Wozzeck

Opera in three acts
Libretto by the composer, adapted from the play by Georg Büchner

Thursday, March 13, 2014, 7:30–9:10 pm

The production of Wozzeck was made possible by a gift from the Metropolitan Opera Club

Additional funding for this production was provided by The DuBose and Dorothy Heyward Memorial Fund

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The Metropolitan Opera
2013–14 Season

The 67th Metropolitan Opera performance of

Alban Berg’s

Wozzeck

Conductor
James Levine

IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

Captain
Peter Hoare

First Apprentice
Richard Bernstein

Wozzeck
Thomas Hampson

Second Apprentice
Mark Schowalter

Andres
Russell Thomas*

Fool
Philippe Castagner*

Marie
Deborah Voigt

Soldier
Daniel Clark Smith

Margret
Tamara Mumford*

A Townsman
Raymond Aparentado

Doctor
Clive Bayley

Marie’s Child
Anthony Reznikovsky

Drum Major
Simon O’Neill

STAGE PIANO SOLO
Bradley Moore

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Fight Director B.H. Barry
Musical Preparation Linda Hall, John Keenan,
Jonathan Khuner, and Bradley Moore
Assistant Stage Director Gregory Anthony Fortner
Stage Band Conductor Gregory Buchalter
Prompter Jonathan Khuner
Met Titles Christopher Bergen
German Coach Marianne Barrett
Children’s Chorus Director Anthony Piccolo
Assistant to the Set Designer Marsha Ginsberg
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Wigs and Makeup executed by Metropolitan Opera
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Mariusz Kwiecien as Onegin
and Anna Netrebko as Tatiana

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Act I
The soldier Wozzeck is shaving the Captain. The officer urges him to work more slowly, then tells him that he is a good man but lacks morality because he has an illegitimate child. Wozzeck replies that virtue is a luxury not meant for the poor.

Wozzeck and a fellow soldier, Andres, are cutting firewood in the fields. Wozzeck is frightened by visions: he hears noises and imagines the sinking sun as a fire setting the earth aflame. Then suddenly all is quiet.

Marie, the mother of Wozzeck's child, and her neighbor Margret watch a military band pass by outside their window. Marie admires the handsome Drum Major and Margret mocks her. Alone with her young son, Marie sings him a lullaby. Wozzeck arrives and tells her about his visions, which he sees as an omen of evil things to come. Marie tries to comfort him, but he rushes off to the barracks without looking at his son. Overwhelmed by her own fears, Marie runs out of the room, leaving the child.

Wozzeck visits the Doctor, who pays him for use in his pseudo-scientific research. Full of self-delusion about making a grand scientific discovery, the Doctor asks Wozzeck about his diet. Wozzeck again brings up his visions, which the doctor dismisses as mere imagination.

On the street before her door, the Drum Major makes advances toward Marie. She resists at first, then gives in to him.

Act II
Marie is admiring the earrings the Drum Major has given her. When Wozzeck enters, she tries to hide them, then claims she found them in the street. Wozzeck is suspicious. He gives her the money he has earned and leaves. Marie is overwhelmed by remorse.

The Captain and the Doctor meet in the street and talk morbidly of sickness and death. When Wozzeck passes by, they taunt him with allusions to Marie's infidelity. Shocked, Wozzeck asks them not to make fun of the one thing in the world that is his. Then he rushes off.

Wozzeck confronts Marie with his suspicions and tries to force her to confess. He is about to hit her but she remains defiant, telling him that she'd rather have a knife in her belly than his hand on her.
Two drunken apprentices amuse the crowd in a beer garden. Wozzeck enters and sees Marie and the Drum Major on the dance floor. A fool approaches Wozzeck and tells him he smells blood. Wozzeck has a vision of people waltzing while covered with blood.

The same evening in the barracks, Wozzeck wakes to nightmarish memories of what happened in the beer garden. The Drum Major enters, drunk, and boasts about his conquest. The two men fight and Wozzeck is knocked down.

**Act III**

Alone with her child, Marie reads from the Bible, first about the adulteress who was forgiven, then about Mary Magdalene. She begs God for mercy.

Marie and Wozzeck are walking together near a pond. Marie wants to hurry back to town, but Wozzeck makes her sit with him. He kisses her and makes ironic remarks about her fidelity. When she attempts to escape, he draws a knife and kills her.

Wozzeck is drinking in a tavern, shouting wildly, and dancing with Margret. When she notices blood on his arm, he is unable to explain where it has come from and rushes out.

At the pond, Wozzeck searches for the knife and throws it into the water. Suddenly he imagines that the moon will reveal his crime. He wades farther into the water to hide the knife in a safer place and to wash the blood off his hands. The Doctor and Captain, passing by, hear him drown.

Neighbor children playing in the street tell Marie’s son that his mother is dead. He does not understand and keeps singing and playing.
In Focus

Alban Berg

Wozzeck

Premiere: Berlin State Opera, 1925

One of the emblematic achievements of the thriving artistic forces in Germany and Austria during the brief period between world wars, Wozzeck was a sensation and a scandal at its premiere. Remarkably, it has lost none of its power to fascinate, shock, and engage audiences, and its status as one of the defining musical works of the 20th century has not blunted its vitality. Wozzeck is the drama of a common soldier who, through relentless dehumanization and systematic humiliation, is driven to insanity and the murder of his mistress. Its subject matter resonated with the German public traumatized by the First World War and its aftermath, but the work’s scope reaches far beyond that, making it a monument to the alienation and angst of modern life. Berg’s score encapsulates the artistic ideals of Expressionism in music—emphasizing the unseen and the subconscious by focusing on the symbolic rather than the concrete. The characters’ highly charged, exaggerated words and music reveal the drama’s inner truth.

The Creators

Among the most visionary and influential composers of the 20th century, Alban Berg (1885–1935) came of age amid an explosion of artistic and intellectual creativity in Vienna. His vocal and instrumental writing merges the revolutionary techniques of Arnold Schoenberg with the grandeur of such late Romantic composers as Gustav Mahler. Wozzeck is the only opera Berg completed; Lulu was left unfinished at the time of his premature death. The libretto is Berg’s own close adaptation of the play Woyzeck by Georg Büchner (1813–1837). He was a natural scientist whose small oeuvre of dramatic and prose works became extremely influential after his early death. The story of Woyzeck was based on an actual incident in 1821, with some of the dialogue inspired by the historic Woyzeck’s actual words, as recorded in the medical inquiry prior to his trial for murdering his mistress.

The Setting

Berg did not specify a time or location for the opera. The background of Büchner’s play has led to the assumption of Leipzig, Germany, circa 1821 as an appropriate setting, but the work’s universal ideas far outweigh any forced attempt at historical accuracy.
The Music
Atonality and whole-tone composition coexist in Berg’s score with moments of romanticism and melody. The vocal writing ranges from pure speech to declaimed speech with musical inflections to melodic singing. Recurring motifs are used, but not in the strict Wagnerian sense of a musical phrase attached to a specific character or idea. The motifs in Wozzeck are often fragments of lines or even rhythms. There are suggestions of familiar sounds, such as the Military March (Act I, Scene 3) and the music of the tavern (Act III, Scene 3), but the music is distorted, creating a sense of parody. To provide a structural framework for his largely atonal composition, Berg used traditional musical forms as the basis for each act and scene, although most of these are not apparent when listening to the music. (The grotesque, pseudo-scientific world of the Doctor, for example, is reflected in a Passacaglia, a form whose most notable feature is a fixed, recurring bass line or theme running through the piece.) Among the most striking moments of the score—in fact, of the entire operatic repertoire—is the orchestral interlude following the scene of Marie’s murder (labeled “Invention on a pitch”): an enormous orchestral crescendo builds on the single note B, interrupted by a crashing chord and a rhythm played on the bass drum. A second crescendo on B suddenly vanishes as the curtain rises and the action resumes. Berg himself famously warned against mistaking the musicological intricacy of the score for the opera’s central point: “However thorough one’s knowledge of the opera’s musical forms,” he said, “from the curtain’s rise until its final fall no one in the audience should think of the various Fugues, Inventions, Suite and Sonata Movements, Variations, and Passacaglias. Everyone should be filled only with the idea of the opera, an idea that far transcends the individual fate of Wozzeck.”

Wozzeck at the Met
Alban Berg’s *Wozzeck* was adapted from a play that has come down to us only as a fragment—preliminary drafts and sketches recovered after the author’s death in 1837 at the age of 23. It took 38 years for the faded and almost illegible manuscript to be deciphered and another 38 years before an edition of the play was staged in November 1913 in Munich. Berg saw the first production in Vienna in May of the following year and immediately decided to convert Georg Büchner’s Expressionist drama about a misused common soldier into an opera.

With the outbreak of World War I only three months later, the degradation that Büchner’s anti-hero suffers at the hands of organized society was to become the common experience of millions, among them Berg himself. Working on the opera during his years of military service, he compared himself to Wozzeck in a letter to his wife: “I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact, humiliated.”

By that time it had come to light that there was a real-life model for the protagonist: In 1821, a despised and poverty-stricken ex-soldier named Woyzeck had stabbed to death his faithless mistress. (Among other errors, the play’s original editor misread the name of the title character.) At the trial the defense pleaded insanity. An expert was appointed to investigate Woyzeck’s mental condition and concluded that, in spite of certain aberrations and delusions, the accused could not be regarded as mentally unbalanced. He was publicly executed three years later. The story of the real Woyzeck not only suggested the content of the drama but was also the source of explicit verbal motifs, employing Woyzeck’s own words as given in the medical report.

Berg’s music imposes a formal structure of unprecedented rigor and symmetry on Büchner’s seemingly disconnected scenes, reflecting an objective, mechanistic order. Its irrelevance to Wozzeck’s subjective fate is a representation of his total isolation in an indifferent universe. The music to which Wozzeck drowns in the pond, for example, is as cold and dispassionate as the water itself. When the “nature music” representing the croaking of the toads that opened the scene returns at its end, it is as though nothing has happened. It’s this, not the “expressive” character of the music, that accounts for the harrowing impact of the moment.

Berg reduced Büchner’s 26 scenes to 15 and grouped them into three acts of five scenes each. Each scene serves as a self-contained movement within a self-contained formal structure:

**Act I** Five Character Pieces: Suite, Rhapsody, Military March and Cradle Song, Passacaglia, Rondo

**Act II** Symphony in Five Movements: Sonata Allegro, Fantasia and Fugue, Largo, Scherzo, Introduction and Rondo
Act III  Five Inventions: On a theme, on a pitch, on a rhythm, on a chord, on a constant eighth-note motion

The three acts together form an arch, with the longer and more complex middle act bridging the symmetrically balanced outer acts. Act I is expository, each scene relating Wozzeck to a different aspect of his environment and to another person of the drama. The first scene shows him shaving—and being patronized and ridiculed by—the Captain. Next we find Wozzeck cutting firewood with his fellow soldier Andres. Superstitious and fearful, Wozzeck perceives terrifying omens all about him. In the third scene we see Wozzeck’s mistress, Marie, admiring the soldiers on parade in the street. Wozzeck pauses at the house for a moment on his way to the barracks, and his abstracted air leaves her frightened and frustrated. Scene 4 introduces the Doctor, a representative, like the Captain, of established society. Though he stands for its more exalted features of science and learning, he is no less banal, even when he speaks in Latin. In the act’s concluding scene, the Drum Major, whom Marie admired earlier in the parade, returns. Marie disappears with him into the house, and a slow curtain descends on the empty stage.

Each scene of the second act presents another step in Wozzeck’s discovery of Marie’s infidelity and in the gradual disintegration of the one human relationship upon which his manhood and sanity depend. It begins with Marie hiding from Wozzeck the earrings the Drum Major has given her: “I found them,” she claims. “Two at a time?” he asks.

Scene 2 shows the Doctor and the Captain as they set upon Wozzeck in the street, dropping vague hints of Marie’s affair. Next we meet Marie and Wozzeck as he asks her why her sin has left no mark upon her face. She pretends not to understand. As he grows more threatening she grows more defiant, and when he raises his hand as though to strike her she cries out, “Don’t touch me! Better a knife in my body than a hand upon me!” In the fourth scene Wozzeck’s suspicions are confirmed when he sees Marie and the Drum Major dancing together. The nadir of Wozzeck’s degradation is reached in the act’s final scene: The drunken Drum Major boasts to Wozzeck about his conquest of Marie and trounces him before the eyes of his comrades.

The first four sections of Act III present the denouement of the drama, starting with Marie, alone, reading from the Bible and seeking comfort in the story of Mary Magdalene. In Scene 2 we find Wozzeck and Marie walking by a pond in the woods. Suddenly he draws a knife and stabs her. We follow Wozzeck to a low dive where he flirts with a girl. When she notices blood on his hand, he runs out into the night. The fourth scene has Wozzeck returning to the scene of the crime, searching for the murder weapon. He throws it into the pond but, thinking that he hasn’t thrown it far enough, wades in to retrieve it. He tries to wash the blood
from his hand, but the water itself, reflecting the red moon, is the color of blood.
“I’m washing myself with blood!” he cries out, then disappears in the water. The
Doctor and the Captain, passing by, hear a groan and hurry away.

The symphonic interlude that follows Scene 4 is a tone poem on some of the principal themes of the opera. Berg asked that it be understood “as the composer’s confession, breaking through the framework of the dramatic plot and, likewise, even as an appeal to the audience, which is here meant to represent humanity itself.”

The final scene, showing a group of children at play in the street, serves as an epilogue. Marie’s child toddles after his playmates as they run off to look at Marie’s newly discovered corpse. The curtain again descends upon an empty stage, as it did at the conclusion of Act I. The time of day, however, is morning, as it was at the beginning of the opera, suggesting a return to the “normal” workaday world of the opening scene. In the end the tragic fate of Wozzeck and Marie is seen as nothing more than a momentary distraction in an innocently callous children’s world. The alternating chords that brought the first act to a close return, but not, as before, in a driving accelerando and crescendo that is cut off by the closed curtain. The quiet, perpetual eighth-note motion of the final “invention” is continued in the alternating chords of the curtain music and seems to go on forever.

In deriving a libretto from the 1909 edition of Büchner’s play, Berg made only minor changes to the actual text. For instance, he substituted “beans” for “peas” in the Doctor scene, adding a reference to a staple of his diet as a soldier in the Austrian army. The opera was completed in the spring of 1922 and had its premiere at the Berlin State Opera on December 14, 1925, with Erich Kleiber conducting. Kleiber’s brave decision to stage a supposedly unplayable work by an obscure “atonal” composer was made the focal point of a crisis for the Berlin State Opera. But in spite of fabricated reports in the proto-Nazi gutter press of a “riot at the dress rehearsal” and of demonstrations against the work, the premiere was a sensational success. It suddenly made Berg a famous composer the world over.

—George Perle

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The Cast

James Levine
MUSIC DIRECTOR AND CONDUCTOR (CINCINNATI, OHIO)

MET HISTORY Since his 1971 company debut leading Tosca, he has led nearly 2,500 performances at the Met—more than any other conductor in the company's history. Of the 85 operas he has led at the Met, 13 were company premieres (including Stiffelio, I Lombardi, I Vespri Siciliani, La Cenerentola, Benvenuto Cellini, Porgy and Bess, Erwartung, Moses und Aron, Idomeneo, and La Clemenza di Tito). He also led the world premières of Corigliano’s The Ghosts of Versailles and Harbison’s The Great Gatsby.

THIS SEASON In his 41st season at the Met he conducts revivals of Così fan tutte and Wozzeck; the new production of Falstaff; three concerts with the Met Orchestra at Carnegie Hall with soloists Joyce DiDonato, Peter Mattei, and Lynn Harrell; and staged scenes from works by Berlioz, Donizetti, and Mozart, and Stravinsky’s one-act Mavra at Juilliard’s Peter Jay Sharp Theater in a joint project between the Met’s Lindemann Young Artist Development Program and the Juilliard School.

Deborah Voigt
SOPRANO (CHICAGO, ILLINOIS)

THIS SEASON Marie in Wozzeck at the Met and concerts and recitals in Zurich, Boston, and California.


CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Minnie with the San Francisco Opera and Lyric Opera of Chicago, the title role of Annie Get Your Gun at the Glimmerglass Festival, Salome at Lyric Opera of Chicago, her first Isolde in Vienna followed by a 23-minute standing ovation, regular appearances as a host in the Met’s Live in HD series, and President Clinton’s visit to her Met performances as Aida.
Clive Bayley
BASS (LEICESTER, ENGLAND)

**This Season**  The Doctor in *Wozzeck* for his debut at the Met, Claggart in *Billy Budd* at the Gothenburg Opera, Daland in *Der Fliegende Holländer* at the Royal Danish Theatre, Gesler in Rossini’s *William Tell* at the Welsh National Opera, and the title role of Massenet’s *Don Quichotte* at Grange Park Opera.

**Career Highlights**  Recent performances include Dosifei in *Khovanshchina* and the General in *The Gambler* in Frankfurt, Sir Walter Raleigh in Britten’s *Gloriana* in Hamburg and at Covent Garden, Gremin in *Eugene Onegin* at Grange Park Opera, Fasolt in *Das Rheingold* in Strasbourg, and Arkel in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Titurel in *Parsifal*, Geronte in *Manon Lescaut*, and Achilla in *Giulio Cesare* at Munich’s Bavarian State Opera. He made his debut at Covent Garden in *Fidelio* and has since appeared there in the world premiere of Birtwistle’s *Gawain*, Biterolf in *Tannhäuser*, Colline in *La Bohème*, Carbon in Alfano’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, Thoas in *Iphigénie en Tauride*, Sylvano in Cavalli’s *La Calisto*, and Hunding in *Die Walküre*.

Thomas Hampson
BARITONE (SPOKANE, WASHINGTON)

**This Season**  The title role of *Wozzeck* at the Met, the title role of *Simon Boccanegra* at the Vienna State Opera, Amfortas in *Parsifal* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, Germont in *La Traviata* at Munich’s Bavarian State Opera, Mandryka in *Arabella* at the Salzburg Festival, and Scarpia in *Tosca* with the Deutsche Oper Berlin and at Covent Garden.


**Career Highlights**  He has sung in all the world’s leading opera houses and frequently appears in concert and recital. A Kammersänger of the Vienna State Opera, he was named a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Letters by the Republic of France and holds the Austrian Medal of Honor in Arts and Sciences. He was a 1981 winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.

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Peter Hoare
TENOR (BRADFORD, ENGLAND)

THIS SEASON The Captain in Wozzeck at the Met, Desportes in Zimmerman’s Die Soldaten with the Zurich Opera, Sharikov in Alexander Raskator’s A Dog’s Heart in Lyon, Creon in Julian Anderson’s Thebans for English National Opera, and Larry King in Mark-Anthony Turnage’s Anna Nicole at Covent Garden.

MET APPEARANCES Shapkin in From the House of the Dead (debut, 2009).

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Recent performances include Gregor in The Makropulos Case, Faust in La Damnation de Faust, Pedrillo in Die Entführung aus dem Serail, and Sharikov in Nice, Vitek in The Makropulos Case at the Salzburg Festival, Bob Boles in Peter Grimes at La Scala, Michel in Martinů’s Julietta for English National Opera, and Alwa in Lulu for Welsh National Opera. He has also sung Sellem in The Rake’s Progress in Lausanne and at Paris’s Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Shapkin at La Scala, Weinberg’s The Portrait at the Bregenz Festival, and Bacchus in Ariadne auf Naxos, Tito in La Clemenza di Tito, the Simpleton in Boris Godunov, and the Witch in Hansel and Gretel at Welsh National Opera.

Simon O’Neill
TENOR (TIMARU, NEW ZEALAND)

THIS SEASON The Drum-Major in Wozzeck at the Met, Siegmund in Die Walküre with the Deutsche Oper Berlin, the title role of Parsifal at Covent Garden, and the title role of Otello with Opera Australia.

MET APPEARANCES The High Priest in Idomeneo (debut, 2006) and Siegmund.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS Siegmund at La Scala, Covent Garden, Vienna State Opera, and Munich’s Bavarian State Opera, the title roles of Lohengrin and Parsifal at the Bayreuth Festival, Lohengrin with the Houston Grand Opera, Cavaradossi in Berlin, Siegfried in Götterdämmerung at the La Coruña Festival, and Max in Der Freischütz at Vienna’s Theater an der Wien. He has also sung Florestan in Fidelio and Jenik in The Bartered Bride at Covent Garden, Mitch in Previn’s A Streetcar Named Desire at Vienna’s Theater an der Wien, and Rodolfo in La Bohème with New Orleans Opera. He was a Finalist in the 2002 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions.
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