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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Alban Berg's Operas According to Roland Barthes's Five Narrative Codes

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Abstract

In his book *S/Z*, French philosopher and literary theorist Roland Barthes applied his five narrative codes – five analytical tools for scrutinising any literary text – to analysing the intersection of various interpretive divisions and cultural discourses in Honoré de Balzac's novella *Sarrasine.* Barthes's five codes are meant to be used as an investigative methodology, and this article implements this system as a means of analysing symmetrical symbolic structures in the narratives of the two operas of Austrian composer Alban Berg: *Wozzeck* and *Lulu.* The aim of this endeavour is to present a new outlook on Berg's method of dramaturgical construction through interdisciplinary connections that juxtapose musicology with literary analysis. This approach presents Berg as a narrative designer of allegories that closely mirror Barthes's literary critical technique, as exemplified by their shared use of the five codes.

Keywords: Alban Berg; Roland Barthes; Opera studies

At the height of his fame in the 1970s, the French philosopher, semiotician and literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915–80) was known for his unique way of synthesising elements of his current-day, public interests with critical methods drawn from structuralism, semiotics and rhetorical analysis, which he redirected towards contemporary cultural phenomena of scholarly and theoretical studies.[1] As Martin McQuillan writes, Barthes 'created a discourse, the means by which theory can address the present as both scholar and citizen. That is to say, Barthes, knowingly or not, invented cultural studies.'[2] Barthes's skill at identifying various cultural intersections that converge to inform literary texts supplies the central framework of the present article. In what follows, keeping my focus on Alban Berg's operas, I apply a specific methodology that Barthes devised to merge the disciplines of literary analysis and musicology.

In his book *S/Z*, Barthes isolates a short story by Honoré de Balzac titled *Sarrasine*,[3] which he subjects to a thorough literary analysis using what he has formulated as a system of five narrative codes, or five analytical tools for examining any literary text. This facilitates

[1] For compelling studies that analyse Barthes's œuvre and its meaning, see Graham Allen, *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Roland Barthes* (London, 2003); and Rick Rylance, *Modern Cultural Theorists: Roland Barthes* (London, 2014).

[2] Martin McQuillan, *Roland Barthes (Or the Profession of Cultural Studies)* (London, 2011), 5.

[3] On the relationship between *S/Z* and *Sarrasine*, see Yvonne Noble, 'Castrati, Balzac, and BartheS/Z', *Comparative Drama* 31 (1997), 28–41; and Sandy Petrey, 'Castration, Speech Acts, and the Realist Difference: *S/Z* versus *Sarrasine*', *PMLA* 102/2 (1987), 153–65.

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Barthes's larger initiative of determining cultural meaning and references as discernible patterns that come together to define a story-based text. Barthes explains how these interpretative divisions unite to define the story by stating that 'the five codes create a kind of network, a *topos* through which the entire text passes (or rather, in passing, becomes text)'.[4] The purpose of this idealistic conflation, Barthes argues, is not to establish an assembled whole, but to present a path toward a unified organisation.[5] 'Hence we use *Code* here not in the sense of a list, a paradigm that must be reconstituted. The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures.'[6] The codes thus function as analytic coordinates for tracing how meaning is distributed and reactivated across a narrative structure: 'they are so many fragments of something that has always been *already* read, seen, done, experienced; the code is the wake of that *already*'.[7]

It is this multiplicity of meaning and application that makes Barthes's five narrative codes well-suited for analysing the genre of opera in general, and to the two operas of Alban Berg (1885–1935) in particular.[8] Applying these codes offers a new window into the complex narrative structures of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* as Berg conceived them. In this regard, Barthes's *S/Z* and the five codes serve as a methodological framework for interpreting the symbolic scope of Berg's operas as revealed through their libretti – texts that Berg adapted from the plays on which his operas are based. Moreover, Barthes writes that 'as a fragment of ideology, the cultural code *inverts* its class origin (scholastic and social) into a natural reference, into a proverbial statement'.[9] This observation points to a broader principle at work in both *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*: each opera subtly transforms the cultural and ideological realities of its time into expressive, seemingly naturalised artistic elements. This transformation functions as a core aesthetic strategy in Berg's work, reflecting the era in which he composed and his personal response to its social conditions. Berg's socio-cultural context has been the subject of previous studies, with particular focus devoted to the ways that his operas resonate with his life in contemporary Vienna. As many scholars have shown, his operas engaged deeply with the city's class tensions, cultural contradictions and evolving views of sexuality.[10] Although this article will not focus directly on these historical dynamics, an awareness of their presence within the operas' textual fabric nonetheless remains important. They create a resonance between the kind of cultural references Berg embedded in his works and the ideological mechanisms Barthes identifies – offering a layered reflection of socio-cultural structures without reducing the operas to direct social commentary.[11]

[4] Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974), 20.

[5] Barthes, *S/Z*, 20.

[6] Barthes, *S/Z*, 20.

[7] Barthes, *S/Z*, 20.

[8] For a study that analyses gender in music through the lens of Barthes's critical theory, see Barbara Engh, 'Loving It: Music and Criticism in Roland Barthes', in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Music Scholarship*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, CA, 1993), 66–79. In this chapter, Engh interprets Barthes's late turn to music as a reconsideration of his criticism. This approach investigates Barthes's focuses on music's bodily presence, which resists full explanation by being more of a state of existence than a structural decoding. Such an evaluation acts as a counterpoint to the present article and its focus on narrative codes that purport semiotic analysis.

[9] Barthes, *S/Z*, 97–8.

[10] For a series of titles that investigate Berg's relationship with Vienna and the events that led to the formation of abstract musical representations of those experiences, see Christopher Hailey, 'Defining Home: Berg's Life on the Periphery', in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, ed. Anthony Pople (Cambridge, 1997), 3–23. See also Christopher Hailey, 'Between Instinct and Reflection: Berg, Opera and the Viennese Dichotomy', in *The Berg Companion*, ed. Douglas Jarman (Boston, MA, 1989), 221–34; Martin Esslin, 'Berg's Vienna', in Jarman, *The Berg Companion*, 1–12.

[11] Berg's socio-cultural morality was largely defined by the writings of Vienna's most famous satirical writer, Karl Kraus, who was particularly focused on exposing the hypocrisies of society. He especially concentrated on those hypocrisies related to sexual morality, where parochial chastity and restraint were advocated for publicly, but where contrary, hedonistic impulses were privately indulged by those same moral adjudicators. For a source

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Using Barthes's five narrative codes to analyse the music of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* reorients our understanding of these works. Approaching *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* through Barthes's codes shifts attention toward the ways in which their formal procedures participate in narrative construction. Musical structures – motivic recurrence, symmetry, orchestration and large-scale design – support the drama and articulate patterns of concealment, delay, opposition and cultural reference that operate alongside the libretto. Based on this approach, the operas disclose a network of symbolic and ideological correspondences that extends beyond stylistic classification and invites consideration of their narrative logic as structurally embedded within the music itself.

Although written in the early 1970s, *S/Z* provides a system for isolating the breadth of narrative meaning. Its five codes describe mechanisms pertaining to enigmas, actions, semantic traces, symbolic oppositions and cultural references, through which texts organise and defer significance. Applied to Berg's operas, this framework highlights the extent to which musical form and dramaturgy participate in comparable processes of delay, mirroring and cultural inscription. The result provides an analytical alignment that clarifies the distribution of narrative complexity across both text and score.

In addition to the overlapping symbolic relationships that the present article aims to exemplify, it is useful to note – as a linchpin – that Berg was keenly familiar with Balzac's writings, and that he even made plans of setting his texts to music. Berg's earliest mention of Balzac came in a letter to his friend and fellow student Anton von Webern, written on 22 October 1911, where he quoted lines from Balzac's *La vieille fille*, describing it as a 'delightful novel' that revealed to him Balzac's 'true significance': 'Only now has [August] Strindberg's admiration for him [Balzac] become completely clear to me. And why you are so enthusiastic. Now I must probably at last buy the book that you have always recommended to me. What is the book actually called, and what is the title of the story?'[12] Webern responded by naming Balzac's novel *Seraphita*, which, he informed Berg, was to be the next book that their teacher, Arnold Schoenberg, was planning to set to music. Berg was so encouraged by this news that he also decided to set *Seraphita* to symphonic music. In the end, neither Berg nor Schoenberg followed through with their plans, but Berg continued to extol the virtues of *Seraphita*, even citing the book in a letter to Schoenberg on 12 August 1912.[13] While Berg never mentions *Sarrasine*,[14] his knowledge of and admiration for Balzac serves to strengthen the rationale for undertaking a comparative study of this sort here, which retroactively applies Barthes's theories to Berg's operas. In other words, Berg's affinity for Balzac is mentioned briefly here to establish a historical and creative link between Berg and Barthes's source material, reinforcing the legitimacy of reading *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* through Barthes's narrative codes.

Barthes's intertextual analysis of *Sarrasine* seeks to isolate a variety of cultural formations. His investigative rhetoric can be applied to Berg's operas in a way that pinpoints many

that isolates Kraus's work, see Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna* (New Haven, CT, 1986). For sources that investigate Kraus's indelible influence on Berg, see Susanne Rode, *Alban Berg und Karl Kraus: Zur geistigen Biographie des Komponisten der 'Lulu'* (Frankfurt am Main, 1988); David P. Schroeder, 'Opera, Apocalypse and the Dance of Death: Berg's Indebtedness to Kraus', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 25/1 (1992), 91–105.

[12] Kathryn Puffett and Barbara Schingnitz, eds., *Three Men of Letters: Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, 1906–1921* (Vienna, 2020), 393.

[13] Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey and Donald Harris, eds., *The Berg–Schoenberg Correspondence: Selected Letters* (New York, 1987), 105–6.

[14] For a source that contains a full bibliography of Balzac's works in Berg's personal library, see Wolfgang Gratzer, *Zur 'wunderlichen Mystik' Alban Bergs* (Vienna, 1993), 270–2. *Sarrasine* is not listed in the bibliography, but there are several cited volumes of collected stories that may contain the novella. All of Berg's Balzac sources are German translations from the turn of the century.

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symbolic similarities between all the examined texts. The purpose and value of such an investigation revolves around instigating a view of Berg as not only composer but also narrative sculptor, his two operas benefiting from a unique juxtaposition of musicology and literary analysis. This investigation leads toward interdisciplinary insights that develop the critical reception of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*'s allegorical complexity through the distinctive prism of Barthes's codes. Moreover, while this is primarily a text-based study, references to Berg's music within the operas are included to complement the discussion of the composer's narrative designs that are in service of telling a story – whether textual or musical. Since Barthes and his five codes are the main methodology for determining meaning in the operas, it is necessary to maintain an analytical consistency of scrutinised mediums. The present article is divided into sections, beginning with a definition of the five individual codes and a short synopsis of *Sarrasine.* This is followed by five subsections, each devoted to one of Barthes's narrative codes. Within these sections, I analyse Berg's operas through this framework in order to show how the characters in *Sarrasine*, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* jointly reflect a specific form of written culture that is unified under Barthes's analytical philosophy.

Barthes's codes and the plot to *Sarrasine*

Prefacing his literary analysis of Balzac's short story, Barthes opens his essay by expressing how narrative analysis has always sought to derive a single system through which all stories can be examined.[15] He continues that this kind of 'evaluation' cannot stem from scientific or ideological tenets, because these only determine what is represented. Barthes insists that evaluation must be associated with practice, which he states is the act of writing.[16] A central dilemma for Barthes is the division between writers and readers, which he feels impoverishes the reader because they can only pass judgement over the text instead of taking an active role in the phenomenon of figuratively writing the text themselves. With this in mind, Barthes asserts that 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of text'.[17] This concept of framing the reader as the writer of the text, in a manner of speaking, is presented by Barthes as a dichotomy: A text that can be 'rewritten' by the reader is designated as 'writerly', while one that 'can be read but not written' is 'readerly'.[18] In other words, a readerly text is a story that is straightforward and presented in a realistic and linear manner, and is largely untroubling for the reader. Writerly texts, conversely, do not conform to traditional styles of storytelling, and must be perceived intuitively. Barthes describes the writerly text as 'read but not written', meaning that the reader must essentially invent for themselves what cannot be included (written) but is only suggested. The point is that readerly texts are digested with idle inactivity, while writerly texts demand the reader to be more engaged and critical because the text challenges expectations. Furthermore, in order to understand a text, Barthes argues, one cannot ascribe meaning to it *per se*, but must rather focus on the 'plurality' that has gone into creating it.[19] By this, he means that the various other stories and fragments of cultural signs that inform the essence of a narrative should be the locus of interpretation. Moreover, the reader is tasked with interpreting the text within this pluralistic framework, while recognising that any reading constitutes only one possible configuration of meaning among many. This is what Barthes means by becoming a producer instead of a consumer of a text.

[15] Barthes, S/Z, 3.
[16] Barthes, S/Z, 3–4.
[17] Barthes, S/Z, 4.
[18] Barthes, S/Z, 4.
[19] Barthes, S/Z, 5.

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Barthes begins his analysis of *Sarrasine* by describing the five narrative codes that he will repeatedly apply in the lexias of his essay to demonstrate a textual analysis that is based on his perception of a plurality of constituent factors. (Lexias are the numbered units akin to aphorisms where Barthes breaks down passages from *Sarrasine* in conjunction with the different codes.) The first code is the hermeneutic code (HER), which concerns the structuring of narrative enigmas: the posing of questions, the withholding of answers, and the delays or partial disclosures that sustain interpretive tension.[20] An example of this code is the story's title itself: *Sarrasine.* Barthes rhetorically asks what this title could mean to the unknowing reader: 'is it a noun? A name? A thing? A man? A woman?'[21] The answer will not be revealed until later in the story. The second code is the semantic code (SEM), which designates recurring connotative elements – clusters of meaning that attach themselves to particular words, images or motifs, and accumulate significance across the text.[22] *Sarrasine* is also a relevant semantic device because it inspires different implications regarding the femininity suggested by its spelling. Moreover, semantic codes are only 'indicators' that suggest but do not try 'to link' themselves to 'a character (or a place or an object) or to arrange them in some order so that they form a single thematic grouping'.[23] The third code is the symbolic code (SYM), which organises meaning through structured oppositions, such as 'garden/salon; life/death; cold/heat; outside/inside', in turn generating larger patterns of tension and reversal within the narrative.[24] It represents a 'vast symbolic structure of substitutions, variations ... [and] the province of antithesis'.[25] The fourth code is the proairetic code (ACT), which governs sequences of action. It examines the logic by which one event implies or prepares the next, producing a chain of narrative expectation.[26] This is a code of action and behaviour, but it is the narrative discourse rather than the characters that determines the action. An example of this is the activity 'to be deep in' something or 'to be absorbed'.[27] The fifth and final code is the cultural code (REF), which refers to bodies of shared knowledge invoked by the text – social conventions, historical assumptions or widely recognised forms of discourse. Through these references, the narrative situates itself within a broader field of collective understanding.[28] These are signifiers of familiarity and socio-cultural emplacement that can reference specific situations of time and place. Barthes stresses that the cultural code consists of allusions to categories of knowledge, and does not explicitly recreate the culture that they are associated with.[29] Jonathan Culler similarly observes that the interplay of these codes does not aim at a direct explanation of the text, but instead produced an intertextual field in which multiple cultural references circulate simultaneously. In this sense, Culler argues, 'the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable sources of culture'.[30]

Barthes develops this framework through an extended engagement with a single nineteenth-century text. In 1830, Balzac published his novella *Sarrasine*, the work that serves as the basis for Barthes's analysis. The story takes place over two evenings at the home of the wealthy and mysterious Lanty family, who are throwing an extravagant ball. The unnamed narrator of the story is alone and reflecting on his surroundings and listening to the guests'

[20] Barthes, *S/Z*, 17.
[21] Barthes, *S/Z*, 17.
[22] Barthes, *S/Z*, 17.
[23] Barthes, *S/Z*, 19.
[24] Barthes, *S/Z*, 17.
[25] Barthes, *S/Z*, 17.
[26] Barthes, *S/Z*, 18.
[27] Barthes, *S/Z*, 18.
[28] Barthes, *S/Z*, 18.
[29] Barthes, *S/Z*, 20.
[30] Jonathan Culler, *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2002), 71.

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gossip about the unknown origin of the Lanty wealth, which is the most popular topic of conversation at the ball. While this is going on, an old and seemingly unsightly man – unknown to the guests – mingles with the crowd and elicits great personal attention from the Lanty family to everyone's bewilderment. When Madame de Rochefide encounters the old man and recoils at his touch, the narrator rushes to her, telling her that he knows who the old man is and where the Lanty family's wealth comes from, offering to tell her the following evening if she will indulge the narrator's amorous interest in her. She agrees, and the following evening, the narrator begins telling the story of the sculptor Sarrasine.

Sarrasine was an up-and-coming young sculptor in France who won a competition and was rewarded with a trip to Rome. Upon arrival, he attends the opera and instantly falls in love with a singer named La Zambinella. Sarrasine goes frequently to the opera to see the singer whom he believes is a woman, and his devotion increases, inspiring him to sculpt a statue of the singer in all her idealised, perceived splendour. After they meet, La Zambinella gives Sarrasine mixed signals, oscillating between playful flirtation and melancholy reticence. The singer ultimately tells Sarrasine that they would never be compatible, which Sarrasine rebuffs, even after the singer's query as to how Sarrasine would feel discovering that La Zambinella was not a woman. He decides to kidnap the singer after a performance, noticing that at this event, La Zambinella is dressed like a man. Despite all the signals and indications, Sarrasine is blinded by his romanticised fantasy of the person he has cast as his ideal woman, until it is finally revealed that La Zambinella is a castrated man. Sarrasine is overcome with anger and goes to kill the singer, but is killed himself before he can do so by the Cardinal's men, who have been dispatched to protect La Zambinella – the Cardinal's suggested paramour.

After the story of Sarrasine ends, Mme Rochefide is horrified to learn that La Zambinella was a castrato, and is even more disturbed by the fact that the old man is La Zambinella in old age. It is now also revealed that the source of the Lanty wealth stems from the castrato's illustrious career as a singer. *Sarrasine* ends with Mme Rochefide reneging on her promise to be with the narrator, having been overcome by a profound feeling of emptiness over the story and significance of the castrato. The narrator is left feeling disappointed and contemplative.

Berg's operas and the five narrative codes

We now undertake a comparative analysis of Berg's operas and Barthes's reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, applying Barthes's five codes as an interpretive framework for both the short story and its mirrored structures in Berg's music. Associations to *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* are made throughout by identifying the most symbolically pertinent similarities between all the narratives. To begin, the persistent discussion of wealth and its provenance is a central theme of *Sarrasine.* It is the primary marker for power, influence and social status. Whereas *Wozzeck* displays an allusion to wealth by means of its antithesis, poverty, *Lulu* represents a society that is similar to the one found in *Sarrasine*, where wealth denotes high social standing. One of the most significant hermeneutic codes in *Sarrasine* concerns the origin of the Lanty family's wealth. The other major signifier of this code is the true identity of the old man.

Although Barthes distinguishes five narrative codes for analytical purposes, he emphasises that they are rarely separable in practice. The following discussion therefore organises Berg's operas according to the five codes in turn, while recognising that individual scenes and motifs frequently activate more than one code at once. Each section isolates those elements that are most clearly legible through a particular code, without suggesting that the codes operate independently of one another.

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Before we turn to each code individually, it is useful to recall that Barthes differentiates among them according to their relation to narrative time. Barthes further distinguishes between codes that operate within the fixed progression of narrative time and those that circulate more freely. The hermeneutic code and proairetic codes depend upon sequence: once an enigma is posed or an action initiated, the structure of the text constrains how it may unfold. By contrast, semantic, symbolic and cultural codes are not bound to a single linear trajectory; they recur, overlap and can be reactivated in different contexts without altering the basic narrative order.[31] This distinction clarifies how Berg's operas may be approached within a similar framework. The large-scale dramaturgical designs of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* – their ordered scenes, symmetrical constructions and patterned developments – correspond to hermeneutic and proairetic organisation, in which actions and revelations follow a determinate course. At the same time, semantic and cultural codes circulate through the operas in more flexible ways. The libretti repeatedly invoke social types, gendered expectations and historical conditions that resonate beyond the immediate plot. With this structural distinction in mind, we may begin with the semantic code.

The semantic code

As noted above, Barthes defines the semantic code as the field of connotation through which characters, objects and situations acquire layered meanings beyond their immediate narrative function. In Berg's operas, such connotative structures often attach themselves to figures whose identities are mediated through projection, representation or social perception. The following examples examine how semantic associations shape the interpretive contours of *Wozzeck* and *Lulu.*

Early in his reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, Barthes locates a semantic code in the story's evocation of wealth through its opulent setting. The Lanty family is depicted as having an aristocratic yet mysterious bearing, and there is a connection to be drawn here to the stature of Dr Schön in *Lulu.* Dr Schön flaunts his wealth through the projection of an autocratic air of superiority, suggesting the kind of haughty morality that wealth often symbolises, whether it is a legitimate expression of power or a delusional desire to wield control. The narrator in *Sarrasine* describes how he is hidden behind a curtain in order to observe without interruption the various dichotomies that are on display for his surveillance. A proairetic code in the act of hiding behind a curtain is likewise invoked by several characters in *Lulu* – Dr Schön, the Countess Geschwitz, Alwa, and Lulu's other admirers – who hide in relatively plain sight, such as behind a curtain or sofa, to observe events undetected.

Barthes's association of the castrato with a semantic field of falseness and the fantastic finds a comparable structure of connotation in *Lulu.* The opera repeatedly situates Lulu within a network of meanings that exceed her literal presence, casting her as something at once natural and unnatural, human and emblematic. This is most visibly concentrated in the portrait that circulates throughout the drama. Beyond just depicting Lulu, the portrait functions as an object through which other characters project onto her an aura of fatality and seduction, as though her power derived from forces beyond rational explanation. This connotative framing is articulated explicitly in the prologue. Instead of introducing Lulu as an individual, the animal tamer treats her as a type, declaring: 'She as the root of all evil was created; to snare us, to mislead us she was fated, and to murder, with no clue left on the spot. My sweetest beast, please don't be what you're not! You have no right to seem a gentler creature, distorting what is true in woman's nature.'[32] Here Lulu is defined through a

[31] Barthes, *S/Z*, 29.

[32] Alban Berg, *Lulu: Opera in 3 Acts (7 Scenes), after 'Erdgeist' and 'Büchse der Pandora' by Frank Wedekind, English/German Libretto*, trans. Arthur Jacobs (Vienna, 1978), 3: 'Sie ward geschaffen, Unheil anzustiften, zu locken, zu

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semantic code that binds femininity to danger, instinct and destruction. Yet the portrait complicates this construction. Like a light that appears to emanate from within but does not have a source of its own, the portrait offers only reflected illumination: what appears as Lulu's essence is in fact a mediated surface onto which others attach meaning. In this way, the opera organises a semantic tension between Lulu as person and Lulu as sign, a tension that operates throughout the drama.

In another instance, Barthes classifies a semantic code when the narrative attempts to link different languages to the mystery of national identity. Barthes calls this an example of semantic 'internationalism'.[33] This linking feature is important to Berg in the formation of projected identities that characters in the operas force onto others. When Marie looks longingly at the passing Drum Major, she is invariably linked by her neighbours, and society as a whole, to the identity of an adulteress. After Wozzeck murders Marie and gets her blood on him, the townspeople notice it and, without knowing the truth, subtly identify him as a murderer. Lulu's admirers, likewise, link her alluring appearance to that of a sexual commodity to be used for pleasure and exploited for profit.

Barthes next presents another excellent characterisation of how reality is idealised in the copy of reality. He writes:

> The writer, through this initial rite [of first viewing and internalising before describing], first transforms the 'real' into a depicted (framed) object; having done this, he can take down this object, *remove* it from his picture: in short: de-depict it (to depict is to unroll the carpet of the codes, to refer not from a language to a referent but from one code to another). Thus, realism (badly named, at any rate often badly interpreted) consists not in copying the real but in copying a (depicted) copy of the real: this famous *reality*, as through suffering from a fearfulness which keeps it from being touched directly, is *set farther away*, postponed, or at least captured through the pictorial matrix in which it has been steeped before being put into words: code upon code, known as realism.[34]

This passage represents the function of Lulu's portrait to her seduced admirers. A similar kind of fearfulness exists in the context of the portrait because the characters are driven by a desire to possess rather than knowing what it means to have what they want. Following the opera's central, bisecting palindrome, which triggers Lulu's gradual fall, her portrait becomes even more untenable as Lulu herself drifts further away as a mirror of her portrait. By diminishing the realistic coefficient in this way – namely, Lulu herself – the portrait gains power as the sole fixation of desire, thereby increasing its scope of influence, which is directly proportional to its enhanced mythical status. This becomes most noticeable in the final scene of the opera, where Lulu herself is largely absent. The other characters huddle around the portrait in this scene, as they look to harness its figurative power subconsciously in order to extricate themselves from the hardships of their reality. This beseeching quality is particularly potent with Geschwitz, who ostensibly prays to the portrait for mercy. It is likewise to the portrait that she sings her *Liebestod* in the closing moments of the opera. The idealisation of the copy is also depicted as a semantic code of dubious beauty, where Barthes writes of the old man that 'he is his own double: like a mask, he copies from himself *what is underneath*; only, since he is his own copy, his duplication is tautological, sterile as the

verführen, zu vergiften. Und zu morden, ohne daß es einer spürt. Mein süßes Tier, sei ja nicht geziert! Du hast kein Recht, uns durch Miaun und Pfauchen die Urgestalt des Weibes zu verstauchen.'

[33] Barthes, *S/Z*, 32.

[34] Barthes, *S/Z*, 54–5.

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duplication of painted things'.[35] These connotative structures also participate in broader oppositional patterns that shape the operas at a structural level.

The symbolic code

The symbolic code organises meaning through structured oppositions and recurring patterns that generate larger conceptual tensions. In both *Sarrasine* and Berg's operas, these oppositions frequently concern authenticity and artifice, life and death, gender and power, or wholeness and fragmentation. The symbolic code becomes especially prominent where characters are positioned within reversible or circular configurations that resist stable resolution.

Nature, and the opposition between exterior and interior spaces, establishes symbolic distinctions that relate to notions of authenticity. Moonlight plays an important role in *Wozzeck.* Barthes distinguishes the moon as a '*nothingness* of light, warmth reduced to its deficiency: it illuminates by mere reflection without itself being an origin; thus, it becomes the luminous emblem of the castrato'.[36] The inauthentic nature of the castrato as neither a man nor a woman will be examined more fully in relation to the symbolic logic of castration; for the moment, the artificial quality of moonlight operates at the level of semantic connotation. In Berg's first opera, Wozzeck follows an evolutionary path where the moon first symbolises his deterioration towards madness. The rising blood red moon connotes death: first Marie's (Wozzeck's common-law wife whom he murders) and then Wozzeck's own. The false illumination and deficiency in *Sarrasine* is paralleled by a deficiency of morality in *Wozzeck*, where both semantic codes are facilitated by moon imagery.

Among these five codes, the symbolic code is distinguished by its organisation of meaning through structured opposition. Barthes next writes that 'the antithesis is the battle between two plenitudes set ritually face to face like two fully armed warriors; the Antithesis is the figure of the *given* opposition, eternal, eternally recurrent: the figure of the inexplicable'.[37] This sentiment accurately (and poetically) denotes the inherent, large-scale conflicts in *Wozzeck* and *Lulu.* The antithesis in both operas is idealistic, but certainly reflects a battle of oppositions. In *Wozzeck*, it is the title character's low social standing with the inequality and exploitation that ensues from living in a weakened position. Moreover, the palindromic feature of the music certifies Barthes's notion of an eternal return of an inexplicable narrative mainstay that perpetuates hereditarily, with Wozzeck's son taking on his doomed father's role and continuing his class antithesis within a merciless society. This is also reflected musically. Throughout the opera, Berg presents a leitmotif of Wozzeck's son being dismissively brushed off, which can be seen as foreshadowing a fate reflecting that of his father. In Act II scene 1, Act III scene 1 and Act III scene 5, Berg notates the motif at the mention of the child, with a sequence of two repeated and accented eighth notes on various beats, and with explicit *Hauptstimme* (primary) voicings in several instrument lines. The final iteration, however, is in a rhythmic variation. The recurrence of this motivic pattern suggests a bleak outcome for the child through no fault of his own, as his very presence in these moments denotes a burden for his mother by triggering guilt at her own inadequacies. In the final scene, with the motif in variation, the boy is treated callously by other children, who tell him that his mother is dead. Berg confirms the musical function of this prospect – the eternal recurrence of the antithesis – when he writes in his lecture on *Wozzeck* that 'although it [*Wozzeck*'s ending] clearly cadences on the final chord, it creates the feeling that it could keep going. In fact, it does keep going! The first measures of the opera might

[35] Barthes, *S/Z*, 59.
[36] Barthes, *S/Z*, 24.
[37] Barthes, *S/Z*, 27.

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well link up harmonically with these final measures without further ado, thus closing the circle. Here is the end of the opera, then the beginning.'[38]

In *Lulu*, the protagonist stands antithetical to all of her sordid love interests, where the conflict there as well cannot be mediated or resolved – it is eternally inexplicable within a symbolic antithesis of life and death. Lulu's dead husbands return in the opera's final scene – figurative incarnations that are symbolically brought back to life in the guise of new characters that are doubled roles – to exact revenge on the temptress that orchestrated their downfalls. Yet the most tragic of Lulu's victims is the Countess Geschwitz, who, like Wozzeck's heirs, is also meant to suffer eternally. With her dying words, Geschwitz remarks to Lulu's portrait – that beacon of idealised unreality – that she will remain close to Lulu forever more. Since neither opera yields any semblance of a resolution, their antithetical ethea were always meant to remain tragically inexplicable.

Another example of a symbolic code in Berg's music for *Lulu* can be seen in his subtle motivic treatment on the above-discussed premise of returning husbands. After Lulu's introduction in the prologue, the animal tamer presents the tiger, who is the embodiment of Dr Schön. Berg transformed Lulu's series to formulate the 'tiger's leap' motif, which represents Dr Schön's aggressive and controlling inclinations towards Lulu.[39] The last time the 'tiger's leap' is heard is in the final scene of the opera with Jack's entrance. In both instances of the motif, the figure is notated in the cellos with an upward chromatic movement that ends in a glissando leap up two octaves to a notated natural harmonic. The same spelled notes appear in both iterations, but with slightly different rhythmic contours before the verbatim glissando.[40] Moreover, the two motifs appear in *Hauptstimme* voices and are rendered even more explicit by the absence of other moving parts in the delicate orchestral texture. The clarity of expression, especially at the end, is meant to heighten the suggestive significance and pending doom that Jack has brought with him. With this motivic ploy, Berg at once creates a musical parallel between Dr Schön and Jack through a circular return.[41] This symmetrical process represents the symbolic code through Berg's association of mirroring characters using subtle signs and symbols in his music.

When describing the sexual infatuation found in *Sarrasine*, Barthes writes that 'we have the theme of the dismembered body – or the body as a whole. The young girl's beauty is referred to a cultural code, in this instance literary (it can elsewhere be pictorial or sculptural).'[42] This is precisely how Lulu is depicted when Alwa itemises her body as reflecting individual musical forms: 'Under this dress I feel your form like music. These ankles – grazioso. This enchanted roundness – a cantabile. Then your knees – misterioso; and then the powerful andante of love's desire.'[43] George Perle writes that this specific list of musical forms reflects the formal structure of Berg's *Lyric Suite* string quartet – his secret love letter to his mistress – which accounts for another autobiographical reference in the music of *Lulu.* Frank Wedekind's original text in the *Lulu* plays that Berg combined into his libretto cited the musical forms that Alwa lists as a symphony that includes a cantabile, capriccio and andante. Berg altered this to reference himself by having Alwa use grazioso, cantabile, misterioso and andante, to signify the movements of the *Lyric Suite*, which are

[38] Alban Berg, 'Lecture on *Wozzeck*: The "Atonal Opera"', in *Pro Mundo–Pro Domo: The Writings of Alban Berg*, ed. Bryan R. Simms (Oxford, 2014), 228–60, at 232.

[39] George Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, vol. 2: *Lulu* (Berkeley, CA, 1985), 93.

[40] See Alban Berg, *Lulu Partitur (I. und II. Akt)* (Vienna, 1963), 6; Alban Berg, *Lulu Partitur (3. Akt)* (Vienna, 1985), 964.

[41] Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 129.

[42] Barthes, *S/Z*, 33.

[43] Berg, *Lulu* libretto, 77: 'Durch dieses Kleid empfinde ich deinen Wuchs wie Musik. Diese Knöchel: ein Grazioso; dieses reizende Anschwellen—ein Cantabile; diese Knie: ein Mysterioso; und das gewaltige Andante der Wollust.'

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gioviale, amoroso, misterioso and appassionato.[44] Barthes refers to this as a symbolic code of the 'reassembled body', while the perceived girl's overall beauty is a cultural code, found also in pictorial representations, quintessentially projected in Lulu's portrait as the symbol of her irresistible beauty. Sarrasine explicitly mirrors Alwa when Balzac writes in *Sarrasine*: 'At that instant he marveled at the ideal beauty he had hitherto sought in life, seeking in one often unworthy model the roundness of a perfect leg; in another, the curve of the breast; in another, white shoulders; finally taking some girl's neck, some woman's hands, and some child's smooth knees.'[45] Barthes designates this symbolic code as 'the body fragmented, reassembled'.[46] Desire is imbued directly upon Lulu's portrait, just like Sarrasine's statue, unifying both artistic depictions under Barthes's classification of a symbolic code of 'replication of bodies'.[47]

Barthes's subsequent description of Sarrasine's obsession with the castrato can be further transplanted to Alwa's obsession with Lulu, where Barthes writes that Sarrasine's description of body parts 'accumulates in order to totalize, manipulates fetishes in order to obtain a total, defetishised body; thereby, description *represents* no beauty at all: no one can *see* La Zambinella, infinitely projected as a totality impossible because linguistic, *written*'.[48] The essential point here is that both Sarrasine and Alwa project fantasies onto their objects of ideality, fabricating an illusion that neither man will be able to overcome, ultimately resulting in both of their deaths because life without their fantasies is a reality that they could not endure. With this profound aesthetic and existential symmetry between both men in mind, it is no mere coincidence that they are both artists whose creativity is fuelled by their projections.

Barthes continues the intersection of beauty and the body by describing how the body cannot qualify its own beauty except to say 'I am who I am.'[49] Lulu uses this exact notion to defend her nature to the accusatory Dr Schön when she states:

> If people killed themselves for my sake, that does not diminish my value. You knew as well why you took me as your wife, as I knew why I took you as my husband. You had cheated on your best friends with me, you couldn't easily cheat on yourself with me too. If you sacrifice your twilight years to me, you have had all my youth for it. I have never wanted to appear in the world to be anything other than what I was taken for; and I have never been taken in the world for anything other than what I am.[50]

Barthes elaborates to suggest that art is the 'code underlying all beauty',[51] because beauty is always compared to a pre-existing work of art that sufficiently captures the idealised image. Lulu embodies this as a symbiotic relationship with her own portrait rather than another competing symbol of beauty. This realisation slightly invalidates Barthes's view

[44] Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 59.
[45] Barthes, *S/Z*, 237–8.
[46] Barthes, *S/Z*, 111.
[47] Barthes, *S/Z*, 33.
[48] Barthes, *S/Z*, 114.
[49] Barthes, *S/Z*, 33.
[50] Berg, *Lulu* libretto, 61: 'Wenn sich die Menschen um meinetwillen umgebracht haben, so setzt das meinen Wert nicht herab. Du hast so gut gewußt, weswegen du mich zur Frau nahmst, wie ich gewußt habe, weswegen ich dich zum Mann nahm. Du hattest deine besten Freunde mit mir betrogen, du konntest nicht gut auch noch dich selber mit mir betrügen. Wenn du mir deinen Lebensabend zum Opfer bringst, so hast du meine ganze Jugend dafür gehabt. Ich habe nie in der Welt etwas anderes scheinen wollen, als wofür man mich genommen hat; und man hat mich nie in der Welt für etwas anderes genommen, als was ich bin.'
[51] Barthes, *S/Z*, 33.

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that beauty references an 'infinity of codes'[52] because each comparison follows an endless chain of additional comparisons. Berg ensured that Lulu is the sole, indisputable and incomparable source of beauty in her narrative with no assimilating references possible because she simply embodies them all herself as the animal tamer's perfect representation of all women. In many ways, this is a negative attribution due to the animal tamer's previous revelation that Lulu is a manipulating, destructive force and, as such, the embodiment of a woman's true nature. But the sentiment remains that Lulu disqualifies beauty as an infinity of codes because she is infinite herself.

The concept of literal and figurative castration is the central crux of Balzac's *Sarrasine.* Barthes describes how characters in the story are rendered androgynous, such as the boy Filippo, who, when called handsome for his delicate, feminine features, is symbolically castrated. Sarrasine himself is figuratively castrated by his despair over the realisation that he has not actually fallen in love with a woman, but a male castrato singer. Barthes differentiates between biological certainties and symbolic representations, noting that 'the symbolic field is not that of the biological sexes; it is that of castration. It is in this field, and not in that of the biological sexes, that the characters in the story are pertinently distributed.'[53] These, then, are all symbolic codes of 'replication of bodies' and the 'axis of castration'.[54]

These symbolic features with their destabilising properties that bring about narrative conflict are highly explicit in the narrative of *Lulu*, particularly with the lesbian Countess Geschwitz. She represents both masculine and feminine traits, and ostensibly presents herself as the figuratively castrated man for being just as susceptible to Lulu's manipulation as all the men in their midst. Moreover, Barthes poetically describes Mme de Lanty as a powerful individual who 'mutilates man' and is the 'castrating woman'.[55] These are symbolic tropes of power and domination that are clearly gendered, reflecting both the frailty of the masculine ego, and the complexity and struggle of gender self-identity. Amidst these layered intricacies in both *Sarrasine* and *Lulu*, the phenomenon of castration is an accurate allegorical signifier for how these narrative characters interact with one another and cause each other torment by exposing personal insecurities. The men in both stories are certainly affected, as both Sarrasine and Dr Schön cannot bear the extent to which their sexual infatuations weaken their male-driven imperatives to control and dominate the objects of their affection. They both lash out violently when they attempt to regain control by force, and are both murdered subsequent to their inability to overcome their own hubris. Wozzeck, likewise, is castrated by Marie's infidelity, whereas his violent attempt at retribution succeeds, albeit resulting in his own death as well. Geschwitz is also murdered for her identity as a castrated man. Lastly, the image of the castrated man suggests a denial of pleasure beyond its connotation of control. Indeed, the castrated–subjugated man yearns for a form of personal fulfilment, as Sarrasine and Lulu's admirers all desire but are denied their fulfilment. This further exemplifies their weakened position within the power dynamic within which they find themselves. Yet their idealised fantasies allow them to maintain irrational hope of a desirable outcome, the futility of which eludes them because their narratives do not redeem the castrated, as if they could somehow regain what has permanently been taken from them physically. A lack of salvation in this regard is another unifying factor between all these literary and operatic narratives.

Barthes's text here is strongly reminiscent of Berg's own doppelgänger projections in both *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, where he represents in the characters of Wozzeck and Alwa vestiges

[52] Barthes, *S/Z*, 34.
[53] Barthes, *S/Z*, 36.
[54] Barthes, *S/Z*, 37.
[55] Barthes, *S/Z*, 36.

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of himself as copies of what is 'underneath' for him as well in an illusory metaphor of reality. Berg's identification with these figures is inscribed within the operas themselves, most explicitly in the reflexive construction of Alwa as a composer who seeks to stage Lulu's story. The autobiographical connections to Alwa are narratively expressed by stylising his character as a composer (a change from Alwa's original vocation as a writer, to mirror Wedekind, his literary creator), who muses on the idea of turning Lulu's story into an opera, just as the orchestra plays the opening bars of *Wozzeck*, suggesting that Alwa/Berg has already done so in reality with his first opera. Additionally, along this line of inquiry, Tim Farrant suggests that the narrator in *Sarrasine* can 'be identified with Balzac himself'.[56]

Returning now to the juxtaposition of reality and illusion between characters and their artistic representations, the portrait of the 'Adonis' illustrates the androgynous beauty of the singer La Zambinella. Few people in the present know that the singer is a castrato, with the portrait functioning as an idealised depiction of its model, who is now an unsightly old man. Similarly, after Lulu's post-palindromic decline, when she herself is unfavourably compared to the beauty of her own portrait, a parallel interplay emerges between the two narratives: those who behold the two portraits project idealistic desires upon images that are not real, as both portraits conform to Barthes's designation of the one in *Sarrasine* as a symbolic code for standing 'outside of nature'.[57] Barthes further states that 'the picture connotes a whole atmosphere of fulfilment, of sexual gratification: a harmony, a kind of erotic fulfilment occurs, between the painted Adonis and' any observer.[58] The portraits also share the distinction that the truths of their models would repel most observers: one is a castrated male who dresses and behaves as a woman, while the other is an adulterer, prostitute and murderer. These realisations fall within the symbolic code as 'replication of bodies (to be in love with a copy)'.[59]

In his discussion of narrative characters and figures, Barthes describes how a named character can be an amalgamation of repeating semantic codes, which is how their personalities are formed.[60] Figures are different from characters in that they can embody multiple roles that do not represent any meaning because they are characters without an identity. Indeed, the figure's role 'occurs outside biographical time (outside chronology): the symbolic structure is completely reversible: it can be read in any direction. As a symbolic ideality the [figure] character has chronological or biographical standing; he has no Name; he is nothing but a site for the passage (and return) of the figure.'[61] Berg's operatic narratives and character depictions follow this schematic of form and meaning. Firstly, a reversible symbolic structure perfectly encapsulates the function of Berg's palindromes as an inherent feature of both operas. Douglas Jarman describes the palindromes of *Wozzeck* as structures that depict Berg's 'view of man as a helpless creature unable to alter his preordained fate and unable to break out of the tragic and absurd dance of death within which he is trapped – a fatalistic and deeply pessimistic view of life that underlies all Berg's mature compositions'.[62] Secondly, the notion of action taking place outside of chronological time is indicative of Lulu's Film Music Interlude, which is its own condensed, circular film montage outside of the opera's narrative, representing the passage of a year in a fast video montage. What is more, the standard Expressionistic treatment of nameless characters that are only identifiable by

[56] Tim Farrant, 'Balzac's Shorter Fiction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Balzac*, ed. Owen Heathcote and Andrew Watts (Cambridge, 2017), 140–56, at 141.
[57] Barthes, *S/Z*, 69.
[58] Barthes, *S/Z*, 72.
[59] Barthes, *S/Z*, 73.
[60] Barthes, *S/Z*, 67.
[61] Barthes, *S/Z*, 68.
[62] Douglas Jarman, *The Music of Alban Berg* (Berkeley, CA, 1979), 241.

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their profession (the captain, doctor, acrobat, marquis, animal trainer and so on) is evident in both operas. Here, they mirror Barthes's characterisations further by embodying no discernible biographical foundation, and are essentially only symbolic idealities that reflect wider narrative themes and complement the socio-cultural atmosphere through their behaviours and motivations.

Following this, Barthes describes the individual at the end of Sarrasine's story who introduces himself to the sculptor as the 'creator' of La Zambinella, in his capacity as the person who financed the latter's castration, education and vocal lessons. Barthes characterises this facilitator thusly: 'a colorless mediator, lacking symbolic scale, engulfed in contingency, a self-assured upholder of the endoxal Law, but one who, precisely because [he is] situated outside meaning, is the very figure of "fate"'.[63] This description is important because its precise meaning can be superimposed over *Lulu*'s animal tamer, who, in the opera's prologue, stood outside the main narrative scope, yet still dictated the essential trajectories of what is strongly reminiscent as the entire work's gravitation to a construction of fate. Furthermore, there are symbolic symmetries to note between La Zambinella and Lulu herself. They were both poor children plucked off the streets by wealthy older men who moulded them into instruments of power and seduction, whose creations would ultimately rebel against their creators: La Zambinella would disregard and shun his benefactor, while Lulu would take this further by orchestrating the dissolving of Dr Schön's engagement to marry him herself, later murdering him and eloping with his son, who has taken his father's place by Lulu's side. The persistence of these oppositional and reversible structures sustains questions that exceed symbolic tension alone.

The hermeneutic code

Barthes describes the hermeneutic code as the mechanism by which narrative generates questions, suspends their resolution, and ultimately discloses or withholds answers. In Berg's operas, enigmas are often embedded within musical structures as well as dramatic situations. Delayed recognition, prophetic suggestion and structural return contribute to a sustained pattern of interpretive suspense. Barthes's comparison between textual and musical structures provides a particularly useful point of entry into this dimension of Berg's operatic writing.

Barthes at one point draws an explicit comparison between textual structure and musical form. In describing the readerly text (a text that can be read but not written), he likens it to a musical score: both consist of organised sequences whose components can be recognised, followed and internally coordinated. The syntagmatic progression of a narrative, in his account, resembles the ordered unfolding of musical material.[64] Within this analogy, Barthes suggests that narrative structures may function in ways comparable to musical processes. He identifies, for example, hermeneutic patterns as 'series of enigmas, their suspended disclosure, [and] their delayed resolution'.[65] Such patterns find an analogue in musical procedures that withhold or defer arrival. At the same time, semantic and cultural codes may be understood as analogous to recurring timbral, formal or stylistic markers that accumulate associations over the course of a work.

Berg's music in his operas certainly contains these narrative features that Barthes is describing. Isolating Barthes's idea regarding a symbiosis of musical harmony and hermeneutic structures that yield enigmas, their disclosure and delayed resolution, the central point in *Lulu* reflects this schema. Berg devised *Lulu* as an opera in three acts, yet the three-

[63] Barthes, *S/Z*, 186.
[64] Barthes, *S/Z*, 28–9.
[65] Barthes, *S/Z*, 29.

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act division does not function as the opera's primary structural articulation. Indeed, *Lulu* is designed to be in two parts of one-and-a-half acts each, that are bisected evenly by a musical number that is known as the Film Music Interlude (FMI). This short interlude of a few minutes defines the opera as a rise-and-fall scenario, and as a narrative ploy that exists outside of the opera's normal chronological time. In this regard, the FMI is a story within a story, much like the narrator's story of Sarrasine to Mme Rochefide. In a circular sequence, Berg's silent film depicts Lulu's arrest, trial, imprisonment and return to freedom, roughly over the span of a year. The hermeneutic code of Lulu's fate following the murder of Dr Schön was the mystery that the FMI unravelled, but did not resolve, as Lulu remained a fugitive from justice. Theodor Adorno observes how the FMI perpetuates this profound lack of resolution when he writes: 'time is interpreted according to what happens in it, by rising and falling destiny, and is held together by that rhythm. That is why the form of the ostinato, the film music – the work's caesura and its innermost reflection – is in strict retrograde: time passes and revokes itself and nothing points beyond it but the gesture of those who love without hope.'[66] This narrative phenomenon certainly delays the resolution until the very end of the opera, when Lulu's dead husbands return in the form of her prostitute clients. Only their musical motifs allow us to recognise that the clients are, in fact, the former victims. They have returned to exact their revenge and enact a form of a resolution to the hermeneutic imperative – a series of events that started with the question of Lulu's fate following her escape from prison, culminating in this final denouement and the solution to that question. When speaking of the three dead husbands and three clients at the end, Perle writes that 'each of these three entrances in the final scene reintroduces extended musical episodes originally associated with the corresponding alternate role in Part One'.[67] An example of this is with music representing Dr Schön that is first heard at the end of Act I when Lulu finally breaks his resolve and manipulates him into committing himself to her. As Perle notes, 'from this point on nothing more is heard of this theme until its return near the end of the final scene, with the entrance of Schön's double, Jack the Ripper'.[68] However, the text reflects these general paradigms as well, for it also bears the same division of changeable and unchangeable codes. This is in relation to the malleability of its meaning and the permanence of the textual layout as a mainstay of the staged opera. In terms of recapitulating features in the libretto, mirroring the above-described thematic return in the music, Lulu beseeches Jack in the final scene to stay with her, asking: 'Don't you want to stay here all night?'[69] As Jarman observes, Lulu's question to Jack is set to the same underlying music that accompanies her appeal to Dr Schön in Act II scene 1. Berg altered Wedekind's original text in order to preserve this musical correspondence between the two moments.[70] In both scenes, Lulu asks the man before her to remain with her: 'Could you please make yourself free this afternoon?'[71] The recurrence of this musical material binds Jack to Dr Schön as his structural successor.

A number of scenes in *Sarrasine* and in Berg's operas exemplify Barthes's hermeneutic code – that is, the creation of an enigma that propels interpretation. Regarding the moment when the narrator in *Sarrasine* brings up the mysterious origin of the Lanty family wealth, Barthes writes: 'since this wealth will be the subject of an enigma (where does it come from?), the lexia must be regarded as a term of the hermeneutic code; the enigma is not yet

[66] Theodor W. Adorno, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, trans. Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey (Cambridge, 1991), 124.

[67] Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 78.

[68] Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 80.

[69] Berg, *Lulu* libretto, 111: 'Wollen Sie denn nicht ganze Nacht hierbleiben?'

[70] Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Lulu* (Cambridge, 1991), 86.

[71] Berg, *Lulu* libretto, 45: 'Könntest du dich für heute Nachmittag nicht frei machen?'

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formulated but its theme has already been introduced'.[72] In *Lulu*, the enigma regarding Lulu's character and morality is expressed in her exchange with the painter (her second husband), when she repeatedly answers his probing personal questions with 'I don't know.' In *Wozzeck*, the title character encounters his own mystery regarding Marie's fidelity, which exists as a theme or idea to him, but which is not revealed to him until later. In each of these examples, the narrative introduces a mystery but delays its explanation, enacting precisely the hermeneutic mechanism Barthes describes. Barthes writes of 'two further terms of the hermeneutic code: the proposal of the enigma each time the discourse tells us, in one way or another, "There is an enigma", and the *avoided* (*or suspended*) *answer*: for had the discourse not moved the two speakers off to a secluded sofa, we would have quickly learned the answer to the enigma, the source of the Lanty fortune'.[73] This suspended feature of the enigma is discernible when Marie repeatedly delays and evades giving Wozzeck an answer to the enigma of where she got her earrings (which were a gift from the Drum Major), or where she and the Drum Major 'stood' together, when Wozzeck accusingly asks if he was there with her on the sidewalk. Marie's evasive reply that many people stand there in the course of a day, making it impossible for her to remember any specific bystander, is her hermeneutic suspended answer.

Moreover, along these lines, Barthes writes that 'narratively, an enigma leads from a question to an answer, *through a certain number of delays.* Of these delays, the main one is unquestionably the feint, the misleading answer, the lie, what we will call the *snare.*'[74] Marie certainly exemplifies the notion of the delay, but Lulu embodies the snare, especially as it manifests in the way that she avoids reciprocating the possessive love (or infatuation) of her admirers. Instead, she manipulates them sufficiently with suggestions of interest that keep them close and loyal to her. One mystery that is allayed relatively quickly is the subsidiary enigma of the painter's sudden success, which is not something that anyone explicitly wonders, but which rather emerges through conversation as being due to Dr Schön's anonymous patronage.

The hermeneutic quality of an enigma with a delayed resolution finds further resonance in *Lulu* through Berg's musical treatment of Lulu's tone row. Perle notes that the basic series that is found throughout the score is also Lulu's row.[75] Lulu's series is first heard in the opera's prologue where it accompanies the animal tamer's declaration of Lulu's manipulative and corrupting nature. Her identity is one of elusiveness throughout the opera: she is at various times a temptress, wife, dancer, convict and prostitute. Lulu's series is also important for being the prime row from which Berg derived several (but not all) other character rows. He did this by taking every second, third, fifth and seventh note of her series to produce the sets associated with the athlete, the schoolboy, Countess Geschwitz and Alwa, respectively.[76] By giving Lulu's row the flexibility to merge with those of other characters, Berg developed a musical hermeneutic enigma through this fragmentation and row transformation that asks, musically as well as narratively, who Lulu really is. The music defers the resolution to this question indefinitely.

Returning to *Wozzeck*, a more significant and subtle hermeneutic code is the fact that Wozzeck's hallucinations bear prophetically symbolic implications, the likes of which are a mystery that cause him anxiety and confusion. This can be seen as a large-scale hermeneutic enigma that is further exacerbated by Wozzeck's conflicted view of social belonging. Berg's

[72] Barthes, *S/Z*, 31.
[73] Barthes, *S/Z*, 31.
[74] Barthes, *S/Z*, 32.
[75] Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 93.
[76] Jarman, *The Music of Alban Berg*, 124. A more thorough theoretical examination of this process of extraction can be found in Dave Headlam, *The Music of Alban Berg* (New Haven, CT, 1996), 305–8.

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music exemplifies these narrative traits, with a prime example occurring in the second scene of Act I. Repeated trills and tremolos in the instrumentation connote Wozzeck's fear through nervous tension. Rising and falling glissando figures accompany Wozzeck's *Sprechstimme* vocalisations of hallucinatory visions,[77] all of which signifies his fracturing grasp of reality. The answer to these mysteries for Wozzeck, one may argue, arrives when he decides to murder Marie. At that moment, Wozzeck has clarity of intent for the first time, having decided on the only course of action that he felt was the right solution for the moral dilemmas that he faced throughout the entire opera. In this regard, he was not merely murdering the woman who betrayed and emasculated him, but was striking out against all the injustices that he faced. These conceptions manifested in the form of Marie at the time Wozzeck murdered her. One indication of Marie acting as an amalgamation of Wozzeck's torments is a feature in the music, when following the murder, the orchestra plays the opera's key leitmotifs in rapid succession. When describing the musical treatment at the moment of Marie's death, Jarman writes that 'a brief, nightmarish version of all the main musical motives associated with Marie is heard in the orchestra and she falls to the ground dead'.[78] This gesture signifies an essential arrival point using multiple simultaneous thematic returns. It further suggests that this single event will subsequently influence all others, tying Wozzeck's fate to the repercussions of that one action.

It can also be argued that the old man in *Sarrasine* is a hermeneutic enigma due to the delayed mystery of his identity, much in the same way that Schigolch, the old man in *Lulu*, invites the same mystery regarding his identity, background and connection to Lulu. But since Schigolch's history and meaning is never revealed, he encompasses Barthes's snare as a perpetual mystery.

In a discussion of the concept of the delay, Barthes writes:

> Expectation becomes the basic condition for truth: truth, these narratives tell us, is what is *at the end* of expectation. This design brings narrative very close to the rite of initiation (a long path marked with pitfalls, obscurities, stops, suddenly comes out into the light); it implies a return to order, for expectation is a disorder: disorder is supplementary, it is what is forever added on without solving anything, without finishing anything; order is complementary, it completes, fills up, saturates and dismisses everything that risks adding on: truth is what completes, what closes.[79]

Berg's operatic narratives rather defy this expectation of a narrative ending that progresses from disorder to order. For Berg, truth is not found in the acquisition of order, but in the horrific realisation that disorder is the only truth due to its perpetual and unending nature. This is certainly the message at the end of *Wozzeck*, where, as we saw earlier, Berg confirmed that the narrative repeats anew. While one may argue that there is a semblance of an achieved order at the end of *Lulu* with Lulu's death, Geschwitz's final admission (to the portrait) that she will forever remain close to Lulu, suggests a prolongation of Geschwitz's subservience, which has not been resolved by the opera's end. In this regard, Berg defies conventions, because his truth is not located at the end of narrative expectation, as a linear arrival point, but in the constant reaffirmation that the only truth to be had consists in a single doomed and unavoidable situation, presented in variation over and over again. The unfolding of these enigmas is inseparable from the sequence of actions through which they are staged.

[77] Berg, *Wozzeck* score, 57.
[78] Douglas Jarman, *Alban Berg: Wozzeck* (Cambridge, 1989), 38.
[79] Barthes, *S/Z*, 76.

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The proairetic code

The proairetic code governs the logic of actions and their consequences. It concerns the sequence of events that propel narrative forward and establish patterns of cause and effect. In both *Sarrasine* and Berg's operas, decisive gestures, warnings and contractual exchanges shape the trajectory of downfall and closure.

Barthes next introduces the context for the commencement of the narrator's story of *Sarrasine* to Mme de Rochefide. Barthes refers to this as 'the conditions for a narrative contract'.[80] In addition, 'the imminent narrative is henceforth constituted as an offering, before becoming merchandise'.[81] By merchandise, Barthes means a 'transaction' for the telling of the tale so that Mme de Rochefide can be physically present with the narrator. The narrator's terms, though, are that they return the following evening to conclude the story in order to build suspense and procure another, more amorous rendezvous with the lady. If we isolate the first half of this proairetic code regarding the narrative contract as an offering, two synonymous examples from *Wozzeck* emerge, and they both feature Marie. In Act II scene 3, Wozzeck and Marie are in a heated argument over her affair with the Drum Major. Towards the end of this exchange, and amidst growing frustration, Wozzeck moves to strike Marie, but then relents. Marie retorts angrily by stating that she would rather have a knife plunged into her body than have a hand laid on her. She then proceeds to the shortest of narrative contracts by telling Wozzeck a quasi-story that even when she was a child, her father never dared to strike her. There is prophetic significance in this moment, because Wozzeck registers the mention of a knife in the body by repeating Marie's words. This can be seen as the birth of his murder plot, as he later kills her in that precise way. Berg's music accompanies this moment by supplying the knife motif when it is mentioned – first by Marie and then by Wozzeck. The motif is constructed as a descending chromatic figuration heard in solo string parts when the words 'better a knife blade …' are sung by the two characters.[82] The knife motif returns on numerous occasions after this, most notably in the scene when Wozzeck kills Marie, and later in Act III scene 4 when Wozzeck is frantically looking for the knife. The second example of the narrative contract occurs in Act III scene 1, where Marie is reading a bible verse, about a poor orphaned child who has no one to take care of him, to her infant son. This came to pass exactly as foretold here for Marie's son after her and Wozzeck's deaths. So with these two examples, we see narrative offerings of stories that become 'merchandise' in the sense that the stories evolve into tangible, empirical truths later in the wider operatic narrative.

Barthes writes next: '*Sarrasine* is not the story of a castrato, but of a contract; it is the story of a force (the narrative) and the action of this force on the very contract controlling it. Thus, the two parts of the text are not detached from one another according to the so-called principle of "nested narratives" (a narrative within a narrative).'[83] This is a similar application to *Lulu*'s prologue and FMI, which are independent narratives within the opera, but outside its chronology. Yet, like Sarrasine's story, these exterior narratives in *Lulu* are not detached from the parent narrative either, as allusions to their meaning are subtly reiterated throughout the opera. In particular, the view of Lulu's womanhood and the destructive capabilities of her gender by the men who are ensnared by her, echoing the animal tamer's definition of Lulu's most natural character. This inescapable allure is evident in Alwa's text: 'If it were not for your two childlike eyes I look into, I should say you were the

[80] Barthes, *S/Z*, 84.
[81] Barthes, *S/Z*, 84.
[82] Berg, *Wozzeck* score, 279–80.
[83] Barthes, *S/Z*, 90.

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most designing of whores and bitches who ever inveigled a man to his doom.'[84] Regarding the FMI, Alwa alludes to Geschwitz's successful plan of breaking Lulu out of prison, as depicted in the FMI, in a rare expression of sincere gratitude aimed at Geschwitz when he says: 'I can't begin to tell you how I admire you, knowing of your self-sacrifice, and your boldness, and your disregard for death in the things you've done for her.'[85] A further unifying concept could suggest that *Sarrasine*'s narrator is the same as Lulu's animal tamer: they invite audiences to experience their stories, and while the animal tamer is only present in the prologue, his implicit character interpretations are present throughout the opera. Perle comments on this phenomenon regarding Alwa, noting that 'It is Alwa who speaks in the Prologue, in the person of the Animal Tamer, and he speaks for the author of the drama and the composer of the opera. It is *us*, the audience, whom he invites to see the beasts in his menagerie, and it is us, as well as the characters on stage, whom his first words, "May I come in?", address, when he enters in his own person at the rise of the curtain on Act I.'[86]

Towards the end of the narrator's story, Sarrasine receives a prophetic warning of death that is akin to the Idiot's subtler suggestion to Wozzeck of the latter's pending murder of Marie. In both cases, these are proairetic codes of warning and murder that serve as narrative foreshadowings in *Sarrasine* and *Wozzeck.* In the case of *Sarrasine* – with its mirror application to *Wozzeck* – Barthes writes: 'if he [Sarrasine] were to heed it [the warning] and to refrain from pursuing his adventure, there would be no story. In other words, *Sarrasine is forced by the discourse* to keep his rendezvous with La Zambinella.'[87] Barthes regards this as an example of 'the story must go on',[88] which is nearly identical to Wozzeck's pained admission upon seeing Marie dancing with the Drum Major: 'On we go! On we go!' ('Immer zu, immer zu!').[89] Both characters naturally ignore their respective warnings for three reasons that Barthes cites that can be equally applied to both narratives: 'Sarrasine chooses the rendezvous: (1) because he is naturally obstinate, (2) because his passion is the stronger element, (3) because it is his destiny to die.'[90]

Both Sarrasine's and Wozzeck's downfalls are facilitated in no small part by the people around them, who consistently seek to exploit them. When Sarrasine is brought into the castrato's world, he is at once the outsider looking in, amongst subtle antagonists. Barthes's description of this convergence could equally be applied to Wozzeck's experience as the mistreated outsider who is passively tormented by the Captain and Doctor. Berg denotes this torment in his score when, for example, in Act II scene 2, the Captain and Doctor taunt Wozzeck with Marie's infidelity. The doctor hums his own motif while mimicking the Drum Major by beating time with his walking stick.[91] Of Sarrasine, Barthes writes: 'the singers [La Zambinella's colleagues and friends] must give Sarrasine a warm welcome in order to mislead him and to further the machination they have undertaken'.[92]

Both Sarrasine and Lulu reach decisive points amidst sexually deviant engagements that challenge social conventions and result in the deaths of both protagonists. This is depicted in *Sarrasine* via an orgy that the character attends shortly before his death, and in *Lulu* via the

[84] Berg, *Lulu* libretto, 75: 'Wenn deine beiden großen Kinderaugen nicht wären, müßte ich dich für die abgefeimteste Dirne halten, die je einen Mann ins Verderben gestürzt.'

[85] Berg, *Lulu* libretto, 67: 'Ich finde keine Worte für die Bewunderung, die mir Ihre Aufopferung, Ihre Tatkraft, Ihre übermenschliche Todesverachtung einflößen.'

[86] Perle, *The Operas of Alban Berg*, 116.

[87] Barthes, *S/Z*, 135.

[88] Barthes, *S/Z*, 135.

[89] Alban Berg, *Wozzeck: Opera in 3 Acts (15 Scenes), Opus 7, after Georg Büchner, English/German Libretto*, trans. Eric Albert Blackall and Vida Harford (Vienna, 1952), 14.

[90] Barthes, *S/Z*, 135.

[91] Berg, *Wozzeck* score, 240–4.

[92] Barthes, *S/Z*, 140–1.

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title character's prostitution in the opera's final scene. Proairetic codes of sexual violence and murder are undertaken to facilitate narrative conclusions. In the case of *Sarrasine*, this is only the conclusion of the story within the story, whereas the main tale is nearing its own ending, functioning as an arguable epilogue to Sarrasine's story with the final true reveal of the old man's identity. These actions unfold within recognisable social and institutional frameworks that further condition their meaning.

The cultural code

As noted above, the cultural code refers to shared systems of knowledge, social conventions and institutional frameworks that ground narrative meaning in recognisable contexts. In Berg's operas, references to military life, urban entertainment, wealth, chronology and social authority situate the dramas within historically and culturally legible environments. These references inform both character construction and the broader social pressures shaping the narrative.

Berg's identification with the soldier Wozzeck provides one such cultural inflection. In a letter to his wife dated 7 August 1918, Berg writes of his rapport with Wozzeck: 'There is a bit of me in his character, since I have been spending these war years just as dependent on people I hate, have been in chains, sick, captive, resigned, in fact humiliated.'[93] The opera's social environment thus intersects with the composer's lived experience, reinforcing the cultural code that situates the drama within the conditions of wartime subordination. The cultural code is also audible in specific musical textures. In Act I scene 3 of *Wozzeck*, the entrance of Marie is accompanied by a military band whose rhythms and fanfares are marked by piccolo trills and sharply articulated percussion. These gestures evoke a recognisable idiom of martial display and masculine authority, embodied in the figure of the Drum Major. Moments like this do not push the plot forward as much as situate it within a shared cultural structure.

This same cultural code of presenting idiomatic music, of a sort, in the diegesis, is evident in *Lulu* as well. Act I scene 3 takes place in the dressing room of a theatre, where Lulu is performing in a cabaret. An off-stage jazz band is playing in the opening of the scene, in a section that Berg fully notates in his score and designates as 'Rag-time'. The band arrangement includes non-standard instrument like the banjo and sousaphone to heighten the cultural code of an urban society. The jazz band's next musical number is called an English waltz in the score, notated in 3/4 time. The Rag-time music returns later, with Berg noting that the musicians of the band are to integrate into the orchestra, with the jazz music becoming gradually more inaudible.[94] The seamless integration of the diegetic music with that of the orchestra unifies the cultural signifiers of this scene musically by adopting some of the most popular and recognisable idioms of the day. This awareness further attests to Berg's sensitivity for promoting a shared culture, by allowing his opera to reflect these fashions through musical suggestion.

Money as a cultural code is also an essential narrative component across all story lines. In *Sarrasine*, the narrator is consistently focused on the conflation of a wealthy lifestyle and one's place in high society. But the key is that it is more important to flaunt this so that one's wealth becomes a known quantity rather than knowing how one came to be in possession of it. In *Lulu*, Dr Schön's obsession for maintaining the optics of his wealth, social standing and the illusion of his control over Lulu, manifest his downfall because these consuming impulses drive him to paranoia and rash behaviour in his vain attempt at preserving the

[93] Bernard Grun, ed., *Alban Berg: Letters to His Wife* (London, 1971), 229.
[94] Berg, *Lulu Partitur (I. und II. Akt)*, 276.

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perceived status quo that a wealthy person of his standing should experience. Inversely proportional to this, we have Wozzeck, whose lowly monetary station cannot be improved upon, which contributes a layer to his dehumanisation at the hands of others. The cultural codes within the societies of Berg's operas, as they relate to the imbalanced distribution of wealth, inform those narratives as acutely as Barthes distinguishes the same preoccupations within his literary analysis. In addition, Michael Moriarty argues that money in *Sarrasine* is a nebulous entity due to its association with the castrato. His description on the matter mirrors similar tenets of the unknowable in *Lulu* regarding origin:

> There is a powerful association in the text between money and castration. Money, in the Paris of the story, can represent anything but indicates nothing about its possessor. It reflects no social origin – on the contrary, it annuls all traces of origin. It can be inherited but has no intrinsic link with inheritance. It is this absence of origin that equates money with castration. Money has no paternity; the castrato can have no posterity. Both are empty at the center, without an intrinsic nature – for which very reason, both are fitted to *represent*; the castrato, after all, is not just a eunuch, but a performing eunuch, can sing as a woman or man, in the garb of either sex. Like the castrato, money is neuter, for only its lack of positive properties enables it to act as universal equivalent.[95]

Another cultural code worth briefly exploring is what Barthes refers to as a code of 'chronology', which is any reference to age or numerical time. In the first scene of Act III in *Lulu*, a fifteen-year-old girl is introduced and identified only by her age, where she is gawked at by older men and subtly implied to be a Lulu-in-waiting. This implication of chronology is also evident in Marie's murder scene, when Wozzeck asks her how long they have known each other and, more ominously, how long she thinks they will continue to know each other. Lulu also cites the metaphorical time of a hundred years to Schigolch as the last time someone has called her by her real name. But perhaps the most meaningful example of this code designation is when Lulu is defending herself to Dr Schön (as previously quoted), telling him that while she may have got his twilight years, he got her childhood/youth. As Barthes writes, 'precise figures [i.e. quantities of time] produce the effect of reality'.[96] Repercussions of chronology are reaffirmed throughout *Sarrasine*, where Barthes writes that 'the old man's extreme thinness is an index of age, but also of emptiness, of reduction through deficiency'.[97] In the case of Lulu and the old man in *Sarrasine*, their age and appearance within the framework of this cultural code also directly ties into a semantic code of beauty, particularly when they are both compared to their personified vehicles of idealised perfection: Lulu's portrait, and the portrait and sculpture of the old man in his youth as an androgynous beauty who is looked upon as a woman.

In his reflection upon the direct and indirect consequences that result in Sarrasine's death (direct referring to Sarrasine's inability to overcome his denial regarding La Zambinella's deceiving guise of a woman, and indirect referring to Sarrasine's ignorance in knowing that only castrati sing in the Papal States because women are not allowed to do so), Barthes writes: 'What is harshly contrasted to the complex constructions of the symbol (which have taken up the entire story), what is rightfully called upon to triumph over them, is social truth, the code of institutions – the principle of reality.'[98] This statement is directly applicable to the kind of institutionalised, socio-cultural truths that govern the realities

[95] Michael Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge, 1991), 126.
[96] Barthes, *S/Z*, 49.
[97] Barthes, *S/Z*, 57.
[98] Barthes, *S/Z*, 185.

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depicted in Berg's operas. Yet, Barthes may be suggesting a kind of moral catharsis that justifies the reality of truth over the illusion of idealism. While Berg's operatic narratives echo a similar dichotomising framework between the real and unreal, the motivations are far more sinister, as his idealisations reflect darker realities that trap his characters in unending cycles of brutal subjugation of the weak by the strong. However, in all narrative cases, it is indeed institutional strength that prevails over the desires of the individual. As such, Sarrasine, Wozzeck, Lulu and their satellites (in Berg's operas) succumb to Barthes's social truths, where those who rebel by trying to force their individuality die. Together, these codes reveal the complexity of Berg's operatic construction while leaving room for further interpretation.

Conclusion

Through his engaging literary analysis and employment of the five narrative codes, Barthes's *S/Z* identifies an intersection of cultural meaning in Balzac's *Sarrasine*, and, at the same time, offers a blueprint for identifying similar tropes in other literary texts. Berg's two operas, *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, lend themselves particularly well to this analytical methodology. This approach was pursued through textual features of the libretti that Berg devised, along with some key aspects of the music, including circular structures, non-linear stories within stories and character doppelgängers. Collectively, these characteristics function to blur the lines between reality and idealised fantasy. Dichotomous relationships ensued in all the analysed narratives, facilitating what Barthes referred to as vast arrays of antithetical symbolisms that informed one of the main ideas: the concept of interpretation and how one's point of view can drastically colour the perception of a situation. This dialectical phenomenon also relates to Barthes's concept of readerly vs. writerly texts, and the manner in which a story is either clearly defined but unchallenging to the reader, or engaging to such a degree that the reader is compelled to 'write' the story themselves by producing their own interpretive conclusions. All of these concepts converge to create cultural discourses, where many of the same patterns and cultural references inherent in *Sarrasine*, and by extension, *S/Z*, had symmetrical representations in Berg's operas. The purpose of such a comparison is to provide a new avenue of insight into Berg's creative process that stimulates a kind of writerly narrative, which in turn bestows a rich plurality of symbols and meaning. Such an undertaking, Barthes argues, constitutes the main objective in becoming a producer of the text rather than being just a consumer. Berg's narrative designs facilitated these investigative methods within each opera's own allegorical construct and reflection of Barthes's codes. As a result, this article's fusion of musicology and literary analysis has aimed to produce an interdisciplinary work that expands the scope of both opera studies generally and Berg studies specifically.

One final thought regarding the general purview of this study's narrative analysis is to reiterate the profound kinship between characters, who themselves facilitate the written cultures on display in all of the examined stories. A specific example that bears significance is how the narrator in *Sarrasine* is, in a way, like Sarrasine himself in that the narrator attempts to woo the feminine figure to whom he is attracted. Their shared lack of success with their relative romantic interests also mirrors the figure of Lulu in the sense that neither Alwa, nor Berg in reality with his idealised love for his mistress, fulfillingly secure the objects of their amorous obsessions. This pessimistic ending unites all three narratives for their lack of cathartic resolution that revolves around a universal denial of one's desires by seemingly fatalistic circumstances. This in turn results in idealised projections of illusion being more seductive to all the characters who covet the love of another, than the painful and destructive truths of their realities. An awareness of this fact stimulates an understanding of subtle metaphors, because grappling with reality and the inventions of imagination is a

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profoundly humanistic trait that makes *Wozzeck*, *Lulu* and *Sarrasine* relatable due to the existential struggles of their characters. Connecting it back to Barthes now: if Barthes views narrative analysis as the evolution of writing, articulating a distinction between readerly texts and the more ideal writerly texts that promote heightened engagement, then Berg, in the context of the current study, created writerly opera texts.

Berg demonstrated how he invented threads of interpretation via autobiographical projections, resulting in a plurality of signs. He also did this by inviting his audience in, as the animal tamer/Alwa/Berg himself beckoned, to do the same with our own imaginations, focused inward, using his operas as springboards for our own stories. In this way, the operas become mirrors and frameworks for self-authorship. Berg created the opportunity for each listener to reinterpret and recompose meaning, both within the narrative world of the operas and in relation to their own lived narratives. Just as Barthes encourages the transformation of readers into writers, Berg's operatic texts provoke a transformation of listeners into narrators of their own symbolic lives – stories shaped by longing, loss and the perpetual negotiation between reality and imagination.

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