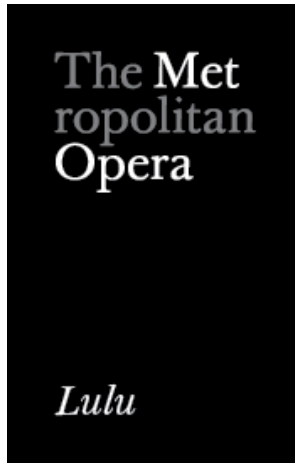


**Concert Report: Metropolitan Opera  
live broadcast of 'Lulu' (May 8)**

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by Timothy Robson



By coincidence on the same weekend that the Cleveland Orchestra performed Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, the Metropolitan Opera performed another work also *Lulu* at the Met from 1937, Alban Berg's *Lulu*, as its last radio broadcast of the season. Some critics have referred to *Lulu* as the supreme

masterpiece of the lyric theater, which may be hyperbole; however, *Lulu* still has the power to fascinate and shock over seventy years after its creation. Left incomplete at the time of Berg's early and untimely death and suppressed by the composer's widow until her death in the 1970s, it was only in 1979 in a completion by the Austrian composer Friedrich Cerha that audiences finally got a clear view of Berg's vision for the work. The opera vocal score was completed by Berg himself; Cerha only needed to complete the orchestration, for which Berg had left annotations. Also, the opera is highly palindromic in its compositional technique, so many passages in the third incomplete act are more or less exact repetitions of music that had appeared earlier in the opera.

*Lulu* was composed using the so-called "twelve-tone" system of composition, in which each note of the chromatic scale is given equal prominence, thus obscuring tonal centers usually found in traditional classical music. But Alban Berg was the most Romantic of the Second Viennese School, which also included his teacher Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern. The score of *Lulu* is full of sensuous orchestral passages and beautifully lyric vocal lines, as well as ensembles of the utmost complexity. For all of its fearsome reputation, much of *Lulu* is quite beautiful. (Yes, with a little experience, it is possible to leave the theater singing some of the

"tunes.") The vocal line moves with virtuosity from singing to "half-singing" to spoken word in service to the drama. Since the music is deprived of traditional tonality, Berg uses such devices as the sonata, rondo, "English waltz" and other traditional musical forms to bring cohesion to the work.

*Lulu* is a young woman to whom men (and at least one woman) are fatally attracted; she leaves a trail of death and destruction behind her until she herself is reduced to streetwalking in London and meets her own death at the hands of Jack the Ripper. *Lulu* may or may not have been a sexually abused child. She uses love to manipulate; however, in her famous aria "Lied der *Lulu*" ("*Lulu's Song*") she states that she has never tried to be anything other than what she is. If men kill themselves over her, that does not diminish her worth. The opera has aspects of cabaret comedy as well as tragedy, with *Lulu's* suitors hiding out under the table and behind the drapes in the drawing room of *Lulu's* third husband, the newspaper tycoon Dr. Schön. After *Lulu* shoots and kills Dr. Schön, *Lulu* seduces Schön's son, the composer Alwa. The lesbian Countess Geschwitz is the only truly sympathetic character in the opera, even to the end when she herself is also killed by Jack.

*Lulu* is a signature work for Met Music Director James Levine, who conducted the Met's first performances of the two-act torso of the work in 1977, the first performances of the completed version in 1980, and most of the performances since. Due to Levine's recent health problems these 2010 performances were taken by the Met's new Principal Guest Conductor Fabio Luisi. The Met assembled an all-star cast who gave what must have been one of the strongest performances that the work has received at the Met, at least from a musical standpoint. German soprano Marlis Petersen (who earlier in this Met season stepped in on three days' notice to sing the role of Ophelia in Thomas' *Hamlet*) was an incandescent *Lulu*, with dramatic heft to her voice, but with the ability to sing the part's very high tessitura and coloratura, all with seeming ease; she made it seem as if she were singing Bach

or Richard Strauss. The double bass-baritone roles of Dr. Schön and Jack the Ripper were taken by James Morris, one of the great Wotans of our time. It was a role debut for Morris, and he brought all of his musical and dramatic skill to it. Alwa Schön was sung by Gary Lehman, first heard at the Met as one of the parade of Tristans who sang opposite Deborah Voigt in 2008. The composer calls for a jugendlicher Heldentenor (a “young heldentenor”), a voice type which has never existed and never will exist; but Lehman had the vocal heft as well as the high notes to carry it off. Mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter was also singing the role of the Countess Geschwitz for the first time. She was poised and noble. The very large supporting cast was excellent. The Met Orchestra plays Berg’s thorny score peerlessly, and the last-minute conductor seemed fully in charge.

The Metropolitan Opera broadcasts are carried in Cleveland on WCLV 104.9 FM. For those unable to receive the station over the air, WCLV also carries them on its Internet stream at [wclv.com](http://wclv.com), however the stream is a relatively low-quality

40 kbps, which sometimes makes the stream sound hollow and distant, like an AM radio over-air broadcast. There are also many other stations who carry the Internet feed. All Internet streams have occasional dropouts and stream re-buffering issues. I listen over the Internet feed from Sirius XM radio (Sirius.com), the subscription satellite radio service, which I find to be the most reliable. (Of course, as a paid service one expects a superior product to what is delivered otherwise free.) The Sirius stream is 128 kbps, which is described as “near CD” quality, so the quality of the sound is considerably better than some other streams, but requires broadband Internet. BBC Radio 3 also carries the broadcasts over its iPlayer service ([bbc.co.uk/radio3](http://bbc.co.uk/radio3)) although the BBC does not carry the Met intermission features, including the famous and popular “Opera Quiz.” The Met’s own website ([metopera.org](http://metopera.org)) carries at least one Met live performance a week during the season, although never the Saturday afternoon matinees. For an opera-deprived city, the Met radio broadcasts and the more recent HD video broadcasts in movie theaters around the city are a blessing.