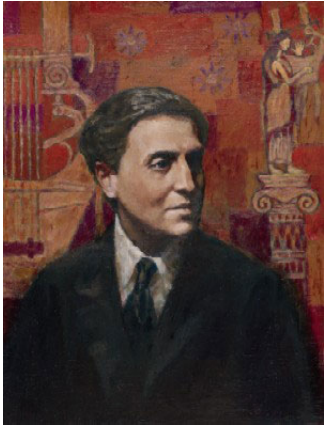


by Timothy Robson



For its penultimate concerts of the 2009/10 season on May 19 and 23, Music Director Franz Welser-Möst led the Cleveland Orchestra in one of their best concerts of the season. In between the Wednesday and Sunday Cleveland concerts, the group performed the same program in New York's

Carnegie Hall. When I heard the Sunday evening version of the program, the musicians still seemed pumped from the New York engagement; it was a triumph of beautiful orchestral sound and the performing precision for which the Cleveland Orchestra is so justly renowned.

Ludwig van Beethoven was represented by two works, the opening *Overture to 'Coriolan'*, op. 62, and the *Symphony No. 3, in E-flat major*, op. 55, known as the "Eroica." In between the two Beethoven works were excerpts from the *Symphonic Suite* from Alban Berg's opera *Lulu*. I use the term excerpts from Berg's suite purposely; the suite has a vocal third movement, the so-called *Lied der Lulu* ("Lulu's Song") that for unstated reasons was omitted from the Cleveland performance, although it was performed in New York. Since *Lulu's* aria presents the philosophical center of the opera, it was a curious omission. There are also several sung phrases at the end of the suite which in the opera are sung by the lesbian Countess Geschwitz declaring her love for Lulu. In concert performance, both *Lulu's* aria and these closing phrases are sung by the same soprano.

Although Beethoven's brief *Coriolan* overture was not intended as a lead-in to an actual performance of the Shakespeare-inspired drama by Heinrich von Collin, it is dramatic in its own right, with various changes in mood, stormy, then lyrical.

In this performance Franz Welser-Möst somehow managed to make the two final soft pizzicato notes seem as if they anticipate a drama yet to come, lifting off the notes as the curtain rises.

Although Alban Berg (pictured above) began his opera *Lulu* in 1929, he died in 1935 of an infected insect bite before he could finish the orchestration of the third act. He created the *Symphonic Suite* as something of a publicity ploy to draw attention to the new work prior to its first performance. It was a fortuitous decision, because the last two movements of the suite are Berg's only completed orchestration of music from the third act, thus giving the composer Friedrich Cerha clues as to how the remainder of the act could be completed when he undertook the project in the mid-1970s. It was not until 1979 that Cerha's three act version was performed at the Paris Opera with Teresa Stratas in the title role, conducted by Pierre Boulez. Franz Welser-Möst has recorded a DVD performance of the two-act torso of *Lulu* with the Zurich Opera.

I was struck in this Cleveland Orchestra performance of the *Lulu* suite by the Romantic grandeur of the music, with extraordinarily sensuous lyricism. The orchestra gave a committed performance, rich in details that would not normally be discernible from an opera house pit orchestra, that made the strongest possible case for this thorny music.

*Lulu* is, after all, in its essence an opera about love, although love is manifested in a number of perverse ways. The first movement (of the four performed here) is a conflation of two Act Two love duets between Lulu and Alwa Schoen, Lulu's last lover and son of Dr. Schoen, Lulu's third husband, mentor and father figure, whom Lulu has "accidentally" shot with Dr. Schoen's own gun. At the climax of the duet, Lulu asks Alwa, very matter-of-factly, "Isn't this the sofa on which your father bled to death?" (Writing a brief program note about the opera for the concert booklet presents a serious challenge to the annotator, because nothing in the opera's story or music is straightforward: the prin-

cipal characters are fully capable of good and evil.) The second movement, "Ostinato," is an orchestral interlude between the two scenes of the second act and is meant to accompany a silent film that depicts Lulu's trial for the murder of Dr. Schoen, her imprisonment, and eventual escape engineered by Countess Geschwitz. The movement is a palindrome, with an orchestral climax at the center of the piece, then with two quiet piano arpeggios and vibraphone chords, reversing the notes themselves until they play out. The fourth movement is an orchestral interlude during the scene change between the two scenes of Act Three, a set of variations on a cabaret-like tune composed by Frank Wedekind (the author of the two plays upon which Lulu is based). The final *Adagio* is a slightly condensed orchestra-only version of the closing scene in which Lulu, who is reduced to prostitution of the streets of London, negotiates for payment with a potential client who turns out to be Jack the Ripper. Lulu's death occurs offstage, but we hear in the orchestra

her death scream. (In the opera house, Lulu's cries of "Nein... Nein... Nein, Nein" ("No...") and her scream make a shocking impression.) The movement ends quietly with the last music of the opera, Countess Geschwitz's dying words of love for Lulu.

After intermission Franz led the orchestra in a fleet-footed performance of Beethoven's mighty "Eroica" symphony. He was barely on the podium before beginning the two big chords that open the first movement. The pulse was very brisk but convincing. This urgency continued through the rest of the performance. In a work so well known, it may be hard to find freshness, but Welser-Möst brought a compelling quality (as he had in the other works on this program) that was challenging and thrilling. During the curtain calls Franz Welser-Möst gave solo bows to the principal wind players and to the orchestra's magnificent horn section which plays such an important role in this symphony. The ovation was deserved.