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## Oppression, Evaluation, and Direction: Understanding Character Agency through the Music of *Wozzeck*

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OPPRESSION, EVALUATION, AND DIRECTION:  
UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER AGENCY  
THROUGH THE MUSIC  
OF *WOZZECK*

by

Eric Allen Hester

A Thesis submitted to the Graduate College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Music  
School of Music  
Western Michigan University  
April 2016

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UNDERSTANDING CHARACTER AGENCY  
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Eric Allen Hester, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2016

In Alban Berg's opera, *Wozzeck*, the concept of agency is one of fundamental importance. The oppressive dictates of fate and social position are featured prominently in the plot of the opera, and the characters evaluate their relationship with these oppressive structures in order to direct their agency. This thesis explores how Berg uses musical form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics to show how characters engage in this evaluative act and ultimately find agency in their world. Music-drama analysis in this paper is approached from a Peircean semiotic perspective, exploring how the dramatic meaning behind the music is used to inform the evaluative process. Ultimately, the analysis of these musical ideas constructs a consistent interpretation of the work, showcasing how the music of *Wozzeck* is integral to understanding the characters' motivations, their fears, and the oppressive world within which they struggle to survive.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ninety years after its premiere, Alban Berg's enduring opera, *Wozzeck*, continues to be the subject of performance and analysis. Describing the work as "theater set to some of the most powerful, gripping, and beautiful music ever written," Anthony Freud, the General Director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, emphasizes how "[t]he brilliance with which every scene is constructed, the devastation of the title character in understanding the betrayal of the woman he loves, the final catastrophe that overtakes them both...stays with you forever,"<sup>1</sup> attesting to the power of the opera's drama. Since its premier, analyses of *Wozzeck* have tried to better understand this "brilliance" of construction that Freud describes,<sup>2</sup> exploring the different ways audiences access the dramatic weight of the opera. This paper continues this analytical tradition, exploring the music of *Wozzeck* from a semiotic perspective in order to access a better understanding of character agency within the story.

### MUSICAL ELEMENTS: QUICK OVERVIEW

In trying to understand character agency in *Wozzeck*, three musical elements are explored in this thesis: form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics. The operational definitions of these musical elements are described in Chapter 1, but a quick summary will suffice here. Form refers to how the music is organized in the opera, how melody, harmony, texture, and various other musical elements are used to create a recognizable structure. Leitmotifs are musical ideas that are developed throughout an opera that are associated

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Freud, Program Notes. *Wozzeck* (Lyric Opera of Chicago, 2015), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

with specific dramatic ideas, which can range from characters, places, objects, beliefs, etc. Semiotic topics are musical references to other musical styles or genres through shared characteristics. This thesis explores these ideas in an effort to better understand character agency in *Wozzeck*, an opera where the idea of agency is of critical importance.

### ***WOZZECK*: PLOT AND CHARACTER AGENCY**

The story of *Wozzeck* suggests a world governed by oppressive structures, where social position dictates the path of a person's life and where the machinations of fate are ever present. The story focuses on a poor soldier named Wozzeck, who struggles to make a good life for his family, which consists of his partner Marie and their unnamed bastard child. Wozzeck believes that, as a poor man, he is doomed to suffer, and so he dutifully endures mistreatment from his unnamed Captain and strange medical experiments from his unnamed Doctor, all in an effort to help his family survive this cruel world. The stress of Wozzeck's life is so great, that even near the beginning of the opera Wozzeck experiences frightening visions he cannot understand. The visions are foreboding and apocalyptic and nature, but communicating his fear of these visions only makes the other characters question his sanity. Amongst this great stress, the breaking point for Wozzeck comes when Marie is unfaithful with the Drum Major. Wozzeck is heartbroken when he discovers his partner's infidelity, and the opera climaxes with Wozzeck murdering Marie and later drowning in a pond as he washes himself of blood. The opera ends with Wozzeck and Marie's child playing by himself, orphaned, with the implication being that the child is similarly doomed to suffer as his father did.

The oppressive role of fate and social position in *Wozzeck* makes agency an idea of great importance. The characters of *Wozzeck* must grapple with the dictates of fate and

social position throughout the story, evaluating their relationship with these oppressive structures and directing their agency in response to this evaluation. Those who assess themselves as benefitting from these oppressive structures, like the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, revel in their advantageous position, contributing to the oppression of those below them or exploiting social disconnects for their own benefit. On the other hand, those who assess themselves as suffering from these oppressive structures, like Wozzeck and Marie, struggle to address the issues that their oppression brings, expressing their discontent, trying to escape, but ultimately succumbing to oppression. The music of *Wozzeck* communicates a detailed understanding of this evaluative process and the exhibition of agency that follows, and the analyses of form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics found in this thesis aim to access the information the music provides.

## **ANALYTICAL FOUNDATION**

### *Analyses of Wozzeck: Reich, Perle, and Jarman*

Successfully accessing this musical information means taking advantage of the excellent foundation laid by previous analyses of the opera, most notably the work of Willi Reich, George Perle, and Douglas Jarman. In examining form, Reich and Jarman are especially helpful. Reich builds off of the formal outline Alban Berg provides in his own lectures on the opera, exploring how the musical material works together to make these forms perceivable and constructing interpretations of the drama based on these forms.<sup>3</sup> Jarman also constructs an interpretation of the drama based on formal structure and palindromic relationships in the work, establishing the strict form as a representation of the oppressive nature of *Wozzeck*'s world. Perle is an invaluable resource when

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<sup>3</sup> Willi Reich, *Alban Berg* (New York: Hancourt, Brace & World, 1965), 117-142.

examining leitmotifs, as he presents a robust analysis, cataloguing nineteen leitmotifs, the dramatic contexts within which they occur, and providing interpretations of the leitmotifs' functions when appropriate.<sup>4</sup> While, more recently, the dramatic importance of symmetrical pitch relationships between leitmotifs in Berg's work has been explored,<sup>5</sup> Perle's catalogue is still the most comprehensive analytical resource for the leitmotifs of *Wozzeck*. Semiotic topics are never described as such in analyses of *Wozzeck*, although the concept is addressed through Berg's description of how folk song is evoked in the opera<sup>6</sup> and Perle's overview of the dramatic role of folk music in the opera.<sup>7</sup> Perle asserts that folk music is used to provide commentary on the world of the opera, although his focus is on the function of the text instead of the actual music.<sup>8</sup> Reich, Perle, and Jarman all provide an immense amount of information on *Wozzeck*, and a semiotic approach to analysis provides a new perspective on this information, allowing access to new revelations regarding how the opera's characters exhibit agency in the story.

*Semiotics and Music: Marsoobian, Curry, and Shaftel*

The idea of semiotic analysis in opera is not new, and applying this approach to *Wozzeck* is easily justified by the existing literature. Armen Marsoobian, Ben Curry, and Matthew Shaftel all explore the concept of semiotic analysis in opera with the hope of accessing information that would otherwise be unavailable. Marsoobian notes the importance of considering musical structure in its interaction with text, making a case for

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<sup>4</sup> George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg, Volume I* (University of California Press, 1980), 93-116.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Baragwanath, "Alban Berg, Richard Wagner, and Leitmotifs of Symmetry," *19<sup>th</sup>-Century Music* 23 (1999): 62-83.

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 161.

<sup>7</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 99.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

music's "exhibitive" function,<sup>9</sup> which influences interpretation in a way that pushes beyond exploring a mimetic relationship between music and drama. Marsoobian takes issue with examining music in drama as something that serves to simply "reflect...the expressive and cognitive content" of the drama, challenging the idea that drama is fully formed before it is musically stylized.<sup>10</sup> Music plays an active part in the interpretation of drama: it interacts with the onstage action to produce new meanings. Curry asserts the dramatic importance of music from another perspective, appropriating Robert Hatten's "theories of markedness and correlation" in order to apply them within a dramatic context.<sup>11</sup> A musical example of markedness would be minor as opposed to major in the classical style, as major is considered the norm, but minor stands in opposition to it.<sup>12</sup> This can have dramatic correlations (i.e. non-tragic vs. tragic for major vs. minor, respectively),<sup>13</sup> and the way in which these oppositions and correlations interact with one another can produce meaning that informs interpretation. While Hatten's theories are not used in this thesis, this alternative perspective on how music informs drama further legitimizes this analytical endeavor.

Finally, Matthew Shaftel's analytical method, which has had the greatest influence on the analytical approach of this thesis, provides an organized way of deconstructing an opera scene in order to understand the dramatic function of various

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<sup>9</sup> Armen T. Marsoobian, "Saying, Singing, or Semiotics: 'Prima la Musica e poi le Parole' Revisited," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 54 (1996): 271.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Curry, "Musical Semiotics in Action: Applying and Debating Hatten's Semiotics in a Musico-Dramatic Context," *Studies in Musical Theatre* 4 (2010): 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

musical elements on a local level.<sup>14</sup> Shaftel investigates musical dramatic function from a type-token perspective, paying special attention to those moments when a “musical manifestation” of an idea (token) seems to differ from its generalized model (type).<sup>15</sup> Shaftel also provides a general vocabulary for describing musical function in a dramatic context. These ideas (type, token, and functional vocabulary) will all be explored in more detail in Chapter 1 and subsequently adopted for my own analyses. Although Shaftel’s method functions on a more local level, deconstructing individual scenes, this paper synthesizes the information provided by these Shaftel analyses in order to explore character agency in the drama.

## SUMMARY

A semiotic approach to analysis, as justified by Marsoobian, Curry, and Shaftel, provides a new way of examining the dramatic function of leitmotifs, form, and semiotic topics in *Wozzeck*. This, in turn, makes it possible to build off of previous analyses of the opera to access how the music informs an understanding of character agency in the work. The way in which these musical elements contribute to this understanding is an integral part of understanding the drama, and in exploring this particular dramatic function this thesis ultimately celebrates the beautiful construction of *Wozzeck* that audiences find so compelling.

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<sup>14</sup> Matthw Shaftel, ““Types, Tokens, and Figaro: Musical Structure and Dramatic Narrative in the Act I Trio from Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro*,” In *Keys to the Drama*, edited by Gordon Sly (Vermont, USA and Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009) 27-51.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

## CHAPTER 1

### PEIRCEAN SEMIOTICS, MUSICAL ELEMENTS, AND CHARACTER AGENCY: AN ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information on the concepts that motivate the analyses found in this thesis. This first involves an overview C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory, focusing on his organization of sign/representamen, interpretant, and object. Following this, form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics will be defined in a way that relates directly to Peirce's semiotic framework. Once this connection between Peircean semiotics and musical elements is established, the concept of character agency will be explored, using Alessandro Duranti's definition of agency as a departure point for examining agency in *Wozzeck*. Finally, this chapter will conclude with an overview of how these concepts can be applied to Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, laying the foundation for my analyses of character agency that are integral to understanding the work as a whole.

#### **PEIRCEAN SEMIOTICS**

##### *Peircean Signs*

C. S. Peirce's semiotic theory concerns itself with the construction of meaning through the interpretation of signs, which consist of three parts: a representamen, an object, and an interpretant. A representamen is a "signifier"<sup>1</sup> of a sign, the part of a sign that serves to represent something other than itself. This other idea being represented is

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<sup>1</sup> Michelle Metro-Roland, "Interpreting Meaning: An Application of Peircean Semiotics to Tourism," *Tourism Geographies* 11, no. 2 (2009): 272.

called the object, and the way the relationship between representamen and object is understood (how the representamen is interpreted) is called the interpretant.<sup>2</sup> A simple example of this three-part relationship is the connection between smoke and fire. In this example, the perception of smoke (the representamen) connects the perceiver to the idea of fire (the object) due to the fact that the two frequently correspond with one another (the way this connection is made is broadly called the interpretant). This connection between smoke and fire is one of several ways a representamen can signify an object, and Peirce categorizes signs based on how this connection is made. For my thesis, two of these categories are relevant: icons and indices.

The first of these, icons, are signs that have representamen that signify an object through shared characteristics. An example of this is shown in Fig. 1:



Figure 1: Icon of an apple.<sup>3</sup>

This image can be understood as an icon of an apple by virtue of the fact that it shares visual characteristics with a real apple. The shape is reminiscent of an apple's shape, the line sticking up out of the middle resembles a stem, and the oblong shape jutting to the left looks like a leaf. Within a Peircean framework, this sign construction may look like this (Fig. 2):

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>3</sup> From <https://openclipart.org/detail/183893/simple-red-apple>



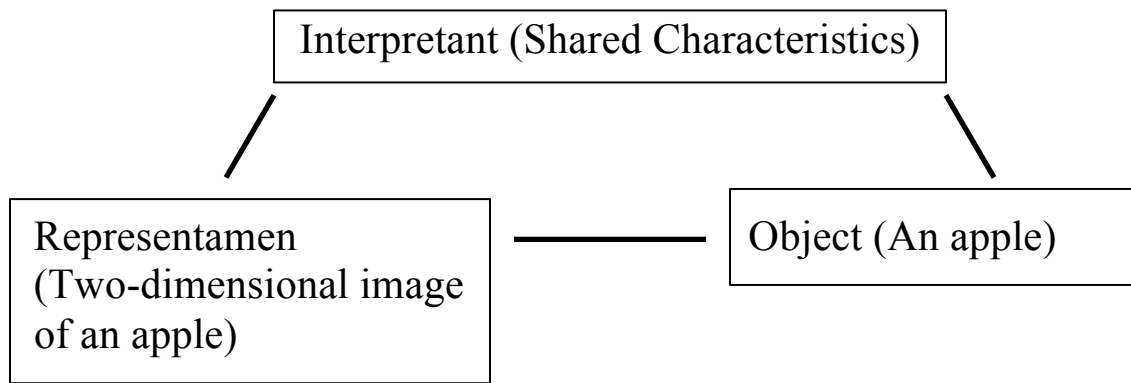


Figure 2: Iconic relationship between a two-dimensional image resembling an apple and an apple.

Because the Fig. 1 image (representamen) has visual characteristics associated with an apple (object), a connection between the image and an apple can be made based on shared characteristics (interpretant). This kind of connection based on resemblance makes this particular sign an example of an icon, one of several kinds of signs Peirce classifies in his semiotic theory.

The other classification of signs that is relevant to this thesis, indices, can be understood by returning to the smoke/fire example. In this example, how does the representamen signify the object? This signification is achieved based on the fact that the representamen (smoke) often occurs in conjunction with the object (fire). Signification like this, through correspondence or causal connection, is what makes a sign an index.<sup>4</sup> Even though smoke does not share any relevant physical characteristics with fire (if it did, this would be an iconic relationship), the two are associated with one another, making smoke an index of fire. This kind of connection serves to focus the perceiver's

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<sup>4</sup> Metro-Roland, "Interpreting Meaning," 276.

attention, “in the manner of a pointing index finger”<sup>5</sup> The components of this index example are outlined below (Fig. 3):

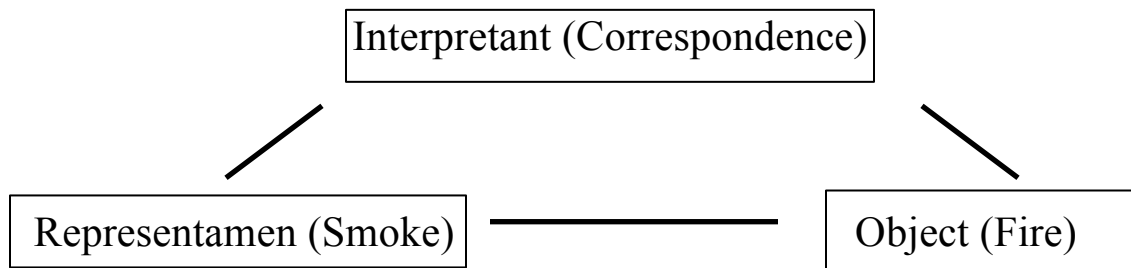


Figure 3: Indexical relationship between smoke and fire.

The overview of Peircean sign construction and classification provided here is meant to outline the basic information that motivates my analyses moving forward; it is in no way meant to be a comprehensive exploration of Peircean semiotics. The relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant is very complex, but the nuance of sign formation is not the focus of this thesis, and this basic understanding of Peircean semiotics will suffice. Most relevant now is how these concepts relate to the three musical ideas explored in this thesis: form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics.

#### *Form: Definition, Type-Token Relationship, and Function as Peircean Icon*

The first musical concept of investigation, form, refers to how musical material is organized in a work. This can be both on a large scale (the musical relationship between acts of an opera) and a small scale (the musical organization of individual scenes of an opera). Some Western art music examples of form include sonata-allegro form, with its exposition, development, and recapitulation structure, and rondo form, with an alternation between a main theme and episodes featuring contrasting material. Organization does not have to be based on pre-existing forms, however. A composer has the freedom to

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 276.

organize the music as he/she sees fit. Based on pre-existing forms or not, the musical structure can be communicated through the organization of melody, harmony, texture, or whatever other musical ideas the composer decides to utilize. For this thesis, the organization of musical material into perceived forms is based on a type-token relationship, which I define below.

Using Matthew Shaftel's definition of type and token as it relates to form, a semiotic type is a "culturally defined formal model," and a semiotic token is "the musical manifestation of a formal strategy in a particular work."<sup>6</sup> In other words, a semiotic type is a general formal structure, and a token is a specific example of the structure. From a Peircean perspective, a type-token relationship can be understood as an iconic one, whereby a formal token (representamen) signifies a formal type (object) through shared characteristics (interpretant). An example of this is the relationship between the sonata-form structure of Act II, Scene 1 of *Wozzeck* (token) and the general sonata-form model (type). The music of the scene has certain characteristics that connect it to sonata form (i.e. an exposition, development, and recapitulation). Here is a visual representation of this iconic relationship (Fig. 4):

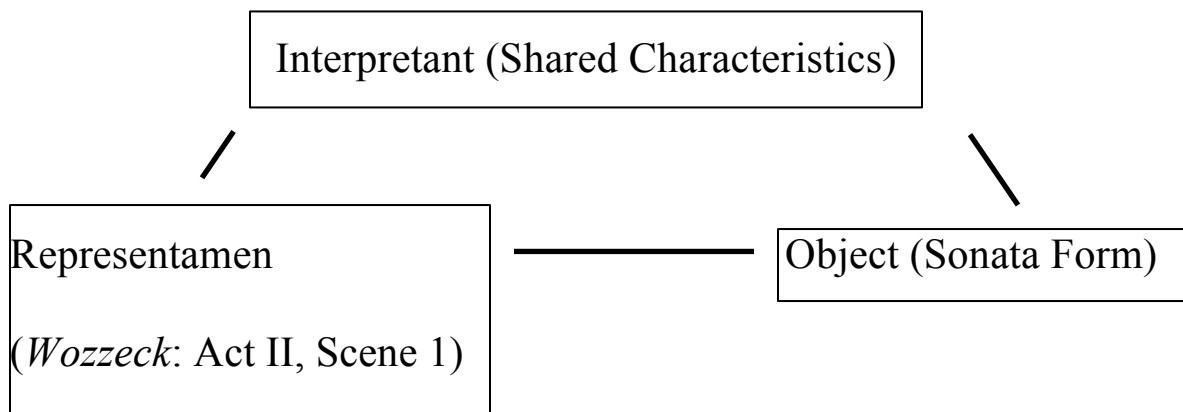


Figure 4: Type-token iconic relationship between Act II, Scene 1 of *Wozzeck* and sonata form.

<sup>6</sup> Shaftel, "Types Tokens and Figaro," 29.

As Fig. 4 shows, the music of Act II, Scene 1 signifies the sonata form model because it shares pertinent musical characteristics with the model. This makes the musical form of Act II, Scene 1 a *token* of the sonata form *type*.

#### *Leitmotifs: Definition and Function as Peircean Indices*

Leitmotifs are the second musical concept of interest, and they too can be understood from a Peircean perspective. A leitmotif is a musical idea that represents a dramatic idea in an opera. Leitmotifs can represent specific characters, events, feelings, objects, etc., and a leitmotif acquires its dramatic meaning by corresponding with the dramatic idea when it is presented. For example, in Act I, Scene 1 of *Wozzeck*, as Wozzeck begins to describe his miserable destiny as a poor man, he sings the leitmotif that George Perle calls “Wir arme Leut!” (“We poor folk!”).<sup>7</sup> Because the “Wir arme Leut!” musical idea temporally corresponds to Wozzeck’s lament of fate and social position, the leitmotif connects the listener to these two concepts whenever it occurs, allowing it to inject meaning into the drama.

The relationship between a leitmotif and its dramatic meaning is fundamentally an indexical one. This is because a leitmotif (representamen) signifies a dramatic idea (object) through correspondence (interpretant). This relationship is presented below (Fig. 5):

---

<sup>7</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 97. All leitmotif names used in this thesis are borrowed from George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg, Volume I* (University of California Press, 1980). Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from the opera are from the English subtitles provided in *Wozzeck*, DVD, directed by Rolf Liebermann, (1970, Arthaus Musik, 2007).

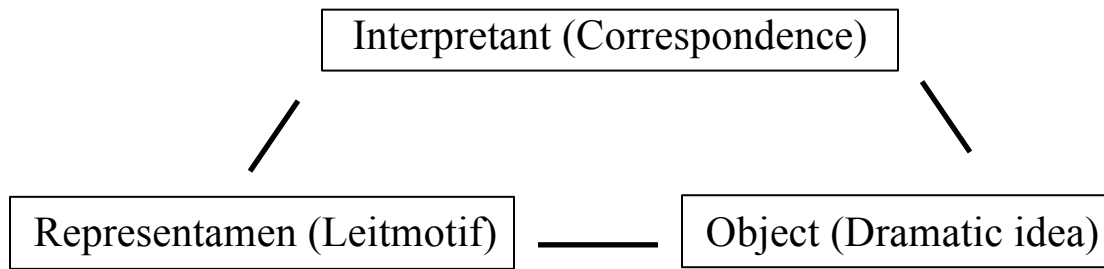


Figure 5: Leitmotifs as indices.

Fig. 5 shows how leitmotifs function as Peircean indices. A leitmotif is presented in conjunction with the presentation of an important dramatic idea, and its continued association and transformation focuses the audience's attention toward the signified dramatic content, injecting additional dramatic meaning into a scene.

#### *Semiotic Topics: Definition and Function as Peircean Icons*

Semiotic topics, references to external styles or genres,<sup>8</sup> are the last musical concept explored in this thesis. Topics are formed when a given musical excerpt has perceivable characteristics that can be associated with a style or genre to which the excerpt does not belong. For example, if a musical excerpt incorporated a snare drum, brass instruments, dotted rhythms, and a tempo of approximately 120 beats per minute, it could be understood as referencing a march style. Here, timbre, rhythm, and tempo work together to create this semiotic topic.

Because topics relate to external styles or genres through shared characteristics, they are considered icons from a Peircean perspective. The music being perceived (representamen) signifies the external style or genre (object) through similarity (interpretant). See below (Fig. 6):

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<sup>8</sup> Shaftel, "Types, Token, and Figaro," 33.

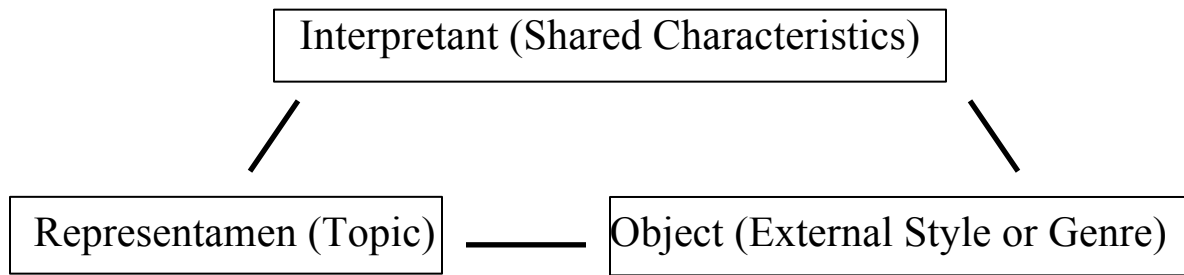


Figure 6: Topics as icons.

As Fig. 6 shows, topics signify particular genres or styles by sharing characteristics with that style. In this way, topics function as Peircean icons.

The overview of form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics presented here provides basic information regarding how these musical ideas are conceptualized in proceeding analyses, but it does not explore the primary goal of these analyses. This thesis explores how characters in *Wozzeck* exhibit their agency through interactions with form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics as understood from a Peircean perspective. The concept of agency is a complicated one, and a foundational exploration of the subject is necessary to properly access my analyses in subsequent chapters.

### **CHARACTER AGENCY: ALESSANDRO DURANTI DEFINITION**

What makes an exploration of agency so complicated is that agency is “often define[d] inadequately” despite the fact that the term is frequently used,<sup>9</sup> and its association with linguistics, sociology, and drama make it an incredibly loaded term. Exploring the complications behind defining agency is not a part of this thesis. For my analytical purposes, Alessandro Duranti’s definition of agency is used, which, despite

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<sup>9</sup> Laura Ahearn, “Agency and Language,” in *Handbook of Pragmatics*, edited by Jef Verschueren, Jan-Ola Östman, and Jürgen Jaspers, (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 2010), 28.

referring specifically to agency in language, can nonetheless be reasonably appropriated for use within a dramatic context. Duranti's definition of agency is as follows:

(1) Agency is here understood as the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities' (and sometimes their own), and (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for a given outcome).<sup>10</sup>

Breaking this definition down and applying it to the idea of character agency in a dramatic context, agency belongs to a character if, within the story, he/she has personal control over how he/she acts, is capable of enacting change on the world, others, or himself/herself, and is a character whose actions can be evaluated. This definition does not presuppose that exhibiting agency is a fundamentally rebellious act, a viewpoint of agency that Laura Ahearn finds narrow-minded,<sup>11</sup> and so this definition enables the exploration of agency exhibited by certain characters who "resist the status quo," find dissatisfaction with it, or conform to it. In analyzing *Wozzeck*, finding agency in relation to the status quo is important, as the world of the opera is an oppressive one, and the characters must evaluate their relationship to this oppression as they seek to enact change on their world, others, or themselves.

### **AGENCY IN *WOZZECK*: EVALUATION AND OPPRESSION**

The capacity for a person to demonstrate agency contrary to strict world structures is a subject of debate central to the plot of *Wozzeck*. Wozzeck himself does not believe himself capable of such agency, referencing his poor social state as something that cannot be challenged and which determines what actions are possible for a man. Though he

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<sup>10</sup> Alessandro Duranti, "Agency in Language," in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, edited by Alessandro Duranti (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 453.

<sup>11</sup> Ahearn, "Agency and Language," 30.

evaluates his oppressed state as undesirable, he also indicates that his state cannot be changed. Wozzeck tells his Captain in Act I, Scene 1 that the poor “are damned in this world and the next,” asserting that he is doomed to suffer because of his social state and never referencing the possibility of altering this predetermined course. He expands on this philosophy in Act I, Scene 4, telling the Doctor that “sometimes a man has such character, such structure” when trying to explain his actions. This lack of faith in directing agency in opposition of these structures is also built into the prophetic nature of Wozzeck’s visions, as the “fiery red form in the sky,” coupled with the “flashes” of a knife, determine a murderous course for Wozzeck from which he does not deviate. Based on the evaluations Wozzeck makes regarding his relationship with the world, he directs his agency towards conforming to the structures that oppress him.

Marie is another character who evaluates her relationship with the oppressive order as a negative one, though she directs her agency toward a different goal. Marie believes that the oppressive structures of her world can be resisted, and she takes steps to actively change her unfortunate state. Through her affair with the Drum Major she is able to dream of a better state, recognizing that her “lips are as rosy as those of fine ladies,” underscoring a belief that she deserves a better life. Marie’s dream is unfulfilled in the opera, with Marie’s murder robbing her of any chance she may have had at a better life, but this does not extinguish the fact that she believed a chance existed. For Marie, the status quo can be shifted, and, dissatisfied with her place in the world, she directs her agency toward change.



## ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: MATTHEW SHAFTEL'S TAXONOMY OF MUSICAL FUNCTION

This kind of evaluative process, responding to the oppressive order and directing agency accordingly, occurs throughout *Wozzeck*, and this thesis aims to understand how the opera's music contributes to an understanding of this process. Form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics are connected to the idea of agency in *Wozzeck* based on Matthew Shaftel's taxonomy of musical function in drama, and it is necessary to understand Shaftel's particular vocabulary for describing this organization in order to properly understand my analyses. When examining how music interacts with drama in an opera scene, Shaftel lists four possible functions music can perform: it can "*paraphrase* or correspond with the meaning of the drama," "*polarize* or define an ambiguous dramatic content," "*contradict* or *ignore* the drama," or "*supplement* the drama, frequently in the form of a subnarrative or subtext."<sup>12</sup> Three of these, *paraphrasing*, *contradiction*, and *supplementation*, inform an understanding of agency in *Wozzeck*.

### *Paraphrasing: Definition and Connection to Agency through Conformity*

A musical idea *paraphrases* the onstage drama if it mimics the dramatic action in some way. This is best understood through example: the relationship between the drama and the musical form of Act I, Scene 1 of *Wozzeck*. This scene features the Captain having a conversation with Wozzeck while Wozzeck shaves him. The conversation darts around a myriad of different subjects: time, morality, the weather, and Wozzeck's bastard child are all discussed, among other topics. Wozzeck is generally a complacent listener in the scene, only contributing significantly to the conversation in defense of his child. The scene ends with the Captain advising Wozzeck to take life slowly.

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<sup>12</sup> Shaftel, "Types, Tokens, and Figaro," 45.

The music of this scene is structured into the form of a suite. This suite is a collection of dances, and the varying dances in the collection correspond directly to the Captain's collection of "loosely juxtaposed conversational topics."<sup>13</sup> As the conversation changes from one subject to another, so too does the music change from one dance to another. In this instance, the musical form is not communicating any substantial dramatic information, and the scene features a dramatic structure that matches the musical structure. This is simple correspondence between the drama and the music constitutes *paraphrasing*.

Because music that *paraphrases* the dramatic action does so by conforming to the dramatic structure, it is inherently related to an evaluation that directs agency towards conformity in *Wozzeck*. Characters use *paraphrasing* music in *Wozzeck* to communicate a belief that the oppressive order cannot or need not be challenged. Wozzeck, as one who suffers from oppression, evaluates his position as undesirable, but also believes it to be immutable, and this is in part communicated through his *paraphrasing* music. The Captain and the Doctor, benefitting from their position, use *paraphrasing* music because there is no need for them to challenge the structure of their world. Tracing this evaluative process and its role in directing characters' agency is the main focus of this thesis.

#### *Contradiction: Definition and Connection to Dissatisfaction*

My analyses explore instances of musical *contradiction* within the formal structures of *Wozzeck*, which refer to moments when type and token do not agree. One such *contradiction* occurs in Act II, Scene 1 of the opera. This scene features Marie at home with her child, admiring earrings she received from the Drum Major while trying to

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<sup>13</sup> Reich, *Alban Berg*, 121.

lull her child to sleep. When Wozzeck enters the scene he asks Marie where she received her earrings, betraying suspicion of her. Wozzeck eventually relents in his interrogation, however, giving her his day's wages before leaving the house. The scene ends with Marie admitting to herself that she is "a bad person" as she reflects on her infidelity.

Musically, this scene is structured in sonata form, although some of the musical material *contradicts* the typical organization of this form. A typical sonata form features an exposition that potentially repeats, a development, and a recapitulation, and the music of Act II, Scene 1 is organized in this way with one notable exception. A false repeat of the exposition occurs in the music, creating a *contradiction* between the general sonata form structure (type) and the manifestation of sonata form structure presented in the scene (token). This *contradiction* makes this section stand out as especially significant, and it dramatically corresponds to Marie remarking on her social state: "We share but a small corner of the world and a broken piece of mirror." The *contradiction* underscores the thematic significance of this statement.

Musical *contradiction*, by conflicting with prescribed structures, relates to a dissatisfaction of the social status quo in *Wozzeck*. In the opera, characters use formal *contradictions* like the one outlined above as platforms for expressing their fears and concerns regarding the world they live in, giving voice to their motivations as they seek change in their world.

### *Supplementation: Definition and Flexible Application*

Whereas musical *paraphrasing*, by conforming to the dramatic action, specifically aids an examination of agency through conformity, and musical *contradiction*, by conflicting with strict structures, specifically aids an examination of characters' dissatisfaction with their world, musical *supplementation* is more flexible. Music that *supplements* the drama does so by providing subtext to the action. Unlike the *paraphrasing* music, *supplementary* music carries substantial dramatic meaning, injecting that meaning into the scene as it is used. Depending on the context in which *supplementation* is used, it can communicate a wide range of ideas related to agency in *Wozzeck*.

An important example of *supplementation* occurs in Act I, Scene 1 of the opera, which has already been summarized in the *paraphrasing* example. As Wozzeck defends his bastard child from the Captain's insults, he informs the Captain of his personal worldview, explaining that, as a poor man, he is incapable of being moral. Wozzeck's philosophy links his social state to the idea of fate, an idea that follows Wozzeck throughout the opera.

Wozzeck's explanation of his ideology corresponds with the "Wir arme Leut!" ("We poor folk!") leitmotif, a leitmotif that is used throughout the opera (Fig. 7). This correspondence connects the leitmotif to the idea of fate, and its occurrence in various contexts throughout the opera adds subtext to the drama, emphasizing the importance of fate in the story. The leitmotif is indicative of Wozzeck's evaluation of himself in relation to his world, as he understands how he suffers under an oppression he cannot escape. This evaluation, in turn, directs Wozzeck's agency towards conforming to the dictates of fate and social position, culminating in Marie's murder.

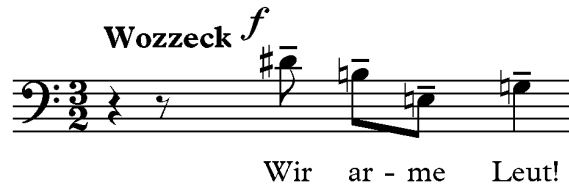


Figure 7: “Wir arme Leut!” (“We poor folk!”) leitmotif.<sup>14</sup>

In the example outlined above, *supplementation* is used to frame Wozzeck’s belief in agency through conformity as an important thematic element, but this connection between *supplementation* and agency through conformity is particular to the specific example provided. Different *supplementary* examples providing different subtext could relate to various other ideas, and so *supplementation* is not specifically associated with one form of agency like *paraphrasing* and *contradiction*. The analyses in proceeding chapters explore how musical *supplementation* informs an understanding of character agency in general.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined the main concepts that motivate the analyses found in this thesis. The subjects of analysis, form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics in *Wozzeck*, can all be understood as Peircean signs that contain important dramatic information. Analyzing these musical concepts in *Wozzeck* from this perspective reveals how the music of the opera contributes to an understanding of character agency in the work. Whether they conform to the oppressive status quo of their world or try to break free from it, the characters of *Wozzeck* evaluate themselves and direct their agency through their interaction with form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics, transmitting important

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<sup>14</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all music figures are created in Sibelius 7 based off of Alban Berg, *Wozzeck*, reduction by Fritz Heinrich Klein (Vienna: Universal Edition, 1931).

dramatic information through music. In deconstructing how this information is communicated, Matthew Shaftel's taxonomy of musical function in drama is used to organize the kind of agency being exhibited: *paraphrasing*, as a musical function that conforms to the dramatic structure, connects characters to agency through conformity; *contradiction*, as a musical function that breaks out of prescribed structures, connects to dissatisfaction as characters evaluate themselves in relation to their world; and *supplementation*, as a musical function that provides subtext to the drama, can connect characters to various concepts depending on the specific context. This analytical process provides a detailed look at character agency in *Wozzeck* while promoting a better understanding of characters' fears, their motivations, and the way in which they struggle to survive in their difficult world.

## CHAPTER 2

### EVALUATION AND EXPRESSION IN THE FORMS OF *WOZZECK*

Musical form in *Wozzeck* plays a prominent dramatic role throughout the opera, operating in various ways to underscore how the characters negotiate the “inhuman[,]. . . sadistic social order” and the “uncaring and hostile world” within which they find themselves.<sup>1</sup> Douglas Jarman has noted how the strict structure of the scenes provides subtext to the drama by representing the rigid, fatalistic world of *Wozzeck*,<sup>2</sup> and how a given character interacts with musical form is indicative of their relationship with these oppressive structures. For the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, agency is exhibited in a way that does not challenge the oppressive nature of their world. Benefitting from their social position, the characters display agency through sadism, abusing those below them. These characters’ approval of the socially imbalanced status quo is musically manifest in their consistent association with formal structures that *paraphrase* the dramatic action. For the purposes of form, *paraphrasing* occurs if two criteria are met in a given musical example:

1. The musical example of the form being used (token) does not differ from its general model (type).

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<sup>1</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

2. The general model (type) of the form being used mimics the dramatic structure as the scene progresses.

Within these *paraphrasing* forms, the drama is directly adhering to the cold, “mechanistic”<sup>3</sup> musical structure, and so these characters become associated with the “inhuman,” “sadistic,” “uncaring,” and “hostile”<sup>4</sup> characteristics that the music represents. Their musical material does not challenge the rigid musical structure, as they take advantage of the cruel nature of the world.

For Wozzeck and Marie, however, there is a greater variation of formal association. Like the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, Wozzeck and Marie frequently operate in concordance with strict formal structures, but, at important dramatic moments, musical *contradictions* occur within these forms. For the analytical purposes here, musical *contradiction* in form occurs if the musical example of the form being used (token) differs in some significant way from its general model (type). These *contradictions* signal when Wozzeck and Marie are evaluating their condition in relationship to their world, finding dissatisfaction with it. During *contradictions*, Wozzeck and Marie are either actively trying to break free from the dictates of their oppressive world or communicating their desire to break free. Ultimately, this makes Wozzeck and Marie’s fate all the more tragic, as the music creates a narrative where these two characters unsuccessfully rebel against the unyielding structures that lead to their destruction.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 60.



## THE OPPRESSIVE NATURE OF FORM IN *WOZZECK*

Form as a representation of an unyielding, fatalistic structure is firmly established in Act I, Scene 2 of the opera, as the foreboding text works in conjunction with the strict form to create this association. The scene takes place in an open field, as Wozzeck and his fellow soldier, Andres, are working. Throughout the scene, Wozzeck's fear that "this place is cursed" becomes increasingly exacerbated, though Andres dismisses his concerns, choosing instead to encourage Wozzeck to sing a hunting song with him. Wozzeck does not comply, however, and his last vision is that of a fire that "rages from the earth to the heavens with a thunderous roar like an army of trombones!" When this vision ceases, Wozzeck notes the silence around him, saying that it is "like the world had died." After this, Wozzeck and Andres leave for the barracks.

This scene marks Wozzeck's first vision in the opera, and its apocalyptic nature emphasizes the important idea of fate in the scene. His assertion that the land is cursed creates a sense of foreboding and clarifies that his fear lies in what the hostile world can do. His visions are frightening, not because they are simple hallucinations, but because they anticipate a potentially violent future.

The dramatic emphasis placed on hostility and fate finds its correlate in the inflexible musical structure of this scene. The music of Act I, Scene 2, features the organized development of three musical ideas: A: a series of three chords, B: a hunting song, and C: a four-note motif. The form of this organization is found below, recreated from Willi Reich's own analysis of the scene (Fig. 8).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Reich, *Alban Berg*, 126.

<b>Measures</b>	Mm. 201-222			Mm. 223-245		Mm. 245-268		Mm. 269-298		Mm. 299-329	
<b>Characters involved</b>	Wozzeck and Andres			Wozzeck		Andres		Wozzeck		Wozzeck and Andres	
<b>Musical Structure</b>	C	Exposition of A and B Material	C	First development of A Material	C	Development of B Material	C	Second development of A Material	C	Coda: A and reference to B	C

Figure 8: Formal outline of Act I, Scene 2.<sup>6</sup>

Act I, Scene 2 begins with an exposition, introducing the A and B material. After this exposition, A and B are independently featured in their own sections, a section focusing on A is repeated, and the scene ends with a coda which, like the exposition, features both A and B. Throughout the scene, the C material acts as a “bridge motif” that links the sections together.<sup>7</sup>

This form features two notable palindromes as important structural elements. The organization of Exposition (Mixture of A and B), A, B, A, and Coda (Mixture of A and B), is itself palindromic, as shown in Fig. 9.

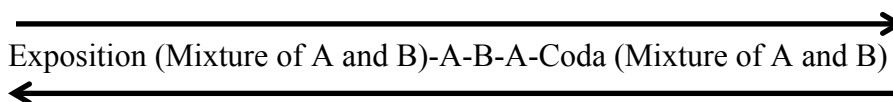


Fig. 9: Palindromic structure of Act I, Scene 2.

This strict palindromic structure is reinforced by a palindromic harmonic connection found in the music. In the exposition, the chords of A material are presented as I, II, III, but in the coda, this material is presented as III, II, I (Fig. 10).

<sup>6</sup> Adapted from Reich, *Alban Berg*, 126.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 126.

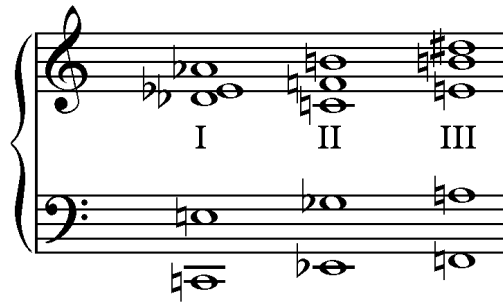


Figure 10: “A” material chords in Act I, Scene 1.<sup>8</sup>

Douglas Jarman notes that a palindromic connection like the ones present in this scene represents an inexorable process that, “once started, runs its predetermined course to return, like the turning earth and mill-wheel, to the point at which it started.”<sup>9</sup> This scene presents a structural representation of this oppressive process that the characters of *Wozzeck* must interact with throughout the opera. By adhering to the musical form, the characters fail to challenge what the form represents, and chose to either take advantage of the oppressive structure or resign themselves to oppression.

#### **FORMAL *PARAPHRASING*, EVALUATION, AND SADISM: THE CAPTAIN, DOCTOR, AND DRUM MAJOR**

For the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, the interaction between form and drama is simple, as they operate within formal structures that *paraphrase* the dramatic action. Act I, Scene 1 provides one example of this. In this scene, the Captain pontificates about the nature of time and morality as Wozzeck shaves him. As the scene progresses and the Captain begins to berate Wozzeck for having a bastard child, Wozzeck argues with the Captain, saying, “Just try bringing up children in a moral fashion without [money]!” The Captain is not receptive to this statement however, and dismisses Wozzeck.

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from Reich, *Alban Berg*, 127.

<sup>9</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 64.

Musically, this scene is organized as a suite of short dances that *paraphrase* the dramatic action by corresponding to the “loosely juxtaposed conversational topics” present in the scene.<sup>10</sup> As the music moves from one dance to another in the suite, so too do the Captain and Wozzeck move from one conversation to another, creating a parallel between the music and the drama.<sup>11</sup> This musical mimicry fits the definition of *paraphrasing*. The Captain and Wozzeck, by not challenging the formal structure, communicate their response to what the form represents. The Captain, evaluating his position as beneficial within the oppressive social structure, comfortably goes about his business of dominating Wozzeck. Wozzeck, on the other hand, though he evaluates his position as unfavorable within the oppressive structure, merely expresses his belief that his position is immutable, and allows himself to be subjugated. Motivated by these evaluations, the Captain and Wozzeck make no musical attempt to break out of the form that organizes the scene. Examining the Captain specifically, this creates an ironic situation. The Captain tells Wozzeck, “I shudder when I think that the world revolves on its axis every single day. Why the mere sight of even a mill-wheel makes me melancholic,” relating these images to the cyclical, predetermined course of time.<sup>12</sup> Although the Captain fears the kind of oppressive structure represented by the mill-wheel, as a character that is consistently associated with musical *paraphrasing*, he benefits most by adhering to the cruel structure he abhors. As the music communicates, the Captain benefits from exhibiting agency in concordance with the oppressive formal structure, contributing to Wozzeck’s own oppression.

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<sup>10</sup> Reich, *Alban Berg*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

The Doctor is another character who evaluates his position as favorable while ironically finding agency in the oppression of Wozzeck. His interaction form in Act I, Scene 4 exemplifies this idea. The scene consists of the Doctor berating Wozzeck for jeopardizing his research by urinating in the street, and this leads to an argument over nature and freedom. The Doctor tells Wozzeck that “[m]an is free! In man, individuality is transfigured into freedom,” expressing an opinion that starkly contrasts both Wozzeck and the Captain’s fear of fate. Following this, Wozzeck’s rebuttal is not positively received, but its content reinforces the dominating perspective on fate that the musical form supports: he says, “But Doctor, you see, sometimes a man has such a character, such structure,” clearly forming the beginning of an argument that these structures can determine action independent of free will, but is unable to finish this thought as a prophetic vision overtakes him:

Ah, ah, Marie. When all is dark, and a crimson glow rises in the west as if from a hearth, what can you cling to? Doctor. When the sun shines at noon and it seems as if the world will go up in flames...

Wozzeck is unable to finish describing his vision as he is overcome with fear. The Doctor is ultimately pleased with Wozzeck’s behavior, encouraging him to “continue nurturing [his] obsessions,” convinced that in doing so, the Doctor will become “immortal” through his research.

Just as with the Captain’s scene, the music of Act I, Scene 4 *paraphrases* the dramatic action, appropriately tailoring itself to the concept of fate that motivates the characters’ discussion. Berg describes the musical form as a “Passacaglia or Chaconne.”<sup>13</sup> Both passacaglia and chaconne refer to Baroque genres that involve

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 162.

variations on a theme,<sup>14</sup> and the form of Act I, Scene 4 consists of a series of variations on a twelve-note theme.<sup>15</sup> In his lectures, Berg notes that the obsessive concentration on a single theme parallels the Doctor's own obsession with becoming immortal through his research, asserting that the music creates "the strongest possible connection to the dramatic action."<sup>16</sup> This absolute adherence to the established musical structure clarifies the *paraphrasing* nature of the form, establishing the Doctor as a character who finds agency in taking advantage of the strict world structure, oppressing Wozzeck. Just as with the Captain, the irony of this is present, because although the Doctor asserts belief in the free will of man, hinting at a rebellious ideology, his musical associations show how he benefits most by acting contrary to his expressed views.

Unlike the Captain and the Doctor, the Drum Major never addresses the concept of fate through his speech, but the formal structures that correspond with his actions nonetheless connect him to agency that takes advantage of the oppressive order, as Act I, Scene 5 shows. This scene features the Drum Major seducing Marie. It begins playfully, as Marie requests that the Drum Major "[m]arch up and down a bit" so that she can admire him. As the Drum Major becomes more aggressive in his advances, a struggle ensues, but Marie eventually stops resisting, crying out, "Oh, well, it's all the same to me!"

The form of this scene *paraphrases* the action by corresponding to the Drum Major's increasing dominance of Marie. Berg describes the form of this scene in his

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<sup>14</sup> Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, A4 and A14.

<sup>15</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 162.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

lectures as “rondo-like,”<sup>17</sup> which means there is an alternation between a main theme and musical episodes.<sup>18</sup> For my analysis here, the main rondo theme is most clearly marked by a recurring fanfare motif (Fig. 11), with the episodes consisting of the development of musical material first sung by Marie at the beginning of the scene (Fig. 12).



evaluations of their relationship with the oppressive order. Both of these characters operate within strict forms like the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, but not with the same consistency. As the proceeding analyses show, although Wozzeck and Marie's actions are *paraphrased* by musical forms throughout the opera, underscoring their own oppression, two notable formal *contradictions* occur in the opera that communicate how they are trying express their misery in relation to the oppressive order. Ultimately, this amplifies the tragedy of their fate when their resistance is unsuccessful.

An example of Marie functioning within a *paraphrasing* musical structure has already been examined in the Drum Major example above, but another, more intimate example of this structural depiction of Marie evaluating her oppressed position can be found in Act III, Scene 1 of the opera. This scene consists of Marie reading her Bible, contemplating the state of her soul and the consequences of her infidelity. She seeks out examples of sinful women in the Bible who are shown mercy, hoping that, if God could show mercy to them, He might "have mercy on [her] too!" There is, however, a sense that Marie is aware of how she has set events in motion that cannot be stopped, as she beckons her child, singing a poignant prophecy:

There was once a poor child, with no father or mother. They were all dead.  
He had nobody left and was starving, and cried day and night.

This unfortunate prediction ultimately describes the reality of Wozzeck, Marie, and their son at the end of the opera. Following this prediction, the scene ends with Marie exploring how Mary Magdalene was treated in the Bible, as she prays for the same chance to repent that Mary had.



The music of this scene is structured as an “Invention on a theme,”<sup>19</sup> and it *paraphrases* Marie’s actions, representing the oppressive force of fate and giving little hope that Marie’s contrite manner will change her situation. In this scene, Marie’s obsession with sin and mercy is represented by the constant reconfiguration of the main theme into seven variations.<sup>20</sup> The mechanistic nature of this musical structure is most clearly represented by its fidelity to the number seven as an important structural number. The theme is seven bars long, it is varied seven times, and it ends with a fugue that has seven note subjects and twenty-one bars (7 X 3).<sup>21</sup> The strict treatment of this musical theme *paraphrases* Marie’s own obsession and underscores how powerless she feels, incapable of changing the course of events and seeking help from God. Although she hopes for forgiveness, the rigid form also suggests that events will continue to run their predetermined course.

This act of contrition by Marie leads into Act III Scene 2, a scene where the music *paraphrases* Wozzeck’s murderous obsession. Here, the musical structure communicates how Wozzeck finds agency by conforming to the fatalistic order of the world. This is the murder scene, in which Wozzeck and Marie are walking through the woods towards town. Wozzeck invites Marie to sit with him and begins to reminisce about his relationship with her, noting how long they have been together and telling her, “I would sacrifice heaven and all eternity, if I could kiss you so again. But I can’t.” Wozzeck’s statements become more ominous, as he tells Marie that “[t]hose who are cold shiver no

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<sup>19</sup> Reich, *Alban Berg*, 121.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

more. You will not shiver in the morning dew.” The scene ends with Wozzeck stabbing Marie as a blood-red moon watches over the characters.

The musical form of this scene is an “Invention on a note,”<sup>22</sup> and it *paraphrases* Wozzeck’s fixation on killing Marie. B-natural is the note of interest for this scene, a note that has had a foreboding role in previous scenes. Berg mentions that “the low B that accompanies the prophetic last words of Act II (‘He bleeds’, ‘One thing after another’) has both dramatic significance and significance as regards the formal design of [Act III, Scene 2],” referencing its violent and prophetic association. In Act III, Scene 2, this note pervades the musical texture becoming more pronounced as Wozzeck comes closer to committing his violent act. This simple correspondence to Wozzeck’s actions connects Wozzeck to the inhuman characteristics of fate, as he finds agency when he allows his violent prophecies to be realized.

As with the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, Wozzeck and Marie operate within *paraphrasing* forms throughout the opera, but this is not always the case. There are distinct moments in the opera during which Wozzeck and Marie present material that conflicts with the established musical structure, expressing their desires and fears that speak to the human torment that afflicts them. Through musical *contradiction*, Marie and Wozzeck are shown at their most human, framing their deaths as the tragedies that they are.

For Marie, a major musical *contradiction* can be found in Act II, Scene 1 of the opera, informing the audience of what motivates Marie’s infidelity. The scene begins with Marie admiring earrings she received from the Drum Major. She scares her child to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 121.

sleep with a frightening lullaby (“A Gypsy lad is on the prowl, He’ll lead you off, by the hand To his far-off Gypsy-land”) so that she can continue looking at her earrings. Then she pauses, saying to herself that “[w]e share but a small corner of the world and a broken piece of mirror.” Eventually, Wozzeck enters, confronting Marie and asking her where her earrings came from. The scene ends with Wozzeck giving Marie his day’s wages before leaving and Marie expressing her guilt to herself.

This scene is organized as a “strict sonata structure,” with an exposition, a “varied and shortened” repeat of the exposition, a development, and a recapitulation.<sup>23</sup> In his lectures, Berg notes how this form corresponds to various dramatic elements, including how the first subject, second subject, and coda correlate with Marie, the child, and Wozzeck, respectively,<sup>24</sup> but he does not go beyond an analysis of how the form *paraphrases* the action. This overlooks an important musical *contradiction* that occurs in the repeat of the exposition, which becomes clear when compared to the original exposition. In the original exposition, the first and second subjects are approximately balanced in terms of length, with the first subject consisting of approximately 22 measures (mm. 7-28) and the second subject consisting of approximately 24 measures (mm. 29-52). In contrast, the repeated exposition is imbalanced, with a 21 measure first subject (mm. 60-80) and a 12 measure second subject (mm. 81-92). The variation of the first subject is especially peculiar, as the first nine measures of the variation are at a slower tempo, not reaching the original tempo until m. 69. It is interesting to note that, without these nine measures, the repeated exposition would be balanced just like the first,

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<sup>23</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 163.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 162-163.

conforming to Berg’s description of it as “varied and shortened.”<sup>25</sup> This makes mm. 60-68 a structural anomaly, a false repeat of the exposition, a musical *contradiction* that underscores the importance of what is happening at this dramatic moment. It is during this musical *contradiction* that Marie stops admiring her earrings and directly evaluates her poor social state: “We share but a small corner of the world and a broken piece of mirror.” Marie’s comment puts words to her motivation in the story, directing her agency. She is tired of her poor social position, and she desires to escape from the uncaring world that has relegated her to this state just as she escapes from the strict musical form in order to express this desire. Her attempt to escape, of course, ends with her death, and it is this moment of humanity shown in Act II, Scene 1 that frames Marie’s lack of success as tragic (see Fig. 13 below for an outline of the musical *contradiction*).

Sonata Form Model (Type)	Exposition	Repeat of Exposition	Development	Recapitulation
Act II, Scene 1 Musical Structure (Token)	Exposition	<b>False Repeat of Exposition (<i>Contradiction</i>)</b> followed by repeat of exposition	Development	Recapitulation
Dramatic Content	Marie admires her earrings and puts her child to bed.	<b>During the <i>contradiction</i>, Marie comments on her social state.</b>	Marie and Wozzeck argue about the earrings, Wozzeck laments his child’s state.	Marie contemplates her sinful nature.

Figure 13: Musical *contradiction* in Act II, Scene 1.

Similarly, Wozzeck is framed as sympathetic in Act I, Scene 3, with a musical *contradiction* corresponding to Wozzeck expressing his fear and motivation. The scene

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 163.

consists of Marie admiring the Drum Major and, after putting her child to sleep, daydreaming about him. Her reverie is interrupted, however, by Wozzeck's entrance, as he struggles to understand his visions ("Is it not written: 'The smoke of the country rose like that of a furnace'"). After this, Wozzeck leaves for the barracks so that he can continue to support his family, and Marie expresses concern for Wozzeck's mental state. The scene ends with Marie singing, "Ah! We poor folk. I cannot bear it. I'm frightened!"

Musically, Wozzeck's entrance corresponds with a deviation from the expected structure within the scene, which up until this point has consisted of a march and a lullaby. Reich notes that, following Wozzeck announcing his arrival by knocking on the window of his house, the music breaks out of its formal scheme.<sup>26</sup> The focus is no longer on the march and lullaby material that structured the beginning of the scene. This musical *contradiction* calls special attention to the drama that follows Wozzeck's entrance, helping frame Wozzeck as a sympathetic character. First, this section informs the audience of why Wozzeck is willing to endure the suffering he puts himself through, as he makes it clear that he suffers for his family, most especially his child: "My child...my child...I must go now." Wozzeck will later confirm this motivation with the Doctor in Act I, Scene 4, as Wozzeck tells him, "My wife gets the extra. That's why I do it." Second, the musical *contradiction* that corresponds with this marks the only time a character shows genuine concern for Wozzeck's mental state. Following Wozzeck's exit, Marie cries out, "Poor man! So haunted. He didn't even look at his child. His strange ideas have driven him to madness!" Here, Wozzeck's apparent insanity is given a more human dimension, as he musically communicates a desire to escape from the oppressive

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<sup>26</sup> Reich, *Alban Berg*, 128.

structure that causes him such stress. Through *contradiction*, Wozzeck is able to communicate his concerns as he evaluates his place in the world.

## SUMMARY

As the preceding analyses have shown, formal structure informs the drama of *Wozzeck* by communicating how characters respond to the restrictive nature of fate and social position that the strict forms represent. All the characters evaluate their relationship with the oppressive structures of their world, and these evaluations motivate their agency in the story. The Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, who are consistently associated with *paraphrasing* musical forms, do not challenge the musical structure because they benefit from the oppressive social structure it represents. Wozzeck and Marie, however, communicate a dissatisfaction with this structure. *Contradictions* in *Wozzeck* serve to emphasize those moments when Wozzeck and Marie express their motivations and fears as they evaluate their position as unfavorable within the oppressive structures of the world. This ultimately adds another layer of appreciation for the dramatic role of form in the opera, as it is integral to understanding both the world of *Wozzeck* and its characters.

## CHAPTER 3

### DELIGHTING IN, LAMENTING, OR REBELLING AGAINST OPPRESSION: LEITMOTIVS AS EVALUATIVE TOOLS

The dramatic ideas associated with the leitmotifs of *Wozzeck* range from unsophisticated and simple to rich and complex. Leitmotifs in the opera reference ideas as plain as characters and recurring events, and they reference ideas as powerful as a character's belief system and desires. Regardless of what is being specifically represented, however, the leitmotifs in *Wozzeck* can create a better understanding of character agency in the story. This understanding comes from examining how characters engage with leitmotifs throughout the opera. The Captain and the Doctor, as characters who delight in the oppressive status quo, communicate their contentment through association with leitmotifs that *paraphrase* the dramatic action. Taking no issue with their place in the social hierarchy, the Captain and the Doctor have no need for the more thematically loaded leitmotifs used by other characters. This is not the case, however, for Wozzeck and Marie, who use leitmotifs to evaluate their social position while coming to contrasting conclusions. Wozzeck's *supplementary* "Wir arme Leut!" ("We poor folk!") leitmotif communicates Wozzeck's understanding of his poor state and a belief in the immutability of fate, and he uses it to lament his inability to break free from the structures that oppress him. Marie interacts with leitmotifs in a way that communicates a similar discontent to Wozzeck's own, but it is marked by a contrasting belief that her

social state can be changed. Attending to Marie's leitmotiv interactions reveals her denial of Wozzeck's belief system, a motivation to transcend her oppression, and a direction for this motivation. Using leitmotifs as evaluative tools, the characters of *Wozzeck* are able to direct their agency in response to the oppressive structures of their world.

## DELIGHTING IN THE OPPRESSIVE STATUS QUO

### *The Captain: Paraphrasing Leitmotif*

Of the nineteen *Wozzeck* leitmotifs catalogued by George Perle, only one is associated with the Captain, and it is found most prominently in Act I, Scene 1 and Act II, Scene 2 of the opera.<sup>1</sup> This leitmotif, which Perle calls "The Captain," is shown below (Fig. 14):



Figure 14: "The Captain" leitmotif.

The first scene in which this leitmotif occurs directly associates the leitmotif with the character of the Captain. In Act I, Scene 1, the Captain is the dominant figure as the scene unfolds, berating Wozzeck as he talks about his personal philosophy regarding time and morality. Throughout the scene, "The Captain" leitmotif is frequently repeated, connecting it to the Captain himself. This leitmotif *paraphrases* the dramatic action of the scene, as this musical idea precedes the Captain's musings and continues to dominate the "pitch organization and design of the scene,"<sup>2</sup> just as the Captain himself dominates Wozzeck in the scene. "The Captain" leitmotif offers no additional dramatic meaning to the scene, merely corresponding to the action taking place on stage, and this lack of depth

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<sup>1</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 96.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



is further reflected in its lack of transformation as the music progresses, as the leitmotif always occurs at the same pitch level.<sup>3</sup> The Captain's association with this *paraphrasing* leitmotiv is indicative of how the Captain views himself in relationship to his world. The Captain is pleased with his dominant position and finds no need to associate himself with leitmotifs that address the oppressive order in any substantial way. Critical engagement with the oppressive order is beneath him, and he prefers instead to indulge himself in his own narcissistic leitmotiv. Content with this evaluation, the Captain enacts change on his world by perpetuating the oppression of those below him, most notably Wozzeck.

This emphasis on the Captain's agency through the perpetuation of oppression is further supported by "The Captain" leitmotiv's presence in Act II, Scene 1. The scene consists of the Captain and the Doctor having a conversation before focusing their attention on antagonizing Wozzeck. As the conversation develops, so too does "The Captain" leitmotiv develop, interacting with a leitmotiv associated with the Doctor. In this scene, "The Captain" leitmotiv *paraphrases* the dramatic action, as its musical development mimics the conversation development, offering no additional subtext.<sup>4</sup> Once again, this consistent connection to a *paraphrasing* leitmotiv frames the Captain as a character content with the oppressive order and willing to continue the oppression of others.

#### *The Doctor: Paraphrasing Leitmotiv*

The situation is much the same for the Doctor, who, like the Captain, benefits from his dominant position, as an examination of "The Doctor" leitmotiv show. This leitmotiv is shown below (Fig. 15):

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.



Figure 15: “The Doctor” leitmotif.

“The Doctor” leitmotif first occurs in Act I, Scene 4 of the opera. The scene consists of the Doctor berating Wozzeck for failing to follow his instructions, jeopardizing his medical research. In the scene, the leitmotif corresponds with the character of the Doctor, *paraphrasing* his presence in the scene. Perle himself admits that “no special musical or dramatic associative properties are conferred upon this motive compared with others,”<sup>5</sup> describing the lack of substance that characterizes *paraphrasing* leitmotifs. Just as with the Captain, this can be further substantiated by the leitmotif’s presence in Act II, Scene 2, as “The Doctor” leitmotif functions the exact same way as “The Captain,” with the conversation musically mimicked by the development of these two ideas. The function is simple *paraphrasing*, and the Doctor’s association with a *paraphrasing* leitmotif underscores a lack of urgency in critically addressing the oppressive order. The Doctor acts in concordance with the oppressive world of the opera.

## **TWO WOZZECK LEITMOTIFS: NEGATIVE EVALUATION, UNDERMINED COMMUNICATION, AND DIRECTING AGENCY TOWARD CONFORMITY**

Wozzeck does not share the Captain and the Doctor’s dominant social position, and his interactions with the “Wir arme Leut!” and “Wozzeck’s Hallucination” leitmotifs show how he is cognizant of this fact. Both of these leitmotifs temporally correspond with dramatic content related to fate, but their different functions serve to address this concept in different ways. The “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif *supplements* the drama by reflecting Wozzeck’s negative evaluation of his oppression and his unchangeable

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 108.

connection to it. It does this by corresponding with Wozzeck's lament of fate and social position (thereby acquiring its dramatic substance), and sharing a pitch relationship with the "Wozzeck's Entrance and Exit" leitmotif. The connection between these leitmotifs emphasizes Wozzeck's connection to the dictates of fate, musically substantiating Wozzeck's belief that he cannot escape from it. The "Wozzeck's Hallucination" leitmotif, on the other hand, *paraphrases* the drama, as it does not occur in any context that can inject extra meaning into the scene. This is because the "Wozzeck's Hallucination" leitmotif only occurs when Wozzeck is experiencing a hallucination and struggling to describe it. These hallucinations hint at concepts of fate, giving the leitmotif associated with them a dramatic substance similar to "Wir arme Leut!," but this substance is not taken advantage of as the leitmotif is used. By simply signaling when Wozzeck has a hallucination, the "Wozzeck's Hallucinations" leitmotif undermines its own dramatic content and Wozzeck's ability to express it to others. Evaluating his position as negative within the oppressive order, and unable to articulate his fears, Wozzeck chooses to direct his agency toward conformity, accepting his role within the machinations of fate.

The "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif (Fig. 16), embodies Wozzeck's concerns and beliefs regarding fate and social position. The dramatic context in which the leitmotif first occurs connects the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif to the idea of fate, and the way in which the leitmotif is subsequently used reveals how Wozzeck views himself in relationship to his world. Wozzeck believes that he cannot deviate from the path prescribed by his poor social state, and so he is only able to lament his unfortunate position while conforming to the structures that oppress him.

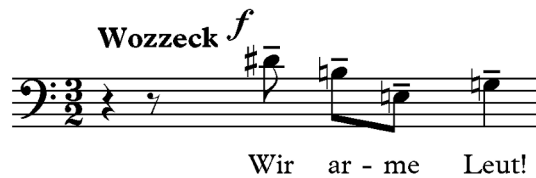


Figure 16: “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif.

The connection between fate and the “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif is first established in Act I, Scene 1, the first time this leitmotif occurs. As he defends himself from the Captain’s attacks on his child and morality, Wozzeck cries out:

We poor folk! You see captain, it’s money, money...Those with no money...Just try bringing up children in a moral fashion without it! We are flesh and blood, too! Yes, were I a fine gentleman with a hat, a watch, and an eyeglass and could speak eloquently, then I would be virtuous too!...But I’m just a poor fellow! The likes of us are damned in this world and the next. And I believe that if we went to Heaven our task would be to help the thunder!

In this response to the Captain, Wozzeck asserts his belief that social state is immutable, entwined inextricably with the concept of fate. He is not moral because he is poor, and he is therefore damned to live a difficult, immoral life. Because the “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif is first heard during this response, it serves to recall this belief system as the leitmotif interacts with other ideas throughout the opera.

One of these interactions is with the “Wozzeck’s Entrance and Exit” leitmotif, shown below (Fig. 17).



Figure 17: “Wozzeck’s Entrance and Exit” leitmotif.

As the name of this leitmotif implies, “Wozzeck’s Entrance and Exit” leitmotif is associated with Wozzeck entering or exiting a scene,<sup>6</sup> similar to how the Doctor and the

<sup>6</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 106.

Captain's leitmotifs directly reference their presence. An interesting characteristic of this leitmotif is that it features nearly the same pitch collection as the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif. This relationship is shown below (Fig. 18):



Figure 18: The "Wir arme Leut!" pitch collection (left) and "Wozzeck's Entrance and Exit" pitch collection, rearranged (right).

Shown above, the "Wozzeck's Entrance and Exit" leitmotif has the same pitch collection as the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif with one additional note added. This direct connection between a leitmotif associated with Wozzeck's presence and a leitmotif associated with fate has an important *supplementary* effect. The relationship shown here connects Wozzeck to the idea of fate, making his belief in its immutability an integral part of his character. This clarifies Wozzeck's evaluation of himself: he believes he suffers within the oppressive order and that he cannot escape from it.

In trying to express his concerns related to this evaluation, Wozzeck experiences a great deal of trouble. Usually, when Wozzeck is trying to express his fears, it is through an attempt at describing the hallucinations that plague him. These hallucinations feature the concept of fate, although Wozzeck is unable to make others understand this fateful connection. This emphasis on fate is consistent with the apocalyptic nature of Wozzeck's hallucinations, an aspect of Wozzeck's visions that Berg deliberately emphasized in his edits to the original text. Among many cuts made to the original Büchner play, Berg cut a scene in which Wozzeck hallucinates Marie in the form of a werewolf, "hint[ing] at [his] madness and his preoccupation with fiendish elements, which does not fit easily

alongside the apocalyptic visions emphasized so much in the libretto.”<sup>7</sup> Indeed, what hallucinations remain in the opera are mostly prophetic in nature, as Wozzeck imagines fire raging “from the earth to the heavens,” sees a “fiery red form in the sky” that will eventually correlate with the bloody moon that presides over Marie’s murder, and takes note of “flashes, like the blade of the knife,” anticipating the physical act that ends Marie’s life. The apocalyptic focus of these visions is neatly emphasized by Wozzeck as, trying to understand his visions, he asks Marie: “Is it not written: ‘The smoke of the country rose like that of a furnace?,’” referencing the Biblical destruction of Sodom. Wozzeck’s hallucinations carry the weight of prophecy, describing a dark future that Wozzeck is fated to experience.

In trying to relate his fears regarding his dark, prophetic visions, Wozzeck struggles to make himself understood, and this is reflected in how the leitmotif that corresponds with Wozzeck’s visions is used. The “Wozzeck’s Hallucination” leitmotif (Fig. 19 ) occurs every time Wozzeck experiences and tries to describe a vision, *paraphrasing* the drama by simply signaling that a vision is occurring. Unlike the “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif, which in the example explored earlier interacts with another leitmotif to produce additional meaning, the “Wozzeck’s Hallucination” leitmotif operates in isolation, never occurring in a context that would serve to *supplement* the drama. The leitmotif fails to communicate the fateful content that it is associated with, and its correspondence with Wozzeck attempting to describe his visions to others undermines Wozzeck’s ability to communicate his fears.

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<sup>7</sup> Rebekka Fritz, *Text and Music in German Operas of the 1920s* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998), 49.



Figure 19: “Wozzeck’s Hallucination” leitmotif.

The “Wir arme Leut!” and “Wozzeck’s Hallucination” leitmotifs inform an understanding of Wozzeck’s evaluative process and direct Wozzeck’s agency toward conforming to the structures that oppress him. The “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif, associated with Wozzeck’s lament of fate and the “Wozzeck’s Entrance and Exit” leitmotif, indicates Wozzeck’s understanding of his negative relationship with the oppressive order and his immutable connection to it. The “Wozzeck’s Hallucination” leitmotif, associated with fate but not used in a way that produces substantial meaning, undermines Wozzeck’s ability to intelligibly express his concerns. Believing fate and social position to be fixed and unable to clearly express his dissatisfaction to others, Wozzeck resigns himself to directing his agency toward dutifully conforming to the oppressive structures of his world.

#### **AGENCY TOWARD CHANGE: MARIE’S *SUPPLEMENTARY* LEITMOTIVS**

The characters examined up to this point have made no attempt to challenge the oppressive structure of their world, either because it benefits them or, in Wozzeck’s case, it seems impossible to challenge. With Marie, however, a different situation emerges. Marie is a character who directs her agency toward change, evaluating herself as on the losing side of the oppressive hierarchy and making steps to break free from it. This can be understood through the *supplementary* leitmotifs she interacts with throughout the opera. Specifically, Marie’s interactions with the “Wir arme Leut!,” “Marie as Mother,” “Marie’s Waiting,” and “Seduction” leitmotifs will be examined here.

What makes Marie's interaction with the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif peculiar is her avoidance of it during a dramatic moment in which the leitmotif could be appropriately applied. This occurs in Act I, Scene 3 of the opera. In this scene, Wozzeck struggles to explain his apocalyptic visions to Marie. Marie tries to soothe Wozzeck, but he eventually leaves for the barracks just as perturbed as before their conversation. As Wozzeck leaves, Marie, concerned for Wozzeck's sanity and her child's well-being, cries out: "Ah! *We poor folk*. I cannot bear it. I'm frightened!" (emphasis mine).

Marie's expression of the phrase, "Wir armen Leut!" ("We poor folk!") marks the only time the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif does not accompany this phrase, and this musical peculiarity reflects Marie's understanding of her world. Instead of singing the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif, substitutes it for the "Marie as Mother" leitmotif, shown below (Fig. 20).



Figure 20: "Marie as Mother leitmotif (left) and Marie's use of it as she says "Wir armen Leut" (right).

Perle notes this substitution serves to emphasize Marie's "desperate need for release,"<sup>8</sup> and the importance of this cannot be understated. If Marie used the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif at this moment of despair, it would have aligned her lament with Wozzeck's own belief system that motivates agency toward conformity, a belief system that could not possibly motivate Marie's actions in the opera. It would be inappropriate for Marie to sing the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif, because her evaluation of her social situation is fundamentally different from Wozzeck's. While both Wozzeck and Marie understand

<sup>8</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 103-104



that they suffer, Wozzeck believes that he cannot change his state, whereas Marie believes that such change is possible. It is Marie's desire and belief that she can change the circumstances of her life that lead her to seek change for herself in her oppressive world.

To whom Marie directs her agency as she seeks can be understood through an examination of the "Marie's Waiting" leitmotif, which is first heard in Act I, Scene 3. In this scene, Marie admires the Drum Major as he marches by her house, daydreaming about him after she puts her child to sleep. It is during this daydream that the leitmotif occurs, consisting of a series of rising perfect fifths, as shown below (Fig 21):



Figure 21: "Marie's Waiting" leitmotif.

In his lectures, Berg notes that this leitmotif represents Marie's desire for change, an "aimless waiting...which finds its resolution only in her death."<sup>9</sup> Describing the desire connoted by the "Marie's Waiting" leitmotif as "aimless" does not seem appropriate, however, given that in the first scene the leitmotif appears, musical material associated with the Drum Major directly follows. This juxtaposition of material points toward the Drum Major as a possible answer to Marie's dissatisfaction with her life.

Independent of this simple musical juxtaposition, however, the Drum Major's place as an object of Marie's desire is communicated through a palindromic relationship

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<sup>9</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 161.

between their leitmotifs. Palindromic relationships in *Wozzeck* have already been explored in Chapter 2, but some additional observations are made here. Palindromes are an important part of *Wozzeck*, as Douglas Jarman emphasizes in his own research. Jarman notes how Act I, Scene 1 is organized as a palindrome in reference to the “turning globe and the image of the mill-wheel,” and that Act I, Scene 3, Act I, Scene 4, and Act II, Scene 3 all associate palindromic figurations with the “baleful natural world which [Wozzeck] inhabits,” asserting palindromes as “a symbol of predestination and of man’s inability to affect the course of events.”<sup>10</sup> This thematically important idea is one major function of palindromic relationships in the opera, although they do serve another related function. Palindromes are related to the “idea of negation” in much of Berg’s music, serving as ““anti-time”” and “symbolically erasing what has taken place.”<sup>11</sup> The dramatic content associated with palindromes frequently balance what comes before (ie. the setting sun of Act I, Scene 2 and the rising moon of Act III, Scene 2)<sup>12</sup> or provides an answer to a question.

The “Guilt” leitmotif is one example of a leitmotif that provides an answer to a question based on palindromic relationships (Fig. 22).<sup>13</sup> In Act II, Scene 1, Marie asks, “Am I a bad person?” and, at the end of the scene, answers her own question with a musical retrograde, singing “I am a bad person.” Given this dramatic function of palindromes, it is natural to expect palindromic relationships, to be used between characters of the opera.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 64-66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 28 and 38.

<sup>13</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 112-113.



Figure 22. The “Guilt” leitmotif, Act II, Scene 1<sup>14</sup>

A palindromic relationship like the one above frames the Drum Major as a possible, but imperfect, answer to Marie’s problems. This is found in the musical connection between “Marie’s Waiting” and the “Seduction” leitmotif, compared below (Fig. 23).



Figure 23: “Marie’s Waiting” leitmotif (left) and “Seduction” leitmotif (right).

These two leitmotifs share a retrograde-inversion relationship, which is one way that a palindrome can be conveyed musically. “Marie’s Waiting” consists of rising harmonic perfect fifths, and the “Seduction” leitmotif consists of melodically rising perfect fourths. While not a perfect retrograde-inversion, the relationship between these two musical characteristics is close to one, and its imperfection only adds to its interpretive effect. Like how the balanced transformations of the “Guilt” leitmotif provide an answer to Marie’s question, this musical relationship frames the Drum Major as a possible solution to Marie’s dissatisfaction with her life. The retrograde-inversion relationship is imperfect, however. In an opera that features such precise palindromic relationships, this imperfect retrograde-inversion sticks out as peculiar, deformed. Though it communicates to whom

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

Marie directs her agency as she tries to change her life, the quasi-palindromic relationship hints at the idea that the Drum Major is not the solution Marie thinks he is. Imperfect or otherwise, this relationship informs an understanding of Marie's actions as she seeks the object of her desire.

## SUMMARY

This investigation into the dramatic function of leitmotifs in *Wozzeck* informs an understanding of character agency in several important ways. The Captain and the Doctor, as characters whose leitmotifs only serve to *paraphrase* the dramatic action, direct their agency toward exploiting the oppressive structure of their world. In adhering to this structure, they contribute to the oppression of the other characters, most especially Wozzeck himself. Wozzeck directs his agency toward conformity, and his leitmotifs communicate what motivates his actions. The “Wir arme Leut!” leitmotif *supplements* the drama, providing subtext that emphasizes Wozzeck's belief in the immutability of fate. “Wozzeck's Hallucination,” as a *paraphrasing* leitmotif, underscores Wozzeck's inability to communicate his fears, leaving him with directing agency toward conformity as his only recourse. Wozzeck acts as he does in the opera because he believes he cannot direct his agency toward change. Marie does not share Wozzeck's perspective. Her leitmotif interactions underscore the fact that she is a character who seeks change in her world. The “Marie's Waiting” leitmotif *supplements* the drama by referencing Marie's desire for something more than what she has, motivating her actions. The quasi-palindromic relationship between “Marie's Waiting” and the “Seduction” leitmotif inform an understanding of Marie's desire, to whom she directs her agency as she seeks change. The relationship between these leitmotifs frames the Drum Major as a potential solution

to Marie's problem as she struggles to break free from her social position. For all of these characters, important dramatic information is communicated through their interactions with the leitmotifs of *Wozzeck*, supporting a deeper understanding of how and to what end they find agency in their world.

## CHAPTER 4

### FOLK TOPICS AND THE DESIRE TO ESCAPE

Semiotic topics pervade *Wozzeck* from beginning to end, and attending to their dramatic meanings is an integral part of understanding how the characters of the opera exhibit agency throughout the story. This is because topics meant to evoke folk song are consistently employed in situations that associate folk music with the idea of escape, providing a way for the characters to break out of the oppressive structure of the world. The method of escape provided by folk topics is rejected by some and accepted by others. The Captain and the Doctor avoid the use of folk topics altogether, refusing to escape from their position, and this musical avoidance underscores how comfortable they are within the social hierarchy. They do not engage with folk topics because it does not benefit them to escape. *Wozzeck*, however, communicates a desire to escape from the oppressive order through his folk topic interactions, but he struggles to successfully perform folk topic music when he has the opportunity to do so. *Wozzeck* makes two attempts in the opera to use folk topics. In both instances, he is trying to escape from the horrors of his life, but *Wozzeck* either rejects himself or is rejected by others, and through this can be understood that *Wozzeck* is a character that is only capable of exhibiting agency within the oppressive structure of his world. The rejection he experiences in trying to escape through the use of folk topics serves to reaffirm his belief in the immutability of his social position and the terrible path it prescribes. Marie is an

exception among these other characters, as she successfully uses folk topics, directing her agency toward escape. In an effort to escape from her poor state, Marie sets her eyes on the Drum Major, and this direction for her agency is further established through folk topic relationships. Because the Drum Major's musical material consists of folk topic characteristics, he acts as the musical embodiment of escape, the idea that Marie desires. It is natural that Marie would seek the Drum Major given this connection. All of these observations based on the use of semiotic topics in *Wozzeck* create a detailed understanding of how the characters evaluate their position and exhibit agency in their world.

### **THE MUSICAL CONSTRUCTION AND DRAMATIC PURPOSE OF FOLK SONG IN *WOZZECK***

Berg and Perle's contribution to understanding folk music in *Wozzeck* is invaluable to the investigation of musical topics in the opera, as Berg provides an outline for recognizing the use of folk topics and Perle provides a model for their significance. In his 1929 lecture, Berg establishes how folk music is conveyed in the opera. Folk music is conveyed by construction of "symmetrically built periods and phrase structures, harmonies that are based on thirds (or, more especially, fourths), and melodic patterns in which an important role is played by the whole tone scale and the perfect fourth, as opposed to the diminished and augmented intervals which otherwise dominate the atonal music of the [Second] Viennese school."<sup>1</sup> For the analytical purposes here, three of these characteristics are the focus: balanced phrase structure, the use of the whole tone scale, and the perfect fourth as an important interval. These characteristics connect the folk music in *Wozzeck* to German-language folksong, which is a connection Donata

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<sup>1</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 161.

Schwendimann Berra asserts in her own research.<sup>2</sup> Below is one of the folk song examples Donata Schwendimann Berra examines in her article,<sup>3</sup> with the balanced phrase structure, whole tone scale collections, and perfect fourths labeled (Fig. 24):

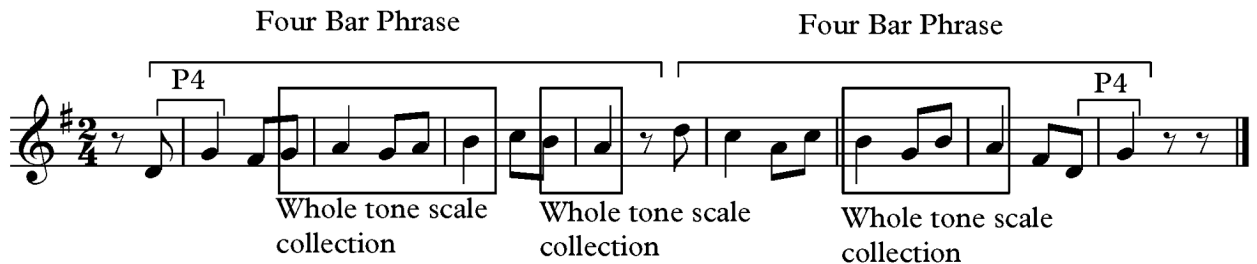


Figure 24: Folk song, “Es ritten drei Reiter wol über den Rhein...”

The characteristics labeled in Fig. 24 are found throughout the music of *Wozzeck* whenever characters are singing folk songs throughout the story. Act I, Scene 2 provides one such example, shown below (Fig. 25):



Figure 25: Andres' Hunting Song, Act I, Scene 2.

In this example, the three characteristics of folk song extracted from Berg's lecture are all present, just as in the folk song example of Fig. 24. Berg exaggerates the characteristics of the style as he transforms it through his own atonal musical language. Another musical example of this occurs in Act I, Scene 3, shown below (Fig. 26):

<sup>2</sup> Donata Schwendimann Berra, “Interesse di Büchner e Berg per i Volkslieder,” *Nuova rivista Musicale italiana* (1973), 402-416.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 413.



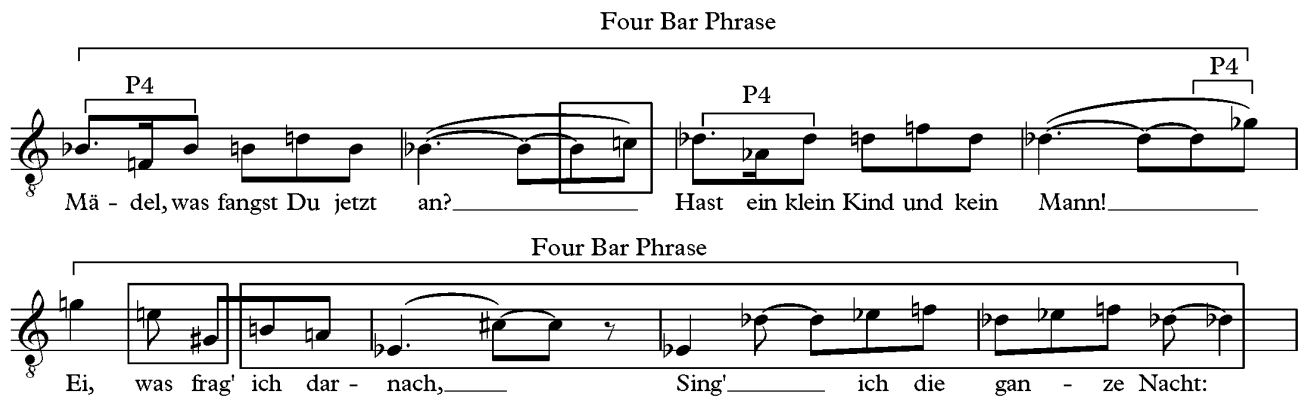


Figure 26: Marie's Lullaby, Act I, Scene 3.

The characteristics are much the same in this example, as the first of the balanced phrases are marked by a prevalence of perfect fourths, and the second of the balanced phrases is marked by frequent use of whole tone scale collections. Rounding off this exploration of Berg's folk characteristics is an example found in Act II, Scene 4, shown below (Fig. 27).

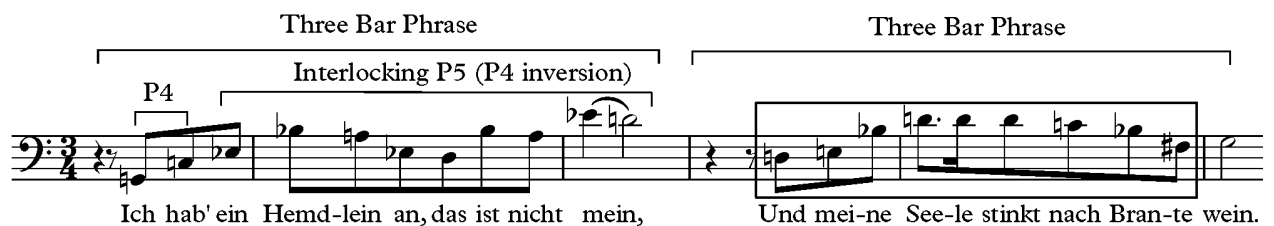


Figure 27: Tavern Song, Act II, Scene 4.

In this example, the phrase structure is once again balanced, with the second phrase featuring a large whole tone scale collection. The first phrase features a lot of perfect fifths, the inversion of a perfect fourth, intertwined with one another. The Eb-Bb and D-A perfect fifth relationship is obscured due to the interlocking pitches, but the relationship is still present.

The analysis of these folk song examples links the music to a folk song idiom while also establishing how Berg evokes folk song in *Wozzeck*, and this further establishes what constitutes a folk topic in the opera. Semiotic topics are musical references to other styles or genres based on shared characteristics, and all of the *Wozzeck* examples explored above are folk topics, referencing a folk song style through balanced

phrase structure, whole tone scale collections, and the use of the perfect fourth. The question now is: what is the dramatic purpose of these folk topics in the opera?

George Perle provides a possible answer to this question, although this chapter aims to push beyond Perle's interpretation to access a better understanding of character agency in the opera. Regarding the dramatic function of folk song, Perle notes how songs in the story operate as ironic commentary on the dramatic action and as a way of defining the world of *Wozzeck*.<sup>4</sup> An example of ironic commentary occurs in Act II, Scene 4, as Andres sings, "Oh daughter, dear daughter, what were you thinking of, to dally with the coachmen and the stable lads too?" Here, Andres' folk song is indirectly referencing Marie's infidelity, commenting on the progression of the story. A better understanding of the world of *Wozzeck* is achieved in Act I, Scene 3, as Marie sings, "Hansel, hitch up your six horses, and give them a good feed. They shall not eat oats, no water shall they drink. Plenty of cool wine!" In singing this, Marie constructs a fantasy world that starkly contrasts the world of the characters. In Marie's fantasy, "even the horses drink 'clear, cool wine' instead of water,"<sup>5</sup> which suggests a world that is much more pleasurable than the one in which men like Wozzeck must struggle to make a decent living. By constructing a fantasy world that is so much better than the world of the characters, a better understanding of the oppressive world *Wozzeck* develops.

Perle's model of folk music in *Wozzeck* as a vehicle for commentary is limited to an exploration of the text. The use of folk topics in *Wozzeck* carries additional meaning that can be understood through an examination of its dramatic context throughout the opera. Attending to what characters use folk topics in the opera and when they do it

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<sup>4</sup> Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 99.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

reveals how characters can use folk topics as a way to escape from the oppressive structure of their world, asserting agency through rebellion.

## TONALITY AND ESCAPISM: AN IMPERFECT ARGUMENT

Erika Reiman supports the connection between folk song and escape in her own research. She argues that tonality represents “unreality” in the opera, and that the folk songs, being mostly quasi-tonal, represent the “mode of unreality” known as escapism.<sup>6</sup> Accessing the idea of escapism through the tonality of the folk songs leads to some inconsistencies, however. Reiman herself has to make an exception within her own analysis, noting that one of Andres’ folk songs is clearly atonal.<sup>7</sup> This makes the connection between escapism and the tonality of folk songs in *Wozzeck* an imperfect one, as one of the folk songs does not fit Reiman’s mold. Fortunately, this inconsistency is not present when analyzing the folk songs of *Wozzeck* through an understanding of their folk topic characteristics. Shown below is the example that does not fit Reiman’s interpretation, labeled to show how it can clearly be grouped with the other folk topics of the opera based on its musical characteristics (Fig. 28).

Two Bar Phrase

O Toch - ter, lie - be Toch - ter, Was hast Du ge - denkt Daß

Two Bar Phrase

P4

3

3

Du dich an die Kut - scher Und die Fuhr - knecht hast ge - hängt?!

Figure 28: Andres’ Tavern Song, Act II, Scene 4.

<sup>6</sup> Erika Reiman, “Tonality and Unreality in Berg’s *Wozzeck*,” in *Encrypted Messages in Alban Berg’s Music*, edited by Siglind Bruhn (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998) 235.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

By grouping musical examples together based on their folk topic characteristics, a more consistent interpretation of the drama occurs. Folk topics are consistently used in dramatic contexts that relate to the idea of escape, and how characters use folk topics informs an understanding of their agency.

## THE DRAMATIC CONTEXTS OF FOLK TOPICS

The first folk topic of *Wozzeck* occurs in Act I, Scene 2, (see Fig. 25 above) and it is used in a context that relates to the idea of escape. In the scene, Wozzeck and Andres are working in the field, and Wozzeck becomes convinced that the land is cursed. Andres dismisses Wozzeck's concern with a simple "Pah! Nonsense," and becomes lost in a hunter's fantasy, singing about how "Out on a fine hunting spree, Every man can shoot at will!" As the scene progresses and Wozzeck continues voicing his apocalyptic concerns, Andres insists that Wozzeck sing with him, a request that Wozzeck ignores. Andres' lack of concern for Wozzeck is deliberately conveyed, as Berg, when adapting the original Büchner play, "eliminate[d] even the slightest hint of any understanding on Andres' part of Wozzeck's plight."<sup>8</sup> In this first example then, folk topics become associated with the idea of escape, as Andres employs one to ignore the fears on which Wozzeck fixates.

This same idea occurs again in Act II, Scene 4. In the scene, Wozzeck sees Marie dancing with the Drum Major in the tavern. Shortly after this unfortunate discovery, a drunk apprentice begins philosophizing on the nature of good and evil in the world. His words are dark, as he asserts that the negative characteristics of man are a necessary part of the continued order of the world, but he eventually dismisses his sobering observations, referencing his own inebriation as he uses a folk topic, quoting Fig. 27. The

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<sup>8</sup> Fritz, *Text and Music*, 103.

drunk apprentice manages to escape from his own unfortunate observations through the use of a folk topic.

In both of the examples explored above, folk topics are associated with the idea of escape, which, in the oppressive world of *Wozzeck*, is an idea that is largely desired. Characters like Andres or the apprentice are able to escape from the restrictive reality of the world through folk topics, coping with their difficult lives. Investigating how other characters interact with folk topics and the idea of escape can promote a better understanding of how they exhibit agency in the story. The Captain and the Doctor do not use folk topics in the opera because they have no need to escape from an oppressive structure that benefits them, content to enact change on their world through the oppression of those below them. Wozzeck is incapable of using folk topics in the opera, underscoring his inability to escape and asserting that, though he evaluates his position as disadvantageous within the oppressive order, he can only direct his agency toward conforming to the dictates of his oppressive world. Marie, on the other hand, is able to exhibit agency toward escape through the use folk topics, seeking the Drum Major's affection in an effort to break free from her oppression.

## **CHARACTER INTERACTION WITH FOLK TOPICS**

### *The Captain: Paraphrasing Semiotic Topics*

The Captain does not use folk topics in *Wozzeck*, using other semiotic topics instead to *paraphrase* the content of his speech. One example of this occurs in Act I, Scene 1. In the scene, the Captain and Wozzeck discuss a myriad of subjects, one of which is Wozzeck's bastard child. The Captain notes the unbaptized state of Wozzeck's son ("As our honourable garrison chaplain said: 'Unblessed by the church!']"). It is at this

point in the scene that the musical texture simplifies and the Captain's melodic material takes on the characteristics of a religious chant (Fig. 29).



Figure 29: Chant topic, Act I Scene 1.

Although this musical moment does feature two of the folk topic characteristics, perfect fourths and whole tone scale collections, the lack of balanced phrase structure, combined with the simple rhythm, note repetition, and correlation to the Captain's words regarding baptism, create a stronger reference to chant music than to folk music. In this instance, then, the semiotic topic being used is simply *paraphrasing* the Captain's words as he discusses a religious subject. His music in this example lacks the thematic substance of folk topics.

A *paraphrasing* semiotic topic is used again in Act II, Scene 2. In the scene, the Doctor teases the Captain by falsely diagnosing him with a fatal condition, prompting the Captain to imagine his own funeral. He tells the Doctor, "I can already see them, with handkerchiefs to their eyes," and it is at this point that a semiotic topic occurs, shown below (Fig. 30).



Figure 30: March topic, Act II, Scene 2.

The slow, regimental rhythms, combined with the use of the perfect fourth in the base and the Captain's reference to his funeral, associate this material with a funeral march. Once again, the topic is *paraphrasing* the Captain's words, offering no additional information.

The examples characterize how the Captain uses semiotic topics in *Wozzeck*, simply *paraphrasing* his speech and never using folk topics. His avoidance of *supplementary* folk topics and consistent use *paraphrasing* topics, which lack any substantial thematic substance, communicate a lack of urgency for the Captain in escaping from the oppressive structures of his world. He evaluates the benefits of his position and remains complacent through his musical decisions. The Captain functions as a dutiful part of his oppressive world, never shifting from this role.

#### *The Doctor: Avoidance of Folk Topics*

While the Captain uses semiotic topics in the notable instances presented above, the Doctor lacks even this distinction. Most relevant in the examination of character agency presented here is that the Doctor, like the Captain, never uses folk topics in the opera. Just as with the Captain, this underscores how the Doctor is comfortable finding agency within the oppressive order, finding no need to challenge it through his music.

### *Wozzeck: Folk Topic Rejection*

Wozzeck presents a different situation compared to the Captain or the Doctor. In contrast to these characters who benefit from their social position, Wozzeck suffers as a result of the forces that oppress him, and he communicates an understanding of this idea through his (unsuccessful) attempts at using folk topics. Wozzeck makes two attempts in the opera to use folk topics, but he is rejected in both instances. His failure underscores his inability to escape and the fact that Wozzeck can only successfully direct his agency toward conforming to the fateful structure of his world.

Wozzeck's first attempt at using a folk topic occurs in Act II, Scene 5. This scene features Wozzeck in the barracks at night, experiencing frightening visions. He sees the Drum Major and Marie dancing, along with flashes of a knife. Scared of what these visions might mean, Wozzeck prays to be rescued from temptation, and it is shortly after this prayer that the Drum Major bursts into the scene. The Drum Major ridicules Wozzeck while talking about his sexual conquest of Marie. As an act of defiance to the Drum Major, Wozzeck begins to whistle. This is met with physical violence from the Drum Major ("Shall I rip your tongue from your throat and twist it around your neck?"), and Wozzeck is effectively silenced.

The tune Wozzeck whistles in this scene is his first use of a folk topic in the opera, and the Drum Major's rejection of it informs an understanding of Wozzeck's agency. The tune is notated below (Fig. 31):

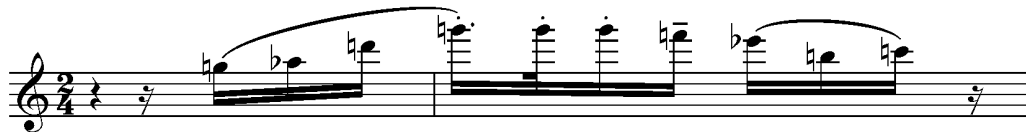


Figure 31: Wozzeck Whistling, Act II, Scene 5.



This tune quotes the tavern song notated in Fig. 5. Because folk topics are associated with escape, Wozzeck's defiant act of whistling is both a way for Wozzeck to acknowledge his miserable position and an attempt to break out of the social structures that oppress him. In engaging in this particular kind of music making, Wozzeck communicates an understanding of his poor social position and a desire to escape from it, but the Drum Major's rejection communicates the fact that this kind of rebellion is impossible for Wozzeck. Wozzeck is incapable of finding agency through escape, and is beaten back into conforming to the oppressive status quo.

The song Wozzeck sings in this scene is the second and last attempt Wozzeck makes at using a folk topic, and the last phrase of the song is notated below, labeled to show how it loses its folk topic characteristics as it reaches its end (Fig. 32):

Figure 32: Last phrase of Wozzeck's folk song, Act III, Scene 3.

feeling of metric balance, and the only moment where the perfect fourth is present is in its inversion at “Verdammt!” Just as Wozzeck is unable completely escape from what he has done, the melody of Wozzeck’s folk song is unable to maintain its folk topic characteristics.

This failed folk song traces a kind of evaluative process as well. As with the act of whistling a folk topic, Wozzeck’s attempt at singing a folk topic is indicative of Wozzeck’s understanding of his place in the world. He would not bother singing a folk topic associated with escape if he did not feel oppressed. In losing folk topic characteristics as the music goes on, Wozzeck further evaluates his ability to escape at all, coming to a musical conclusion that he is incapable of directing his agency toward escape and deciding to seek help from someone who might be able to provide escape for him (Margaret). In this scene, as in Act II, Scene 5, Wozzeck finds himself only capable of operating within the structures that oppress him.

Wozzeck’s interaction with folk topics *supplements* the drama, underscoring Wozzeck’s inability to do anything but exhibit agency through conformity. Even though he suffers within the oppressive structure of his world, any attempt Wozzeck makes to break out of this structure is denied, and so he conforms, motivated by the belief that he cannot do otherwise.

*Marie: Escape and the Drum Major*

While Wozzeck struggles to use folk topics, Marie is able to employ them successfully, and their utilization reveals important information regarding the nature of her desire. Marie’s first use of a folk topic occurs in Act I, Scene 3. In this scene, Marie sings a lullaby to her child after admiring the Drum Major. She sings, “Girl, what are you

doing now? A babe in your arms, but no man! Ah, what do I care, I sing the whole night long. Hush-a-bye, baby, the cradle will fall, Nobody gives me anything at all!” This lullaby is Marie’s first folk topic, notated below (Fig. 33):

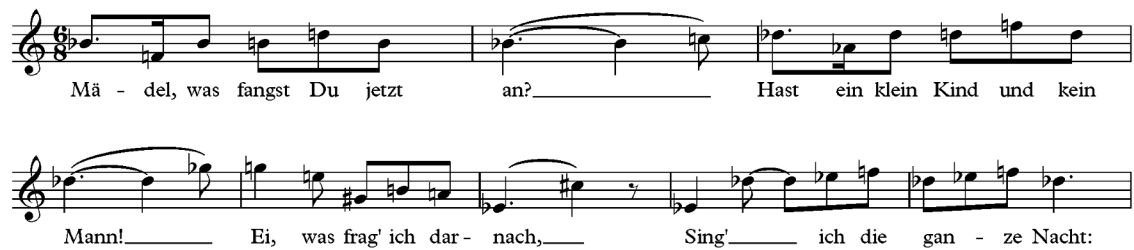


Figure 33: Marie’s Lullaby No. 1, Act I, Scene 3.

In this example, both the text and the music are working together to inform an understanding of what motivates Marie as she directs her agency toward escape. The text, which comments on Marie’s own social position, is followed by text that describes how she does not care given the fact that she can sing. Through the text, the lullaby provides Marie with an expressive medium for overcoming the sorrows of her social state, and this is consistent with the association between folk topics and escape. Marie is able to use folk topics successfully, and so she is preoccupied with escape. She wants to break free, directing agency toward escape.

In her attempt to escape, Marie focuses her attention on the Drum Major, and folk topic relationships explain Marie’s focus on this particular character as she seeks change. This is because the Drum Major’s musical material consists of folk topic characteristics, making him a musical embodiment of the idea Marie desires. This idea is best understood by examining the example of the Drum Major’s melodic material shown below (Fig. 34):



Figure 34: Characteristic melodic material for the Drum Major, Act I, Scene 5.

In the above excerpt, the Drum Major's melodic material consists entirely of perfect fourths and pitch collections related to the whole tone scale. Both of these characteristics are a fundamental part of Berg's musical language related to the construction of folk topics, and here the Drum Major is shown embodying these characteristics. Through his consistent use of perfect fourths and the whole tone scale, the Drum Major himself becomes associated with the idea of escape, and so it is unsurprising that Marie would seek his attention.

In these examples, Marie's interaction with folk topics *supplements* an understanding of Marie's desire for escape and the Drum Major's role in fulfilling it. Marie is a character who directs agency toward change, hoping to break out of the social structure that oppresses her.

## SUMMARY

Attending to how the characters of *Wozzeck* interact with semiotic topics throughout the opera is integral to understanding how they evaluate their position in the world and exhibit agency based on this evaluation. The Captain and the Doctor, in avoiding folk topics altogether, communicate a disinterest in the idea of escape and a desire to maintain the oppressive status quo. Wozzeck, by trying and failing to use folk topics, displays his understanding of his unfortunate state and his inability to break free, coming to the conclusion that he can only find agency within oppression. Marie is able to direct agency toward change, and this is reflected in her use of folk topics throughout the opera. Why she directs this agency toward seeking the Drum Major is informed by the

Drum Major's musical characteristics, which consist of folk topic ideas and therefore make the Drum Major an embodiment of escape. Much of this information is not communicated through the text alone, and is best understood through an examination of the musical relationships explored in this chapter.

## CONCLUSION

Form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics work together in *Wozzeck*, conveying information that is integral to understanding character agency in the work. Agency belongs to characters who are able to control their actions to enact change on their world, and within the oppressive world of *Wozzeck*, finding agency is of the utmost importance. The characters evaluate their position in relation to the oppressive order and, motivated by this evaluation, choose to perpetuate oppression, accept it, or reject it, exhibiting agency in a way that reflects this decision. Understanding this evaluative process and the character agency motivated by it emerges from analyses of form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics, which can all at certain points *paraphrase*, *contradict*, or *supplement* the drama.

*Paraphrasing*, as a musical function that mimics the dramatic structure, conforming to the dramatic development, relates to evaluation that directs agency toward conformity in *Wozzeck*. Characters who are consistently associated with music that performs this function direct their agency in a way that does not challenge the oppressive structures of their world. This can be because they evaluate themselves as benefitting from it, as is the case with the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major, or because they believe that such a challenge is impossible, as is the case with Wozzeck. *Contradiction*, which breaks out of the established musical structure, relates to evaluation that finds dissatisfaction with the status quo, and characters use *contradictions* to express a desire to break free. Most notably, Wozzeck and Marie use *contradiction* when they are expressing their dissatisfaction in their relationship with the world, communicating their negative

evaluation. *Supplementation*, by injecting additional dramatic meaning into a scene, can be used for evaluation and directing agency in different ways depending on the subtext provided. To what end *supplementation* can help a character exhibit agency is based on the specific context.

In examining their musical function, the analyses of form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics found in this thesis create a consistent interpretation regarding how the various characters exhibit agency throughout the work. By using music that *paraphrases* the dramatic action and avoiding music that *supplements* the drama by adding a subtext related to challenging the status quo, characters like the Captain, the Doctor, and the Drum Major communicate their approval within the oppressive hierarchy, directing their agency toward perpetuating oppression. This is reflected in the *paraphrasing* leitmotifs used by the Captain and the Doctor, their association with forms that *paraphrase* the dramatic action, and their avoidance of folk topics, which relate to the idea of escape and therefore clash with these character's values. Comfortable within the social hierarchy, these characters do not need to challenge it.

Wozzeck, by using *paraphrasing* music and music that *supplements* the drama by underscoring his belief in the immutability of fate and social position, directs his agency toward conformity while expressing his misery in response to oppression. Wozzeck's belief in fate is expressed through the *supplementary* "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif, which is associated with this belief system in Act I, Scene 1 and continues to inject the idea of fate into the drama of the opera. The "Wozzeck's Hallucination" leitmotif *paraphrases* the dramatic action by merely indicating that a vision is occurring, lacking substance and failing to clearly communicate Wozzeck's evaluation of his oppressed state to others.

Believing fate to be unalterable and incapable of reaching out to others, Wozzeck directs his agency toward conforming to oppression.

Wozzeck's use of *contradictions* and attempts at using folk topics express how finding agency within the oppressive order is undesirable to Wozzeck, as he wishes to break free but is incapable of doing so. It is during a *contradiction* in Act I, Scene 3 that Wozzeck receives sympathy from Marie, marking the only time that a character seems to care about his suffering. That Wozzeck is rejected when he uses folk topics in Act II, Scene 5 and Act III, Scene 3 indicates that Wozzeck is simply unable to break out of the forces that oppress him, that he cannot successfully direct his agency toward escape.

Marie attempts to break out of the oppressive structure of the world through her music, using *contradictions* to assert her desire for a better life and using *supplementary* music to underscore her need to escape. A *contradiction* in Act II, Scene 1 coincides with Marie's description of her poor social state, hinting at a desire for a better life. Marie's avoidance of the "Wir arme Leut!" leitmotif in Act I, Scene 3 *supplements* the drama by underscoring her rejection of Wozzeck's conformist attitude. While she evaluates her position as undesirable, she does not share Wozzeck's perspective regarding the possibility of change. A palindromic relationship between the "Marie's Waiting" and "Seduction" leitmotifs further *supplements* the drama by providing a direction for Marie's agency as she seeks change: the Drum Major. This palindromic relationship, an imperfect one, informs an understanding of how the Drum Major is an imperfect solution to Marie's desire to find agency through rebellion. Marie's use of folk topics throughout the opera underscores a desire to escape and, because the Drum Major's musical characteristics consist of folk topic characteristics, reaffirm that the Drum Major is an



object of desire. Seeking the Drum Major's attention based on her evaluations, Marie directs her agency toward change.

As the above synthesis shows, form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics construct a consistent interpretation of how and to what end characters in *Wozzeck* exhibit agency. This consistency speaks to the brilliant construction of the opera, affirming Anthony Freud's observations quoted at the beginning of this thesis. With respect to the structural return found at the end of *Wozzeck*, which links the last bars of the opera with the first, closing the musical circle that dictates the events of the story,<sup>1</sup> I would like to return to an expanded version of the Anthony Freud quote that initiated this analytical investigation:

*Wozzeck* overwhelmed me for the first time more than 40 years ago...I'd never experienced anything like *Wozzeck*, and it remains a piece that, in my view, makes a unique impact...The brilliance with which every scene is constructed, the devastation of the title character in understanding the betrayal of the woman he loves, the final catastrophe that overtakes them both – all of this stays with you forever. It unfolds to riveting, astoundingly imaginative music.<sup>2</sup>

The “brilliance with which every scene is constructed”<sup>3</sup> can be understood through an examination of character agency in *Wozzeck* as informed by the forms, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics found throughout. The “devastation”<sup>4</sup> of its tragedy is amplified by the music, which constructs a narrative in which characters who desire to break free are denied agency through rebellion at the end of their lives. The music of *Wozzeck* is not only “riveting” and “astoundingly imaginative,”<sup>5</sup> but powerful and informative, playing an active role in establishing character agency. As the characters of *Wozzeck* struggle

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<sup>1</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 66.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, *Wozzeck*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

with the concept of agency throughout the story, the music provides a detailed understanding of this important dramatic development.

Berg, in his lectures, insists that audiences “forget everything that [he] tried to explain about musical theory and aesthetics” when experiencing the opera, but, as Jarman notes, “Berg [is] always at his most secretive when he seems to be most open,”<sup>6</sup> and it would be unwise to take this suggestion at face value. After all, it is by attending to the structural details, the nuances of musical function, that the drama of *Wozzeck* can be best understood. Form, leitmotifs, and semiotic topics all perform a substantial dramatic role in understanding character agency in *Wozzeck*, and it is their brilliant application that makes *Wozzeck* an artistic triumph of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>6</sup> Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck*, 59 and 170.

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