

**Desperate Hausfraus: The Secret Program of
Alban Berg's *Chamber Concerto***

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- I. The *Chamber Concerto*, like Berg's other mature works, is fundamentally a work about relationships—about endings and beginnings—and there are aspects of its story that have “mid-life crisis” writ large. The work was a turning point both in Berg's compositional history and in his life's story—and as such it occupies a unique place in the wind repertoire. Who has heard it? Studied score? Knows secret program?

- II. The *Chamber Concerto*, a three movement double concerto for piano, violin and 13 winds, is Berg's first work after *Wozzeck*.
 - a. Composed 1923-1925, a crucial period relative to his discovery of Schoenberg's twelve-tone principles, it is Berg's first attempt to formulate a work using those principles.
 - b. Berg's embryonic twelve-tone technique combined with his beloved interval cycles and his ties to the post-Wagnerian tradition give the work a unique pitch vocabulary—one that he developed more fully in the *Lyric Suite*, *Violin Concerto* and *Lulu*.
 - c. It is also as Berg's first attempt personal musical idiom without appearing to reject his teacher.
 - d. The *Chamber Concerto* points toward Berg's mature compositional style in which hidden programmatic references, musical anagrams and Berg's unique combination of twelve-tone techniques with post-Wagnerian harmonic ideas are added to his predilection for sonata form, emphasis on interval cycles, fascination with palindromes, and the use of rhythm rather than pitch to elucidate structure.

- III. The *Chamber Concerto* is also Berg's first work to have a “secret program,” and this aspect of the work makes it both a ground-breaking musical testament as well as a fascinating detective story.

SLIDE 2 – Berg Quote

I can tell you, dearest friend, that if it were known how much **friendship, love and a world** of **human and spiritual** references I have smuggled into these three movements, the adherents of program music—should there be any left—would go mad with joy.

—“Open Letter” from Alban Berg to Arnold Schoenberg, February 9, 1925

In the first instance, it is most obviously a chronicle of his relation to Schoenberg.

- IV. Compositional History and Relation to Schoenberg
 - a. Berg (1885-1935), part of Second Viennese School
 - i. Minimal musical education before 1904 (age 19)—juvenile songs; then saw Schoenberg's advertisement for students in a newspaper.
 - ii. Schoenberg became his teacher, mentor and model in all things; surrogate father

SLIDE 3 – Berg and Schoenberg

- iii. Berg had no skill in applied music, and received few performances early in his career; he therefore depended on Schoenberg's estimate of his ability. Schoenberg left Vienna for Berlin and Berg was on his own
 - iv. Wrote *Altenberg Lieder* (1911-12, age 26 = first great piece); Schoenberg conducted a performance of two movements; there was such a riot that the concert had to be stopped.
 - v. By 1923, when Berg began the *Chamber Concerto*, *Wozzeck* had propelled him to greater success (more performances, better reviews) than Schoenberg. **Berg thought of himself more as a colleague and equal of Schoenberg. Schoenberg tended to treat him as a student.**
- V. In some ways, the sequence of Berg's works can be thought of as a chronicle of his relationship with Arnold Schoenberg.
- a. In this sense, the *Chamber Concerto* can be viewed as the point at which Berg "left home." He began to reconcile his desire for musical independence with his veneration for, and sensitivity to criticism by, his teacher.
 - b. As early as 1921, Berg was trying to distance himself from Schoenberg's influence.
 - ⁱBerg wrote to his wife on June 28, 1921, (two years before beginning work on the concerto): "As to Schoenberg's return...whatever happens we must arrange things for ourselves so that we keep our freedom."
 - ⁱⁱAnd on July 2, 1921, he wrote, "About Schoenberg: In principle, of course, I'd be very glad if you went there. But...then I wouldn't know how to avoid going there myself; which I have no wish to do."
 - ⁱⁱⁱDuring his work on the *Chamber Concerto*, he wrote, "The Schoenbergs were in good spirits. But it wasn't too pleasant an atmosphere, because he kept on finding fault with my *Chamber Concerto*. He doesn't like the piano in this combination. Only he doesn't know, of course, that it is a *concerto*, not an ordinary octet. And yet he wants me to tell him how the piece is shaping, what sort of thing it will be, and all the time with advice, admonitions, warnings, in fact generally pouring on cold water."

SLIDE 4 – Pult und Taktstock (Open Letter)

- VI. The *Chamber Concerto* has a public program, announced by Berg in an open letter to Schoenberg, published in the Viennese musical journal *Pult und Taktstock* in February 1925. In this letter, Berg dedicates the work to Schoenberg as a 50th birthday present (although he's several months late), and describes how the melodic material of the work is derived from the musical letters in the names of Schoenberg and his two pupils, Berg and Webern.

SLIDE 5 – Motto with sogetti caviti

- a. At the head of the work stands a five-bar musical motto, which itself is headed by "Aller guten Dinge..." the first words of the German proverb "Aller guten Dinge sind drei" [All good things come in threes]—but notice also that it contains three words and three dots. The motto itself (which bears the indication "These *five* measures must not be conducted, but must be played") contains the names of the three composers, translated into musical notation. In German notation, B is our B-flat, H is our B, and Es (rendered here simply as S) is our E-flat. Thus we have **Arnold SCHoenBErG**, played on the piano; Anton wEBErn, played on the solo violin; and **AlBAN BErG**, played on the horn. (While Schoenberg lived in Vienna, he spelled his name with an umlaut on the "o," thus the motto does not include the extra "e.")

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 1 – Motto

SLIDE 6 – Tabular Summary (“cooked the books”)

- b. Berg referred to Schoenberg, Berg and Webern as the “holy trinity,” and numerous large and small-scale aspects of the work reflect the idea of “trinity,” or multiples of three:
 - The work celebrates a triple anniversary: Schoenberg’s 50th birthday, Berg’s 40th, and the 10th anniversary of the Schoenberg, Berg, Webern group
 - the work is in three movements which are played without break (although Berg did create alternative endings for the first two movements, to allow them to be performed individually).
 - there are three performing units (piano, violin and wind ensemble)
 - and three combinations thereof (piano and winds, violin and winds, both soloists and winds)
 - the first movement consists of a theme and five variations (making six sections altogether)
 - the number of measures in each movement is a multiple of three (though Berg “cooked the books” to make it seem more symmetrical than it really is. He also “cheated” with lots of $\frac{1}{4}$ and $\frac{1}{8}$ measures)
 - the second movement has six sections
 - the third movement has three
 - Berg uses the three methods of organizing pitch and seeks to encapsulate the “journey” of Schoenberg—he says he composed using free atonality, passages which refer to “your new 12-tone system” and passages “with a tonal flavor”
 - even the tempo markings are all multiples of three, as are the timings he gives for each movement (performance note! Timings and tempo markings don’t add up)
 - c. There are also references to Berg’s “number of fate,” 23, and to 5 (which represents the sum of the digits, 2+3). Berg knows this may be a bit much, and jokes about it: “I realize that—insofar as I make this generally known—my reputation as a mathematician will grow in proportion (...to the square of the distance) as my reputation as a composer sinks.”
- VII. This elaborate “public program,” is clearly laid out in the Open Letter. It is, however, only a smoke-screen for the real story. The three movements have secret titles: “Friendship,” “Love” and “World”—to which Berg made only a passing reference in his letter.
- a. What are secret programs? Why are they secret?
 - i. Berg’s “official” programs = chronicle of socially acceptable relationships
 - ii. The “secret” programs chronicle illicit relationships (Fuchs-Robettin, Mizzi)
 - iii. Berg also used his secret programs to express deeper or more complex feelings than he chose to express openly
- VIII. In my 1986 dissertation, I speculated on the existence of a “secret program” for the *Chamber Concerto*. Three years later, Brenda Dalen published “Freundschaft, Liebe und Welt: The Secret Program of the *Chamber Concerto*.” Both Dalen and I found the phrase “friendship, love and a world” from the open letter very suggestive. Dalen found a programmatic outline

in Berg's hand in which he clearly labels the first movement, "Friendship," the second movement, "Love," and the third "World"

SLIDE 7 – Berg's sketch of the "Secret Program"

- i. In the outline for the first movement, Berg indicates initials of some of his friends next to some of the variations.
 1. The first variation, for piano solo, is titled "Steuer" for Eduard Steuermann, the second, the Waltz, "Kolisch" for Rudolph Kolisch. These two men were the soloists for the Vienna premiere of the *Chamber Concerto* and were generally enthusiastic performers of the music of the Schoenberg circle. The dedication of the solo piano variation for the pianist Steuermann is obvious.
 2. The Waltz variation has a brief moment for the solo violin strumming the open strings--this was a ritual in which Kolisch indulged before every performance (m.111-112).

SLIDE 8 – Kolisch Pizz

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 2 – Kolisch pizz (Includes reference to Schoenberg, Op. 9)

3. The third variation was titled "Blöcke" and is dedicated to Josef Polnauer--the "bouncer" for Schoenberg's *Society for Private Musical Performances*

SLIDE 9 – Polnauer "Fight Scene:"

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 3 – Fight scene. Concert. Rowdy interrupts and grumbles. Fight.

IX. In contrast, the Adagio (in duple meter throughout), tells a tortured tale of infidelity and suicide—truly desperate hausfrau. At the center of the plot are two wives—Mathilde Schoenberg, who was prone to entanglements with young men, and Helene Berg, who facilitated her friend's affairs (while unaware that Mathilde's paramours may have included her own husband).

SLIDE 10 – Helene and Mathilde

- a. The second movement of the *Chamber Concerto* is a palindrome, one of Berg's favorite formal designs. Berg was fascinated with palindromes, and usually used them programmatically to indicate time, fate or predestination. Berg also took great care to make the "turn-around points" visually and aurally conspicuous. The *Chamber Concerto* is no exception. Mathilde Schoenberg died while Berg was composing the second movement—**her death shook Berg very much**, and the sketches for this movement suggest that he worked this ghostly "midnight" turn-around point to symbolize her death.

SLIDE 11 – Score excerpt: Turn around point

1. Berg instructed the printer to lay out the score to make the two facing pages of the score present, literally, mirror images of each other. This extends to the details of the performance indications "Kfg. setzt fort" and "Ob. fortsetzend" reversing to "Kfg. fortsetzend" and "Ob. setzt fort," respectively.

2. To make the turn-around aurally obvious, Berg briefly introduces the piano into the violin solo movement playing a series of 12 low C#'s--tolling a mysterious "midnight."
3. The programmatic outline for this movement simply indicates "Ma." But Berg made a sketch for the turn-around on an envelope in which he lists a number of elements including the piano bass and a "Math Thema: Ahde edhA" This is the Hauptstimme for the first horn at the turn-around point. The letters are also a *soggetto cavato* for the name Mathilde, the name of Schoenberg's first wife.

SLIDE 12 - Berg's "envelope" sketch of the second movement showing the 'Math Thema'

SLIDE 13 – Score excerpt: Turn around point

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 4 – "Turn around" point

- a. An additional reference to Mathilde is a theme that Berg labeled "Melisande" in his sketches, and which resembles a leitmotiv from Schoenberg's tone poem *Pelleas und Melisande*. In this drama, "Melisande" is caught in a love triangle that leads to her death.
- b. Mathilde Schoenberg had a tragic affair with the painter Richard Gerstl, a friend of the family and art teacher to both Schoenbergs. Mathilde eventually left Schoenberg for Gerstl, but was persuaded to return by several friends including Berg and Webern.
- c. Shortly after her return to Schoenberg, Gerstl committed suicide. Mathilde never recovered from this psychological shock and died soon afterward.

SLIDE 14 - Melisande" Theme: excerpt from Berg's guide to Schoenberg's tone poem and themes

SLIDE 15 - Chamber Concerto, mm. 261-2, "Melisande appears"

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 6 – "Melisande appears"

SLIDE 16 – Score excerpt of Hohepunkt ("Death of Melisande")

MUSICAL EXAMPLE 5 – Hohepunkt (which is 47 m before the turn-around-Mathilde died at 47)

SLIDE 17 – RIP Mathilde

4. Dalen's brilliant exposition of this secret program, however, is problematic: The *Chamber Concerto* was a birthday present for Schoenberg, and a celebration of these events would have certainly been a bizarre tribute.
5. Further work by John Covach and Michael Votta, however, reveals that the "secret love story" may actually be a reference to a novel by Balzac, *Seriphita*. This novel was a favorite of both Schoenberg and Berg. It deals with transformation through love and sublimation into a supernatural state of grace.

SLIDE 18 – Mathilde = Seriphita

- a. Covach postulates that the center of the palindrome represents Mathilde's death and ascent into heaven, and her transformation into a "purely spiritual being," thus giving her a measure of redemption. Trumpets herald Balzac's heroine's early death; Berg uses trumpet at the Hohepunkt, then horns and trombone at the turn-around.
- b. Interestingly, the references to the Melisande theme --the theme of the unfaithful lover -- come only in the first half of the movement.
- c. Votta has shown how the secret program explains how the pitch structure of the work is unified. (*Seriphita* was the inspiration for the idea of "the unity of musical space" which led Schoenberg to his 12-tone theory)

- i. During the time Berg was working on the *Chamber Concerto*, Schoenberg gave a lecture describing his then-new 12-tone system. In this lecture he said:

“the validity of this form of thinking is demonstrated by the previously stated law of the unity of musical space, best formulated as follows: The unity of musical space demands an absolute and unitary perception. In this space, as in Swedenborg’s heaven (described in Balzac’s *Seraphitá*) there is no absolute down, no right or left, **no forward or backward.**”

Hence, the palindrome as metaphor for both secret program and pitch structure.

But there is, perhaps, even more to the story.

In a 1920 letter, Berg asks his wife, "Is Schoenberg aware that you know about the 'X' affair?" Examining the original letter in Vienna, Raymond Coffey speculated that the 'X' was code for a crossed-out name beginning with 'B.' It later was found that a young student of Schoenberg's named Hugo Breuer was another of Schoenberg's associates who caught Mathilde's fancy.

SLIDE 19 – The “happy family?”

Apparently Alban and Helene Berg aided and abetted this affair. Helene made phone calls to Breuer for Mathilde, and later wrote that Mathilde met Breuer at the Bergs’ house so she could “rape Hugo on the divan.”

An entry in the diary of Alma Mahler [widow of Gustav Mahler] talks about Mathilde being “man-mad for a few weeks.” Coffey said: “Berg must have known that Schoenberg's wife was running around in a manic way to have sex with a 20-year-old...I can't believe that's not in the *Chamber Concerto*.” Breuer had a successful singing career for several years, and then emigrated to England in 1938 to flee the Nazi menace. After a few months, he too killed himself.

And there’s still more:

In a letter written to Helene shortly before her death in 1923, Mathilde confessed that she consulted a seer. The seer had predicted the deaths of two of Mathilde's lovers, one by suicide, one by a mosquito bite.

SLIDE 20 – Mathilde + Alban?

Berg died of an infection caused by an insect bite. We know that both Berg and Mathilde had numerous affairs—might they have been involved with each other? One clue emerges from the *Chamber Concerto*: The “rhythmic motive” that provides the unifying element in the third movement (the “world”) is a five-note figure introduced in the second movement just after the main “Melisande” theme, and this motive dominates the final movement. This could be an oblique self-reference by Berg, using 5 to represent his “number of fate” by adding the digits of “23.”

Not too long after composing the *Chamber Concerto*, Berg wrote to his wife:

“... only still shadowed by a grief which since that time [when we first met] rules me more and more; and which, for a long time now, has made me into a double or, better said, a play-acting person. For you must know: everything that you may hear of me and perhaps even read about me, pertains,

insofar as it is not completely false – as, for example, this, which I read today by chance in a Zurich programme: 'A completely happy domesticity, with which his wife has surrounded him, allows him to create without disturbance' – pertains to what is only peripheral. But it pertains only to a person who constitutes only a completely exterior layer of myself, to a part of me which in the course of recent years has separated itself... from my real existence and has formed a detached being, the one I seem [to be] to my surroundings and to the world."

(quoted in Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*: Lulu, p.25-26.)

After Berg's widow, Helene, died in 1976, his private papers became available to scholars, and the full extent of Berg's "secret programs" started to become clear. It turned out, for example, that the *Lyric Suite* for string quartet (1925-26) was a "latent opera," telling the story of Berg's extramarital affair with Hanna Fuchs-Robbetin, the wife of a friend (and sister-in-law of Alma Mahler who helped the lovers exchange letters), and with a young servant girl ("Mizzi" = Marie—later "immortalized" as the character in *Wozzeck* who bears an illegitimate child) who bore him a child.

SLIDE 21 – Hanna Fuchs-Robbetin

When Berg was in Prague for a performance of "Three Excerpts from *Wozzeck*" in May, 1925, he stayed at the home of Herbert and Hanna Fuchs-Robbetin. Fuchs-Robbetin was the brother-in-law of Franz Werfel, an old friend of Berg's who has married Alma Mahler, widow of composer Gustav Mahler. Hanna (the sister of Franz) quickly took a liking to Berg. Berg and Hanna met again when he stopped in Prague on his way to Berlin for *Wozzeck*'s premiere, and they began an affair which lasted until Berg's death.

This affair became the basis for the "secret programs" of works after the *Chamber Concerto*: the second (serial) version of "Schliesse mir die Augen beide" (the first was dedicated to Berg's wife, Helene), the *Lyric Suite*, and the *Violin Concerto*.

SLIDE 22 – The "Desperate Hausfrau"

Helene wrote often to Alma Mahler, and her letters refer obliquely to Hanna Fuchs-Robbetin, always mentioned in the third person or collectively as "those people in Prague." Two months after Berg's death, Helene wrote to Alma, discussing how people thought she never left Alban alone, always traveling with him, going to concerts and dinners with him and so on.

"there remains but one explanation: Alban invented an excuse to keep his poetic passion within those boundaries which he himself desired. He himself constructed obstacles and thereby created the romanticism which he required. Perhaps it was also unconscious caution: he didn't want too close an association with this woman, as he imagined her in the unheard-of florescence of his artist's fantasy, for fear of disappointment (for Alban was spoiled, mentally and physically). He avoided her... It all comes to a flight from reality. In this way and only in this way could the *Lyric Suite* have come to be. I must therefore acknowledge the sense of all that has happened – and remain silent. And therefore I can also say that there is no bitterness in me, only emotion and melancholy. **And nothing, nothing can dim my love for him. Some day I will stand with her before God.**

"Even those who today face [his music] without understanding or with misgivings – for he was so far in advance of them – will gradually grow into it, until a time comes when people will at last know who Alban Berg was."

(Perle, quoted in *The Operas of Alban Berg*: Lulu, p.28-29.)