumpet. This particular timbral combination, a solo voice combined with a trumpet in F, is also found in *Example 6* from song V of the *Altenberg Lieder*. The color revealed by this timbral relationship is perhaps one that Berg found especially attractive.



Early on in his career, Berg acknowledged the efficacy of utilizing tonal references in an atonal context. In the spring of 1913, following the successful premiere of his *Gurrelieder*, Schoenberg organized a concert in Vienna that was to include his Chamber Symphony, op. 9, along with works by Alexander von Zemlinsky, Anton Webern, and at least some portion of Berg's *Altenberg Lieder*. In a letter to his teacher and mentor, Berg suggested only presenting one of the five songs:

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¹⁵ Mark DeVoto, "Centenary of a Lesser-Known Scandal," *The Boston Music Intelligencer*, (Mar. 27, 2013), https://www.classical-scene.com/2013/03/27/scandal/ (accessed April 30, 2019).

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This [the fifth song] is certainly shorter than the other 3 (II, III, and IV) together and because it is, as you say, more difficult for the orchestra than those 3, but easier for the voice, since there's almost always an instrument accompanying the voice--and since the harmony is still almost tonal--it shouldn't require more rehearsal time than the other 3 songs.¹⁶

The concert was not a success. Even before Berg's work was performed, the audience was restless, voicing disapproval and protesting during Webern's *Six Pieces*, op. 6. By the time Schoenberg had finished conducting the excerpts from Berg's work (only the second and third songs), the audience "lost all restraint, and a riot broke out." The police were called, the concert was ended, and the event came to be known as the *Skandalkonzert*. Berg, disappointed and humiliated, never sought another performance of his composition. A full premier did not occur until 1952; it is a tragedy Berg never had the opportunity to hear the complete *Altenberg Lieder*.

Berg's compositions for the voice in an orchestral context are remarkable for their clarity of texture and intricacy of timbral design. Although Berg may seemingly create quite difficult passages for the voice by making use of wide leaps and dissonant intervals, he finds subtle and unobtrusive yet practical ways of supporting the challenges his music may present. The great care in which he weaves this support between the voice and the orchestra has, in no small way, contributed to the lasting and well-deserved success of his operas, two of the most signficant vocal works of the 20th century.

¹⁶ Letter from Berg to Schoenberg, Vienna, 9 March 1913, in Julian Brand, editor, *The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987).

¹⁷ De Voto, "Scandal".

¹⁸ Ibid.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Composer Jeremy Beck "...embrac[es] the past while also going his own way. ... [In] Beck's forceful and expressive sound world ... the writing is concise in structure and generous in tonal language, savouring both the dramatic and the poetic." (*Gramophone*).

Beck's music has been presented by New York City Opera, American Composers Orchestra, ETHEL, the Louisville Orchestra, Apollo Chorus of Chicago, Yale Opera, and the Center for Contemporary Opera, among others. Recordings of his vocal, chamber, and orchestral music are available on the neuma, Acis, innova, and Ablaze labels.

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