

Soap Opera and Genius in the Second Viennese School

The affairs of Mathilde Schönberg in Alban Berg's Chamber Concerto

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"I still cannot believe that dear Alban has gone. I still talk to him in my thoughts . . ." ¹ Arnold Schönberg's ² words to Helene Berg on the shock of Alban Berg's death carry a taste of the affection, built up over a 30-year friendship, that the two men felt for each other. But it was not always so; for whilst teacher and student were mostly good friends, there were considerable periods during which they were not. Each man left much rich detail of his personal life, and an essence of their fluctuating relationship can be gained from both the trove of letters and papers that they scrupulously retained for posterity and, equally intriguingly, from musical codes and clues found in the secret programmes that they concealed in their compositions. These sources reveal, especially for the years spanning Schönberg's first marriage, a remarkable, sometimes lurid, picture of the everyday lives of the members of Arnold Schönberg's circle, to which the term, "*Soap Opera*," though perhaps more readily associated with a later era, can be aptly applied.

"*Soap Opera*," might best be defined as "*real-life events which resemble a serial drama, chiefly characterized by tangled interpersonal situations*," a definition that is especially apposite in respect of the set of circumstances which can now be revealed from hitherto unpublished letters and documents found in the Berg and Schönberg archives. It fell to the genius of Alban Berg to represent these "*real-life events*" in the composition of his *Chamber Concerto*, but the woman who was actually at the centre of those "*tangled interpersonal situations*" transpires to be Arnold Schönberg's first wife, Mathilde Zemlinsky.

Indeed, this is not the first time that Mathilde Schönberg's behaviour has come under scrutiny, for she sits at the core of an ill-fated love affair with the expressionist Viennese artist Richard Gerstl, which resulted in Gerstl's suicide in 1908. Berg's *Chamber Concerto*, in the 2nd movement, appears to represent Mathilde and allude to her affair with Gerstl, but it is only after close examination of the contemporaneous correspondence that it becomes clear that Mathilde embarked on more than one extra-marital affair and may even had some sort of relationship with Berg himself.

The representation or self-representation of biographical events such as these by artists in their works, has been the focus of much fascinating theorising and is a subject that has long provoked widespread and envious curiosity, an inquisitiveness never more perfectly articulated than by Freud, who argued in 1908:

We laymen have always been intensely curious to know . . . from what sources that strange being, the creative writer, draws his material, and how he manages to make such an impression on us with it and to arouse in us emotions of which, perhaps, we had not even thought ourselves capable. Our interest is only heightened the more by

¹ "Noch immer kann ich es nicht fassen, daß mein lieber Alban nicht mehr ist. Noch immer rede ich in Gedanken mit ihm . . ." Letter from Arnold Schönberg to Helene Berg, dated 1 January 1936. Nono-Schönberg, Nuria: *Arnold Schönberg 1874 – 1951. Lebensgeschichte in Begegnungen*, Ritter Klagenfurt, 1992, p. 324. Translation: Juliane Brand, Christopher Hailey & Donald Harris: *The Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence Selected Letters*, Macmillan Press, Basingstoke, 1987, p. 471.

² The German spelling of "Schönberg" will be used throughout, except in the occasional use of direct quotes from English publications, where the American version, "Schoenberg", has been retained.

the fact that, if we ask him, the writer himself gives us no explanation, or none that is satisfactory;

Freud added, in mild self-deprecation:

. . . this [interest] is not at all weakened by our knowledge that not even the clearest insight into the determinants of his choice of material and into the nature of the art of creating imaginative form will ever help to make creative writers of us.³

Freud's phrase, "that strange being, the creative writer", provides the ideal segue to Alban Berg and his *Chamber Concerto*, a work which "straddles Berg's atonal and twelve-tone periods."⁴

Although he would not finish it until July 1925, Berg had begun his *Chamber Concerto* in early 1923, at a time when he was acquiring evermore confidence and independence as a composer, albeit without much support from Schönberg. In particular, Berg had recently, in the spring of 1922, completed the full score of *Wozzeck*, in the process becoming far less dependent on the approval of his master.

Nonetheless, on 9th February 1925, his 40th birthday, Berg concluded a letter in his small apartment, in Trauttmansdorffgasse before choosing to publish it, for all to read, in *Pult und Taktstock*, the house journal of his, and Schönberg's, publishers, Universal Edition:

Dear esteemed Friend, Arnold Schönberg,
Composition of this concerto, which I dedicate to you on your fiftieth birthday, was finished only today, on my fortieth. Overdue though it is, I ask that you nonetheless accept it kindly; all the more so as – dedicated to you since its inception – it is also a small monument to a friendship now numbering 20 years.⁵

With this letter, Berg belatedly commemorated "eine Dreiheit der Ereignisse," a "trinity of events,"⁶ being Schönberg's 50th birthday on 13 September 1924, his own 40th, and the 20-year friendship between Berg, Webern and their teacher – a concept that he had first mooted in July 1922.⁷ Betraying his well-known fixation with numbers, Berg inscribed the first movement with the adage "Aller guten Dinge..."⁸ meaning "all good things (come in threes)."

In fact, the number three permeates the work, Berg constructing the *Chamber Concerto* in three continuous movements. He called the first, "Freundschaft" (Friendship), describing it as a "Thema scherzoso con variazioni", - - - the second, "Liebe" (Love), an *Adagio*, - - - and the third, "Welt," or (World), a *Rondo ritmico*, and "a [kaleidoscopic like⁹] combination of the two preceding ones."¹⁰

³ "Uns Laien hat es immer mächtig gereizt zu wissen, woher diese merkwürdige Persönlichkeit, der Dichter, seine Stoffe nimmt, . . . und wie er es zustande bringt, uns mit ihnen so zu ergreifen, Erregungen in uns hervorzurufen, deren wir uns vielleicht nicht einmal für fähig gehalten hätten. Unser Interesse hiefür wird nur gesteigert durch den Umstand, daß der Dichter selbst, wenn wir ihn befragen, uns keine oder keine befriedigende Auskunft gibt . . . und wird gar nicht gestört durch unser Wissen, daß die beste Einsicht in die Bedingungen der dichterischen Stoffwahl und in das Wesen der poetischen Gestaltungskunst nichts dazu beitragen würde, uns selbst zu Dichtern zu machen." Freud, Sigmund: *Creative writers and day-dreaming, Complete Psychological Works, Volume IX 1906 – 1908*, The Hogarth Press, London, 1959, p 142/*Der Dichter und das Phantasieren*, 1908, Gesammelte Werke 1906 - 1909 Imago, 1941, p. 213

⁴ Headlam, Dave: *The Music of Alban Berg*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1986, p. 194.

⁵ "Lieber verehrter Freund Arnold Schönberg, Die Komposition dieses Konzerts, das ich Dir zu Deinem fünfzigsten Geburtstag gewidmet habe, ist erst heute, an meinem vierzigsten, fertig geworden. Verspätet überreicht, bitte ich Dich, es dennoch freundlich entgegenzunehmen; umsomehr als es - seit jeher Dir zugehört - auch ein kleines Denkmal einer nunmehr zwanzigjährigen Freundschaft geworden ist." Berg's open letter to Schönberg. 9 February 1925, *Pult und Taktstock*, 2. Jahrgang, Heft 2/3, p. 23/trans. *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p. 334.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Letter from Berg to Webern, dated 28 July 1922, *Alban Berg, Briefwechsel mit Anton Webern*, hrgs. von Rudolf Stephan und Simone Hohmaier (Briefwechsel der Wiener Schule 4), Druck i.V.

⁸ *Pult und Taktstock*, p. 23.

⁹ "On the programmatic outline . . . Berg . . . summarized [the third movement's] content in the notations "die Welt," "das Leben," and "kaleidoskopartig." Dalen, Brenda: "Freundschaft, Liebe, und Welt": *The Secret Programme of the Chamber Concerto* in *The Berg Companion*, edited by Douglas Jarman, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1989, footnote 12, p. 175

¹⁰ *Pult und Taktstock*, p. 23/25/ trans. *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p.335

Thus, in an era when programme music had become passé, the work is undeniably and defiantly programmatic - Berg admitted so himself as, continuing the opening paragraph in his open letter, he confided publicly to Schönberg that:

in a musical motto preceding the first movement, three themes (or rather motives), which play an important role in the melodic development of the piece, contain the letters of your name as well as Anton Webern's and mine, so far as musical notation permits.¹¹

In other words, using German notation where B natural = H and E flat = Es, or S, Berg extracted letters from each name to create a musical code - A-D-S-C-H-B-E-G for Schönberg, A-E-B-E for Webern and A-B-A-B-E-G for Berg, and it is these "mottos" that begin the piece

As a further tribute to Schönberg, Berg orchestrated the work for piano, violin and 13 wind instruments, describing this ensemble to Schönberg as: "a chamber orchestra of 15, [of course, divisible by three] a sacred number for this type of scoring ever since your Opus 9".¹² Schönberg's 1906 *op. 9, Chamber Symphony Nr. 1 for 15 solo instruments*, had a considerable influence on Schönberg's students at the time, Webern later testifying "*der Eindruck war kolossal*" – "the impression was colossal."¹³

However, as opposed to his very public pronouncement of the three opening motives, Berg gave no indication whatsoever that, within the variations that follow, he had also made musical reference to other members of Schönberg's circle. This is the first signal of hidden secrets in the *Chamber Concerto* and credit for their discovery must go to Brenda Dalen, a musicologist who published her results in 1989.¹⁴ Her source was the vast archive of Berg's papers, which has only become available since the death, in 1976, of Berg's widow, Helene, who held tight control over Berg's legacy. Since then, however, Berg's archive has disgorged a wealth of letters, sketches and musical notes, which, in turn, have revealed the secret programmes that Berg buried in his *Chamber Concerto*.

A brief examination of Dalen's findings illustrates these discoveries.

Dalen revealed that the aforementioned associates of Schönberg are disclosed in Berg's "*programmatic outline*,"¹⁵ which shows the composer plotting the course of the work's three movements, whilst giving not only the initials of the trinity, A.S., A.W. and A.B., as declared by Berg, but also the following names: *Eduard Steuermann*, *Rudolf Kolisch* (*Schönberg's future brother in law*), *Josef Polnauer* and *Erwin Stein*. All four were Schönberg's former students, associates in Schönberg's "*Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen*", and integral members of Schönberg's wider circle.¹⁶

However, it is the secrets that lie buried in the second movement, the *Chamber Concerto's* slow, long, lyrical *Adagio* that raise the most intriguing questions. Berg announced that the movement took the form of a musical palindrome, a favoured mechanism of his:

The formal structure of the *Adagio* is based on the "da capo [three-part] song form": A1-B-A2, where the A2 is the inversion of A1. The return of the first half of the

¹¹ "In einem musikalischen Motto, das dem ersten Satz vorangesetzt ist, sind die Buchstaben Deines, Anton Weberns und meines Namens, soweit dies in der Notenschrift möglich ist,*) in drei Themen (bezw. Motiven) festgehalten, denen eine bedeutende Rolle in der melodischen Entwicklung, dieser Musik zugefallen ist.*)" Nämlich A-D-S-C-H-B-E-G, A-E-B-E und A-B-A-B-E-G." *Pult und Takstock*, p. 23/trans. *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, pp.334 and 337.

¹² "ein Kammerorchester von fünfzehn Mann bildend, der seit Deinem Opus 9 heiligen Zahl für derlei Besetzung." *Pult und Takstock*, p. 24/trans. *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p. 334.

¹³ Lecture given by Anton Webern on 4 February 1932, Moldenhauer, Hans: *Anton von Webern: A Chronicle of his Life and Work*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1978, p88

¹⁴ Dalen, Brenda: "'Freundschaft, Liebe, und Welt': The Secret Programmes of the Chamber Concerto" in *The Berg Companion*, edited by Douglas Jarman, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1989, pp 141-180.

¹⁵ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, p. 143. Musiksammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Wien, F21 Berg 74/II, fol. 2,

¹⁶ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, p. 175.

movement, comprising 120 measures, occurs in retrograde . . .¹⁷ [and also, of course, measures 120 bars too.]

At least Berg kindly provided *partial* acknowledgement of the characters he portrayed in “Freundschaft”. For “Liebe”, the *Adagio*, he gave none. However, interred in Berg’s papers and manuscripts, a secret and deliberate programme emerges, concealed in the music of the 2nd movement.

Dalen’s findings provide a basis for resolving the mystery, for, as a first clue, in the same “*programmatic outline*”¹⁸ and scrawled under “Liebe” and “Adagio”, the letters “M” and “a” can be discerned. Next, a so-called “*envelope sketch*”¹⁹ gives a better indication of Berg’s intentions, for, on the right hand flap on the back of a disused envelope, Berg scribbled his notion of the pivotal moment in the *Adagio*, when the palindrome reaches its turning-point. Here, Berg’s Gothic-type scrawl, reveals:

Ein Bild	An image
Auf Höhepunkt	at the turning point
(Angelpunkt)	or (pivot)
Klavier Baß	where a Piano bass enters
Dazu Math Thema	in addition a Math theme
Ahde edhA	to which Berg gives the motive, Ahde or edhA

It is evident that if the “Math”, from the “Math Thema” is combined with “AHDE”, a substantial portion of the name **Mathilde** materializes.

Dalen found clearer clues in an early, “discarded, sketch”²⁰ of the turning point. Here, above the third stave, the name Mathilde is disclosed split into four – **Ma, thil, d** and **e**, Berg also writing the word “Symmetrie” thus characterising his beloved palindrome. Additionally, and, perhaps, most significantly, Dalen suggests that, in a “preliminary sketch”²¹ of the *Math Thema*, Berg tied the Mathilde cipher, inextricably with the Schönberg cipher, taking the “A” and “H” and “D” and “E” from A-D-S-C-H-B-E-G to create A-H-D-E, **Mathilde**.

It is evident that, if the first movement spoke of Schönberg, and his circle, then the musical language of the second, the elegiac *Adagio*, has, as its covert central focus, Mathilde Schönberg, Arnold’s wife, and it is hardly surprising that any inquisitive individual would wish to raise one simple question - “why?”

A brief overview of Mathilde’s marriage to Schönberg might help to shed some light on this conundrum. Mathilde was the sister of Schönberg’s only recognised teacher, Alexander Zemlinsky, who introduced the pair in 1899. They married in October 1901, with Mathilde already pregnant with their first child. Schönberg invited the much younger Richard Gerstl into his household in the Spring of 1906, where Gerstl produced portraits of Schönberg and Mathilde, whilst teaching the composer how to paint. The two men became friends, Gerstl becoming familiar within Schönberg’s circle, especially during the long Austrian summer holidays of 1907 and 1908 spent in the idyllic resort of Gmunden on Lake Traunsee. Here, during the summer of 1908, the tall, 25 year old artist’s affair with Mathilde flourished, whilst he produced his most important expressionist works, as his portrayals of Schönberg’s family and circle of the time illustrate.

¹⁷ “Der Bau des *Adagio* beruht auf dem ‘dreiteiligen Lied’: A1-B-A2, wobei A2 die Umkehrung von A1 vorstellt. Die Wiederholung dieser ersten Satzhälfte von 120 Takten geschieht krebsförmig . . .” *Pult und Taktstock*, p. 24/trans. *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p. 335

¹⁸ See footnote 14.

¹⁹ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, fig. 5, p. 156, Musiksammlung ÖNB F21 Berg 74/III, fols. 2-3,

²⁰ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, fig. 7, p. 159, Musiksammlung ÖNB, F21 Berg 74/VII [B], fol. 11v.

²¹ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, fig. 6, p. 157, Musiksammlung ÖNB F21 Berg 74/VII [B], fol. 26.

A dramatic denouement arrived in late August 1908 when the two lovers were found *in flagrante delicto*, and Mathilde fled with Gerstl back to Vienna. She was eventually persuaded to return, only for Gerstl, having lost Mathilde and been excluded from a concert of Schönberg's students that day, to stab and hang himself in his studio on the evening of 4 November 1908.

The matter remained a secret for 60 years, and Mathilde has since been portrayed as a mousy, demure *Hausfrau*, staying in the background, an insignificant presence until her painful death from cancer in October 1923, aged 46. However, recent research exposes a different picture – that of a woman more assertive than has been previously thought, possessing a vigorous sexual appetite, most notoriously satisfied by her affair with Richard Gerstl.

Schönberg must have forgiven Mathilde for they remained together after Gerstl's death, but he was devastated by the affair, and prompted to thoughts of suicide. Indeed, his 2nd *String Quartet*, in which Schönberg crosses the bridge to atonality for the first time, has been widely interpreted as representing Schönberg's imploding marriage, completed as it was in Gmunden in July 1908, precisely at the time that Gerstl and Mathilde were cementing their infidelities. Never admitting to any secret programme, Schönberg nonetheless scattered his 2nd *String Quartet* with clues, amongst them incorporating musical references to himself, Mathilde and Gerstl.²²

Thus, Berg's programmatic concept for the *Chamber Concerto* followed honourable precedents – Schönberg was one, but also Mahler and Strauss and others whom Berg revered. And so it was in 1925 that, as unfashionable as programme music was, Berg, in ending his open letter, impishly hinted of secrets hidden within his Concerto, wittily pre-empting criticism by referring to his obsession with numbers first:

I mention, finally, that divisibility by three also applies to the number of measures in the entire work, as well as within sections. I know that, insofar as I make this generally known—my reputation as a mathematician will rise in proportion to the square of the distance that my reputation as a composer falls.

He went on:

But seriously: because as an author it is much easier to speak of such external matters than of inner processes, in which this concerto is certainly no poorer than any other music. I tell you, dearest friend, if it were known exactly what I have **smuggled** in the way of human-spiritual references into these three movements of friendship, love, and world, the adherents of program music—if indeed there still are such—would be most delighted and the “linearists” and “physiologists,” the “contrapuntists” and “formalists” would attack me, incensed at this inclination, if I hadn't at the same time divulged that they too, if so inclined could find satisfaction.²³

With this intimation of “*smuggled references*” one can understand how Dalen and others construe the *Adagio* in terms of Mathilde's life, and for the “*Liebe*” of the piece to be the love that existed between her and Schönberg, in spite of her peccadilloes.

The turning point of the movement thus takes on great significance, as, deep at the precise epicentre of the palindrome, lie 12 mysterious strokes of the piano, all in low C sharp, exactly as

²² Dale, Catherine: *Tonality and Structure in Schoenberg's Second String Quartet, Op. 10*, Garland Publishing, New York & London, 1993, p.157.

²³ “Erwähne ich schließlich, daß die Teilbarkeit durch drei auch die Anzahl der Takte sowohl des ganzen Werkes als auch innerhalb desselben bestimmt hat, so weiß ich, daß - sofern ich dies allgemein bekanntgebe - mein Ruf als Mathematiker in dem Verhältnis steigen wird, wie der als Komponist, im Quadrat der Entfernung davon, fällt. Im Ernst aber: . . . weil sichs als Autor ja viel leichter von solchen Äußerlichkeiten reden läßt, als von den inneren Vorgängen, an denen dieses Konzert gewiß nicht ärmer ist als irgend eine andere Musik. Ja, ich sage dir, liebster Freund, wüßte man, was ich gerade in diese drei Sätze von Freundschaft, Liebe und Welt an menschlich-seelischen Beziehungen hineingeheimnißt habe, die Anhänger der Programm-Musik—wenn es solche überhaupt noch geben sollte—hätten ihre helle Freude daran, und die ‘Linearen’ und ‘Physiologen’, die ‘Kontrapunktiker’ und ‘Formalisten’ fielen, empört ob dieser “romantischen” Neigung, über mich her, wenn ich ihnen nicht gleichzeitig verriet, daß auch sie alle, wenn sie nur willens sind zu suchen, auf ihre Rechnung kämen.” *Pult und Taktstock*, p. 27. Translation partly *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p. 337 and partly Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, p. 142.

Berg set out in his envelope sketch. An “early draft”²⁴ of the *Adagio*, illustrates all these elements. Berg pinpoints the turning-point, the “*Wendepunkt*” or “*Mittelpunkt*,” adding the notation - “12 *Schläge*”, or “12 strokes”, plus two faded, syllables - “*ma*” and “*thil*”, before actually completing the name “*Mathilde*” with a flourish.

Berg was also eager to point out in his open letter that, during the middle part of the *Adagio*, the thematic material is presented in mirror image,²⁵ the “*Wendepunkt*” being of such importance to him that he insisted that this section always be printed on opposite pages, so that his image of the moment was not lost. He also instructed that the 12 notes be played “*möglichst unmerklich*”²⁶ - “as imperceptibly as possible” and with Mathilde’s motif played on the horn, just before the piano chimes, there can be few more dramatic moments in music.

Dalen logically suggests a connection to Schönberg’s 1903 tone-poem of Maeterlinck’s tragic “*Pelleas und Melisande*”, which can be said to predict the Gerstl affair:

The musical symbolism of the *Adagio* can be reinterpreted in terms of Mathilde’s ill-fated affair with Gerstl. The palindrome symbolizes the Schoenbergs’ estrangement and eventual reconciliation as well as Mathilde’s spiritual death and gradual retreat from the world following Gerstl’s suicide.

Moreover, the twelve fateful strokes for the piano at the turning-point may recall the moment, [when, as the clock strikes noon, Melisande tosses her wedding ring into a fountain] at which the fate of Pelléas and Mélisande is sealed in Maeterlinck’s drama, [both lovers dying shortly after].²⁷

On all available evidence, this interpretation is hard to dispute. The *Adagio* is obviously an homage to Schönberg and his love for Mathilde.

Or is it?

New evidence reveals that Dalen and others were not in possession of all the facts and that Mathilde’s “*gradual retreat from the world*” may have been quite the opposite. It also becomes apparent that both Schönberg and Berg were cognisant of these matters, Berg even being complicit in Mathilde’s behaviour.

Five years before Berg’s open letter, on 27 February 1920, the Schönberg family was about to leave their home in Mödling, just south of Vienna, on a three-month journey across Europe. Life was hard, Austria was in dire economic straits, and hyperinflation was imminent. Schönberg, though, had once again established a living as a teacher. Yet, he felt the need to flee the city.

The previous evening, Schönberg had conducted an open rehearsal of his *Orchestra Pieces*, op. 16, in the concert hall of the Schwarzwaldschule, his last musical duty before leaving Vienna. Helene Berg had attended alone, Alban having decamped to Carinthia, where, miserable and lonely, he was trying to settle financial pressures by selling his family home, the Berghof in Villach.

The ostensible reason given for the Schönbergs’ departure was four concerts that Schönberg was to conduct in Prague organised by Alexander Zemlinsky. However, darker events concerning Schönberg’s wife and daughter had occurred over the previous weeks, possibly persuading Schönberg to remove his family from Vienna entirely, causing Berg to write to his wife on 20th February 1920 that “perhaps I shan’t see Schönberg any more.”²⁸ These events would have

²⁴ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, fig. 3, p. 154, Musiksammlung ÖNB, F21 Berg 74/VII [A], fol. 9.

²⁵ “zum Beispiel beim ganzen Mittelteil (B) im genauen Spiegelbild.” Pult und Taktstock, p. 25/*Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p. 335.

²⁶ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, Ex. 3, p. 152.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 166.

²⁸ “Also, vielleicht sehe ich ihn [Schönberg] gar nicht mehr.” Berg was responding to a letter from Anton Webern informing him that: “Now it is quite possible that Schönberg may remain in Amsterdam and have his family join him there Only a plan so far, so mum’s the word.” (“Und nun ist es leicht möglich, dass (er) [Schönberg] vielleicht gleich in Amsterdam bleibt u. dann seine Familie

remained secret, like many others within the Schönberg circle, if Berg had remained in Vienna, but telephoning was expensive, so Alban and Helene exchanged long, narrative letters, Helene detailing her life in the city.

In reading this private correspondence, a slight sense of intrusion is hard to avoid, but nonetheless, it is thanks to these letters that the sequence of events that occurred in the Schönberg family in 1920 emerges, a “soap opera” that pervaded the everyday lives of city folk in post war Vienna. For the letters reveal that Mathilde, at the age of 42, may have chosen to embark on another sexual adventure outside of her marriage, and repeat her conduct of 1908.

Little published material exists regarding these events, but a few clues do exist. Alexander Zemlinsky, for one, was plainly concerned about his sister, writing insistently to Schönberg in early February 1920: “What’s the matter with Mathilde? What really seems to be the matter? Write to me once more.”²⁹

Alma Mahler’s diary, around 21 February 1920, also indicates a crisis in Schönberg’s household, describing Mathilde derogatorily as “*Mannstoll*”³⁰ – man-mad – implying a sense of manic behaviour:

Schönberg’s daughter has taken poison - was saved, his wife was man-mad (Mannstoll) for a few weeks, has sorted herself out again . . . a wild merry-go-round!³¹

A terse extract from a letter that Berg wrote to Helene from the Café Parkhotel, Villach on 10 February 1920³² confirms Alma’s diary entry, Zemlinsky’s concern and Berg’s discomfort. This letter is taken from the only comprehensive edition of Berg’s letters to his wife, “*Briefe an seine Frau*” published 40 years ago and is amongst several which were censored, probably by Helene herself, using “X” to conceal the name of an anonymous person.

At the time of Berg’s Parkhotel letter, it should be noted that his relationship with Schönberg had deteriorated once again, Berg, having rejected the opportunity to write a short monograph on Schönberg, writing to Helene on 16th January 1920:

Schönberg wrote, asking me to write a long monograph about him. How lovely that would be! However I had to decline and also resign from the Association ‘for an indefinite period’. It’s horrible.”³³

Berg immediately regretted his decision and he was right to be worried for Helene soon informed him “Schönberg was hurt that you have definitely rejected the book.”³⁴ Berg, though, blamed Schönberg, writing to Helene on 1 February, “Now, about the book on Schönberg! I would be so happy if I could write it But Schönberg presented the whole thing and my agreement as so urgent, that I had to refuse at once – not to keep him and his publisher in the air.”³⁵

nachkommt. Dies ist einstweilen nur ein Plan, drum silentium!)” Berg, Alban: *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, A. Langen und G. Müller, München, 1965, p. 449/ *Alban Berg: Letters to his Wife*, Translator: Bernard Grun, Faber and Faber, London, 1971, p. 265.

²⁹ “Was ist übrigens mit Mathilde? Was fehlt ihr eigentlich? Ich möchte das doch gerne wissen. Schreib auch ei[n]mal.” From a letter from Alexander Zemlinsky to Arnold Schönberg, from Prague, dated February 1920, Arnold Schönberg Center, Vienna, ID: 18723.

³⁰ For the sake of accuracy, Alma’s original use of a capital letter when writing *Mannstoll* has been retained, although grammatically the word should all be in lower case.

³¹ “Schönbergs Tochter hat sich vergiftet -- wurde gerettet, seine Frau war ein paar Wochen Mannstoll, hat sich wieder gefunden . . . Tolles Ringelspiel!” From Alma Mahler’s diaries, p. 160, Mahler-Werfel Papers, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania. Alma wrote the word *Mannstoll* with a capital “M”, perhaps deliberately intending it to be a noun, rather than descriptive.

³² This letter has been incorrectly dated in both *Briefe an seine Frau* and *Letters to his Wife* as 19th February 1920.

³³ “Ich hätte einen so schönen Auftrag, eine Monographie über Schönberg (160 Seiten) zu schreiben, und muß absagen. Ich bitte zugleich Schönberg um Enthebung auf unbestimmte Zeit, da ich hier bleiben muß.” *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 421/ *Letters to his Wife*, p. 254.

³⁴ “Schönberg war etwas gekränkt, dass Du so endgültig für das Buch absagtest.” From a letter from Helene Berg to Alban Berg, 27 January 1920, Ref: F21 Berg 1582/1920, 13, Musiksammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek, Wien.

³⁵ “Nun, wegen des Buchs über Schönberg! Ich wäre doch so glücklich, wenn ich es doch noch schreiben könnte. Aber Schönberg stellte die Sache und meine Zusage als so dringend hin, daß ich, um ihn und den Verlag nicht hinzuhalten, sofort absagen mußte.” *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 435/trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 259

The *published* version of the Parkhotel letter of 10 February reads:

I did mean to write to Schönberg as well, but really don't know what attitude to adopt. Am I supposed to know anything of his family affairs? Is Schönberg aware that you know about the X affair? Or of Trudi's attempted suicide? Could I or should I refer to this as "offering sympathy"? So in the end I didn't write.³⁶

Whilst no other published reference as to who X might have been appears to have been published, recent examination of the original letter discloses that the "X" refers to an obliterated name, and is not an "X", but a name beginning with "B". "X" had simply been used as a code to disguise the truth.

The intriguing answer to "X's" identity rests in letters that Helene sent to her husband during January and February 1920, for the mystery of "X", and the object of Mathilde's attention turns out to be a 20 year old student of Schönberg's, a young Jewish bass singer by the name of Hugo Breuer, the "B" of the original letter, a member of a family of bicycle manufacturers and wholesalers,³⁷ and 22 years junior to Mathilde Schönberg. Born in 1899, Hugo, of whom no photograph has been located, had together with his older brother, Otto, taken Schönberg's tuition from October 1918.³⁸

On the 27th January 1920, Helene, sick with flu, sent a long, rambling letter to Alban, writing that:

Yesterday I had hardly got out of bed . . . when, at half past nine, I found Tildi [short for Mathilde] standing before me!!! She immediately made for the telephone and rang Erwin Ratz³⁹ first to get Hugo Breuer's phone number.⁴⁰

It is worth noting that Helene, and surely Berg too, would not have been surprised at Mathilde's interest in Hugo, since Helene then comments "she had given me a completely wrong number in her letter!"⁴¹ Presumably Mathilde had already written to Helene asking her to call Hugo on her behalf, and Mathilde's error in giving the number was probably the reason for her unexpected visit.

Helene next reports that Mathilde, "then called Breuer! But of course, only as Frau Berg!"⁴²

Alarmed by this, Helene echoes Alma, describing Mathilde as "mannstolle"!

I find it outrageous. What this man-mad ("mannstolle") person permits herself, irrespective of the fact that she might compromise me by pretending to be Frau Berg - what have I done to deserve that? I can get into a terrible pickle, if Schönberg finds out anything about it.⁴³

³⁶ "Eigentlich wollt' ich auch an Schönberg schreiben. Aber ich weiß wirklich nicht, wie ich mich verhalten soll. Darf ich etwas von seinen Familienangelegenheiten wissen? Weiß Schönberg, daß Du über die X.-Affäre orientiert bist? Oder von Trudis Selbstmordversuch? Kann oder soll ich diese Angelegenheit von Rechts wegen 'kondolierend' erwähnen? Ich schreib' also nicht." *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 448/ trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 264

³⁷ Hugo Breuer, Wholesale bicycle salesman/Composer/Opera singer, Kaiserstraße 1, Wien VII, b. Vienna 10 June 1899, part owner of family business, "Breuer & Co", married the artist, Klara Sulzer, emigrated to England via Prague in March 1938, arrived in London 25 August 1938, treated for depression in Folkestone, U.K., committed suicide on 17 February 1939. Father - Josef Breuer, b. Vienna 1859, partner Breuer & Co., d. Vienna 15.4.1918, Mother - Irma Breuer, b. approx. 1875. *Orpheus Trust, Wien* (www.klangwege.orpheustrust.at/musikschaeffende_e.php?detail=7), *Association of Jewish Refugees, London and U.K. Home Office archives*.

³⁸ ASC: www.schoenberg.at/1_as/schueler/wien/schueler_wien.htm

³⁹ Erwin Ratz, 1898 – 1973, Schönberg's student 1918 - 1921

⁴⁰ "Gestern – ich war kaum aus dem Bett, ich war schon voll böser Ahnungen, daher blieb ich nicht länger liegen, steht die Schönberg Tildi schon vor mir 1-2 10h früh!!! Stürzte sich natürlich sofort auf's Telephon u. telephonierte erst an Ratz, um die Telefonnummer von Breuer (sie hatte mir eine ganz falsche gegeben in ihren Brief) u. dann an Breuer. Natürlich nur als Fr. Berg!" Helene to Alban, 27.1.1920, Ref: F21 Berg 1582/1920, 13, Musiksammlung ÖNB, Wien.

⁴¹ See footnote 42.

⁴² *ibid*.

⁴³ "Ich finde das beispielloes! Was sich diese mannstolle Person erlaubt! Abgesehen dass sie mich, da sie sich als Frau Berg ausgibt kompromitieren kann - wie komme ich dazu! Ich kann in eine furchtbare Sauce hineinkommen, wenn Schönberg etwas davon erfährt." As footnote 42.

Helene continued “Mathilde at last reached the boy, and demanded that he should wait for her at 2.30 in Gloriettegasse”,⁴⁴ about 400 metres away and close to the Schönbergs’ home during the war.

Mathilde’s pursuit must have been going on for a while, for Helene commented that Mathilde was very upset that “the Breuers had discontinued their lessons” and that “Hugo was nowhere to be seen,”⁴⁵ perhaps evidence that the sequence of events had intensified over a number of weeks, if not longer. It is worth noting that, whilst Schönberg clearly remained oblivious, one can only surmise how long the Bergs had been privy to the situation.

Helene continued, describing Mathilde derogatorily as “das närrische Frauenzimmer,” - this foolish woman - “so pathologically conceited - that she imagines that - ‘Hugo will do something stupid’ and she must therefore meet him frequently in order to save him. In other words she will absolutely not let him go.”⁴⁶ This must have got in the way of Schönberg’s plans as Helene then reported “Schönberg has decided that Mathilde should go to Prague for a while – but Mathilde told me that this was now not on, because of Hugo,”⁴⁷ leading Helene to call her “Komplett verrückt!”⁴⁸ - Completely crazy!

Helene then scathingly relates that before Mathilde finally left, she titivated herself endlessly, carefully powdering her old face and combing her hair, Helene commenting to Alban that “the young man must really laugh when he sees her coming along.”⁴⁹ As a final affront, Mathilde insisted that Helene promise that, when Arnold phoned, Helene would lie to him that Mathilde had left at 4, and not 2.30.⁵⁰

Helene recounted all this, including a full-bloodied character assassination, in one animated letter!

Berg wrote back dismissively: “I would like to bet that young Breuer didn’t turn up at the rendezvous.”⁵¹ Nevertheless, by not telling Schönberg, both Helene and Berg had long become accomplices in Mathilde’s deceit.

Helene now attempted to stay back, but matters took a dramatic turn a few days later, Helene’s letter to Alban of 7 February 1920, further confirming Alma diary entry.

Trudi, the Schönberg’s daughter, had been offended for no good reason, probably caused by a quarrel with Schönberg, who called her “ein unausstehlicher Drachen”, Viennese for an unbearably argumentative woman, and in consequence, took 19 sleeping tablets. She was found by chance, lucky to be saved. Mathilde couldn’t sleep, so Schönberg had, bizarrely, opened some champagne. Taking a glass to their 18-year-old daughter, they found her unconscious, a suicide note beside her. Schönberg was unsurprisingly upset, but Mathilde, suggesting teenage hysteria,

⁴⁴ “Also sie hatte endlich den Buben “derglengt”, verlangte, dass er sie um 1-2 3h Gloriettegasse erwarten soll!” (Derglengt: Viennese coll. *reached*). As footnote 42.

⁴⁵ “Die Breuers haben ihre Stunden auf eigenes Ansuchen eingestellt . . . Der Kleine [Hugo] lässt sich nirgend mehr blicken . . .” As footnote 42.

⁴⁶ “Jedenfalls ist das *närrische Frauenzimmer* derartig krankhaft eingebildet – das sie sich nun vormacht – “der Kleine wird einen Unsinn begehen” u. sie muss deshalb öfters mit ihm zusammenkommen, um ihn zu retten. ‘Auf deutsch’ sie will ihn absolut nicht auslassen!” As footnote 42.

⁴⁷ Schönberg, though evidently completely ignorant of Mathilde’s behaviour, had nonetheless euphemistically indicated that something was wrong on 28 January 1920, writing to Zemlinsky: “*Thanks for the invitation to Mathilde [to accompany Schönberg to Prague] . . . unfortunately, however, Mathilde is not currently well enough, to be able to decide to make the trip.*” (“Meinen herzlichsten Dank für deine Einladung an Mathilde . . . Leider ist jedoch Mathilde jetzt nicht wohl genug, als daß sie sich zum Reisen entschließen könnte.”) From a letter from Arnold Schönberg to Alexander Zemlinsky, dated 28.1.1920, ASC, ID: 580.

⁴⁸ “Schönberg hat mit ihr beschlossen dass sie für einige Zeit nach Prag soll - sie sagte mir, dass sie aber jetzt erst recht nicht geht, wegen dem Kleinen. *Komplett verrückt!*” As footnote 42.

⁴⁹ “Vor ihrem Abmarsch . . . richtete sie sich endlos! Das alte Gesicht wurde sorgfältig gepudert u. die Haare gekämmt. Das Herz muß dem jungen Menschen fürwahr lachen wenn er die anrücken sieht!” As footnote 42.

⁵⁰ “Nachdem sie mir noch das Versprechen abnahm, wenn Schönberg anruft zu sagen, dass sie um 4h weggegangen sei.” As footnote 42.

⁵¹ “Ich möchte wetten, daß der kleine X. [Hugo Breuer] nicht zum Rendezvous gekommen ist.” *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 435, This letter is censored in the original publication and not included in the English translation.

did not take the suicide attempt seriously, and swiftly moved the conversation on to Hugo, confiding that Otto Breuer had tried to force her to leave his brother alone.⁵²

However, nothing was going to stop Mathilde and she set about tempting Hugo from his flat, prompting Helene to write, in somewhat startling terms:

Mathilde asked me to telephone Breuer and to tell him that I had something important to give him, in order to lure him out to our flat. He would not come otherwise if he knew he would meet her. She told me all this without shame. She wants to force a meeting and, possibly, to rape (vergewaltigen) him here on the couch!!! The woman must be mad!⁵³

Poor, complicit Helene, offended that her feelings had been ignored, had now exposed the scandalous situation to Alban: Mathilde's wild and predatory behaviour; her daughter's suicide attempt; the move from Vienna; and it was to this letter that Berg had replied from Café Parkhotel.

Obviously concerned, Berg begged Helene on 16 February 1920 "not to fall out with Schönberg."⁵⁴ Helene, though, became exasperated, reporting to Alban three days later:

The telephone bill for Mödling arrived. 9 Kroner for just one conversation! I've had to telephone the crazy Mathilde untold times because of this fellow!!⁵⁵

Caught in the middle, Helene may have decided to precipitate the end of Mathilde's affair. She wrote to Alban, albeit without much confidence, around 20 February:

Mathilde has confessed everything to Schönberg and now there is peace!⁵⁶ Thank God, or is she just telling me this because she noticed my disapproval!⁵⁷

One wonders precisely what role Helene played in Mathilde's confession, for a couple of days later, Helene cleared the air herself, advising Alban that "I had to have a word with Schönberg concerning Breuer."⁵⁸

Having finally extracted herself, and presumably her husband, from any further collusion with Mathilde, that was Helene's last word on the matter.

⁵² "Also nun zu Tildi: die Trude hat sich eigentlich aus gar keinem Grund vergiftet. Unlust zu maturieren u. ein kleiner Streit, in dem Schönberg zu ihr "du bist ein ausstehlicher Drachen" sagte. Daraufhin nahm sie 19 Brominal (?). Darauf kamen sie nur zufällig, Tildi konnte nicht schlafen u. Schönberg redete ihr zu, ein Glas Champagner (sie hatte seit langem eine Flasche) zu trinken. Nun brachten sie der Trude auch ein Glas davon und fanden sie tief bewusstlos. Einen Abschiedsbrief an Lisette neben sich. Bis 3h war sie bewusstlos und so steif und schwer dass sie 4 Personen (der Arzt, die 2 Schönbergs u. das Dienstmädel) kaum heben konnten. Sie speibte [Viennese coll. vomit] dann tüchtig bis 3h Nachmittag u. am nächsten Tag sass sie in der Küche und blies auf einem Kamm! Es dürfte eine Backfisch über spantheit gewesen sein. Auch Tildi nahm sich den Selbstmordversuch nicht zu Herzen. Sie erzählte mir daß der ältere Br. so grob mit ihr war, sie zwingen wollte, ihm zu schwören, seinen Bruder in Ruhe zu lassen! Der Kleine hat sich vollständig zurückgezogen und nun kommt das Ungeheuerliche!" Helene to Alban, 7.2.1920, Ref: F21 Berg 1582/1920, 21, Musiksammlung ÖNB.

⁵³ "Verlangte sie von mir, ich soll den Br. anrufen und ihm sagen, dass ich ihm etwas Wichtiges zu übergeben hätte, um ihm hinaus in unsere Wohnung zu locken. Sonst käme er nicht, wenn er wüsste, dass er sie trifft. Das sagte sie mir, alles ganz ohne Scham - Sie will sich also eine Zusammenkunft erzwingen, will ihm womöglich, hier auf unsere Divan vergewaltigen!!! Das Weib muss verrückt sein!" As footnote 54.

⁵⁴ "Bitte Dich, verfeinde Dich nicht mit Schönberg." *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 444/ trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 263.

⁵⁵ "Telephon Rechnung (Mödling) kam auch. Ein Gespräch 9K! Dabei hat ich die närrische Tildi xMal wegen diesem Mannsbild anrufen müssen!!" Helene to Alban, 19.2.1920, Ref: F21 Berg 1582/1920, 15, Musiksammlung ÖNB.

⁵⁶ Schönberg clearly did not relish his private matters becoming public, and his reaction to his problems with his wife and daughter, i.e. to flee Vienna, was in keeping with previous family crises. For instance, Schönberg had taken a similar approach in 1911, when his landlord accused Trude, his then nine-year-old daughter, of some inappropriate sexual behaviour towards the landlord's son. On that occasion, the matter became embroiled in legal proceedings, but not before Schönberg had uprooted his family and moved them to Berlin, leaving the matter in Berg's hands, who then acted on Schönberg's behalf.

⁵⁷ "Sie [Mathilde] hat Schönberg alles gebeichtet u. nun ist Ruhe! Gott sei Dank oder sagt sie das mir, weil sie mein Missfallen merkte!" Helene to Alban, dated around 20.2.1920, Ref: F21 Berg 1582/1920, 8, Musiksammlung ÖNB.

⁵⁸ "Ich muß'ts, von Breuer Schönberg gegenüber erwähnen." Helene to Alban, 22.2.1920, Ref: F21 Berg 1582/1920, 22, Musiksammlung ÖNB.

And Hugo Breuer? His relationship with Mathilde over, he associated with Josef Hauer, Schönberg's despised challenger as the inventor of the 12-tone system of composition, Hauer dedicating his opus 23 to Hugo,⁵⁹ which Breuer performed, receiving encouraging reviews⁶⁰ and probably offending Schönberg mightily in the process.

One can only speculate whether Mathilde's rash antics spanned more than a couple of months and if, during that time, Hugo resisted her advances. However, a typewritten biography of Schönberg, attributed to his much younger, second wife, Gertrud, clearly refers to Mathilde having "an affair with someone else," so perhaps Hugo may have succumbed. The extract reads:

When he [Schönberg] went to his wife in the country . . . Trude [his daughter] told him that his friend, a painter [Gerstl], was going around with his wife. The friend killed himself afterward . . . Later at Berg's house⁶¹ Schönberg's wife had an affair with someone else [Breuer?].⁶²

Probably written around 1950, Gertrud's recollections almost certainly came from Schönberg himself. They suggest that Schönberg was fully aware of Mathilde's indiscretions, and of the Bergs' complicity in the Breuer affair, and, although second-hand and written years later, appear to be reliable.

This applies equally to a second, intriguing précis of Schönberg's life, also probably gleaned from Schönberg himself. Here, Gertrud scrawled many personal events in Schönberg's life, including the Gerstl affair, before ending with an enigmatic, shorthand postscript:

"Mathilde Wahrsager(in), einer durch Selbstmord u. einer durch Krankheit. (Stechmücken)."⁶³

A translation could be: "Mathilde Fortune-teller, one by suicide and one through illness (mosquito)."

Why did Gertrud choose to single out these two events in a selective, seemingly accurate biography? Her note could be open to misinterpretation, but suggests a visit by Mathilde to a fortune-teller, who spoke of the fate of, presumably, her lovers. One would die of suicide - Gerstl, perhaps? Or, Hugo Breuer, who emigrated to England in August 1938, and also took his life 6 months later?⁶⁴ And the second man foretold to die from an illness caused by a mosquito? Is it too much of a coincidence that Alban Berg was the only one in Schönberg's circle to suffer such a fate? For in July 1935, Berg was bitten by a mosquito. Refusing to have the bite treated, it became septic, spreading blisters across his body. Berg, with Helene, attempted to lance the boils with scissors, poisoning his bloodstream. When he finally sought treatment on 17 December 1935 it was too late and he died on 23 December. Thus it seems unlikely that Gertrud was referring to anyone else other than Berg.

And as a result of Gertrud's juxtaposition of the two deaths, is it legitimate to ask whether, in addition to the Breuer and Gerstl affairs, an indeterminate and unique liaison beyond anything which is currently known existed at some time between Mathilde Schönberg and Alban Berg? Whilst it should be stressed that there is absolutely no proof that there was ever an illicit or sexual relationship between them, Gertrud's stinging "*mosquito*" endnote may now create a soupçon of doubt, and therefore, particularly in terms of the *Adagio*, it remains perfectly valid to posit the suggestion.

⁵⁹ Szmolyan, Walter: *Josef Matthias Hauer. Eine Studie*, Verlag Elisabeth Lafite, Wien 1965, p. 71

⁶⁰ "The highlight of the evening was the lovely voice of Hugo Breuer."/"Der Gewinn des Abends war die hübsche Singstimme des Herrn Hugo Breuer." *Wiener Musik-Zeitung*, 24.11.1923.

⁶¹ In 1911, the Bergs moved to a one-bedroom flat at Trauttmansdorffgasse 27 in Hietzing (Wien XIII) and remained there for the remainder of their lives.

⁶² Typed Biography of Arnold Schönberg, [dictated by Gertrud Schoenberg to typist], Gertrud Schoenberg Satellite Collections [S4], ASC ref: T43.09.

⁶³ Handwritten Biography of Arnold Schoenberg (post 1951): Gertrud Schoenberg Satellite Collections [S4], ASC.

⁶⁴ See footnote 35.

It may not have been beyond either of them in a Vienna infamous for its clandestine affairs, for, Mathilde's behaviour apart, Berg was equally capable of unfaithfulness, his denials being scattered throughout his 28-year correspondence with his wife.

From as early as the summer of 1908, Berg found himself reassuring his future wife of his fidelity, having, on this occasion, raised her suspicions concerning an attractive young Viennese woman, Ridi R, whom he had met in Villach and had then followed to Venice. On his return he wrote to Helene on 24 August 1908: "Now I have told you [about Ridi R and Venice]. And although I have not been unfaithful to you once, I somehow feel freer and lighter 'because there should be no secrets between us.'"⁶⁵ Evidently, his protestation did not carry sufficient conviction, for a year later Berg was forced to give Helene further reassurances from Villach concerning the same girl.⁶⁶

Such refutations occurred regularly. For example, on 18 July 1914, writing from Vienna to his wife, who was taking the cure in Carlsbad, Berg found himself responding uncomfortably to Helene's direct question: "The question of whether I was faithful to you, I answer with a "yes", but I am almost ashamed that I even have give an answer."⁶⁷ Indeed, it appears that Berg, who greatly admired Oscar Wilde, may have adopted Wilde's attitude in "*Dorian Gray*," Wilde observing that:

Faithfulness is to the emotional life what consistency is to the life of the intellect—
simply a confession of failures.⁶⁸

Helene, whilst apparently aware of her husband's serial infidelities, presumably accepted them, sadly retaining an idealistic view of her childless marriage until her death, an image that has dissipated since. Berg's nephew, Erich Alban Berg, best summed up their relationship: "She dominated him. And he did everything that she wanted. He revenged himself through his amours,"⁶⁹ this most famously in 1925 when Berg commenced an affair in Prague with Hanna Fuchs-Robertin. Once again, Helene was suspicious but Berg lied floridly to her:

It goes against the grain, really, to 'reassure' you about me and Mopinka [Hanna]. Perhaps I'll just say that faithfulness is my main quality. (I'm sure I must have been a dog in a previous incarnation . . . may I die of distemper if I ever sin against faithfulness!) . . . So: being of such conservative disposition, how could I help, my darling, being anything but faithful to you and remaining faithful for ever? [11 November 1925]⁷⁰

Here parallels can be found to the *Chamber Concerto*, since Berg promptly wrote his Lyric Suite, in which, over 50 years later, another secret programme, this time dedicated to Hanna, was discovered by George Perle, persuading Dalen to comment that:

Berg's annotated score of the Lyric Suite reveals that the retrograde in the third movement [the palindrome] of the Lyric Suite commemorates Berg's first meeting with Hanna.⁷¹

There can be little doubt regarding Berg's predilection to secretly represent personal events in his works, and the use of palindromes to do so, and irrespective of any possible liaison between

⁶⁵ "Nun hab' ich Dir's erzählt — und mir ist, obwohl ich Dir fürwahr nicht ein einziges Mal untreu war, leichter und freier, 'denn es soll Aufrichtigkeit zwischen uns herrschen'!!" *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 39/ trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 43.

⁶⁶ "An Ridi R. habe ich zum erstenmal hier gedacht, als ich ihren Namen in Deinem Brief las: mein Ehrenwort! Was Du auch denkst!" "*As to Ridi R. - I haven't given her a single thought here until I read her name in your letter. Word of honour! The things you think!*" 14 July 1909. *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 69/ trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 62

⁶⁷ "Die Frage, ob ich Dir treu war, beantworte ich mit einem "ja", aber ich schäme mich fast der Frage und daß ich sie beantworte." *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 262/ *Letters to his Wife*, p. 165, (the translation is mine.)

⁶⁸ Wilde, Oscar: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Chapter 4

⁶⁹ Smith, Joan Allen: *Berg's Character Remembered* in *The Berg Companion*, edited by Douglas Jarman, Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1989, p. 27.

⁷⁰ "Es widerstrebt mir eigentlich, Dir ein Wort der Beruhigung wegen Mopinka zu sagen. Vielleicht nur das eine: Mein Haupt-Charakterzug ist Treu (war ich in der vorigen Inkarnation doch sicherlich ein *Hund*, . . . der an Staupe zugrunde geht, wenn ich mich gegen die Treu versündige). Also: Wie könnte ich bei einer solch konservativen Veranlagung da nicht und *erst recht* nicht anders, als *Dir, mein Golderl, treu zu sein und ewig zu bleiben!!*" *Alban Berg: Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 540/ trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 341.

⁷¹ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, p. 147.

Mathilde and Berg, it is difficult to envisage that Berg could have written the *Adagio* without taking cognisance of the relatively recent Hugo Breuer affair, caught up as he was with its concealment.

As a result, questions arise concerning the existing, persuasive interpretation of the movement's secret programme, and it is now appropriate that these reservations be properly aired. For instance, can it still be assumed that "*Liebe*" epitomises the love between Mathilde and Schönberg? Probably not, for Schönberg, despite outpourings of loss, hastily married Gertrud in August 1924, less than a year after Mathilde's death, perhaps even perversely reinforcing any subversive intentions that Berg may have had in the *Adagio*.

Or that the 12 piano blows represent Gerstl's death? Certainly, a slew of different interpretations emerges, not least, that it could personify the Breuer affair itself. Perhaps musicological analysis will now discover a code for Hugo Breuer in the work!

And can the palindrome truly can be taken as a metaphor for the Schönbergs' marriage before and after the Gerstl affair, through Mathilde's withdrawal from life and her eventual death?

Here, it should be noted that the structure and ideas of the *Chamber Concerto* were probably established by Berg well before Mathilde's death in October 1923, for Berg wrote about it to Helene on 29 March 1923, after a visit to the Schönbergs:

The Schönbergs were in good spirits. However, it wasn't a pleasant atmosphere, because Schönberg kept on finding fault with my Chamber Concerto. He doesn't like the piano in this combination.⁷²

Dalen's reinforces this, revealing:

The basic concept of the palindrome emerges in a series of plans for the overall structure of the concerto, which Berg drew up during the spring or early summer of 1923.⁷³

Since Mathilde's worsening health only caused concern in her last few weeks, it remains difficult to accept that the *Chamber Concerto* was influenced in any way by Mathilde's eventual death. Indeed, Berg may have conceived the structure considerably earlier than Dalen indicates, since the postmark on Berg's notorious "*envelope sketch*" can now be shown to be 2 February 1920⁷⁴, over 3 years before Mathilde's passing and in the middle of the Breuer affair, although this obviously does not prove that Berg actually scribbled his notes at that time.

And, if Gerstl was central to the *Adagio*, why did Berg choose not to use Gerstl's musical cipher in addition to Mathilde's? Schönberg had certainly done so in his works around 1908.⁷⁵

Most importantly, the Breuer affair demonstrates that Mathilde's withdrawal from life was anything but that, and, as a result, the possibility that she had other, unrecorded affairs should not be ruled out.

Thus it is advisable to look at other reasons for Berg's secret programme, for as is often with Berg, irony may never be far from the surface, and if this is so with the *Chamber Concerto*, a number of alternative interpretations can lend themselves to its programmatic content.

⁷² "Schönberg's waren guter Dinge. Trotzdem war es nicht gemütlich, weil Schönberg ununterbrochen wegen meines Kammerkonzerts penzte. Er ist gegen das Klavier in dieser Mischung." Alban Berg: *Briefe an seine Frau*, p. 391/ trans. *Letters to his Wife*, p. 306.

⁷³ Dalen, *The Berg Companion*, note 61, p. 178.

⁷⁴ The value of the postage stamp on this envelope is 10 Heller. According to the Österreichische Post's archives, this was a tariff that was only applicable to Printed Matter (Drucksache) up to 50g in the period 14.1.1920 to 15.4.1920. The postmark on the envelope is partially obliterated, but whilst the year cannot be distinguished, the date of 2.II is quite clear. Given that the tariff was only applicable in 1920, the date of the posting of the envelope can be safely assumed to be 2 February 1920.

⁷⁵ See footnote 18, and Forte, Allen, *Schoenberg's Creative Evolution: The Path to Atonality*, *The Musical Quarterly* 64/2, 1978, p. 133 – 176.

Such a possibility is supported by the impression gained from other scholarly appraisals of the *Chamber Concerto*, several of which indicate, sometimes reluctantly, that essential pieces of a jigsaw puzzle remain missing. As an example, Douglas Jarman, whilst leaning towards Dalen's interpretation, has said:

As we know from sketches, letters and a variety of internal evidence, the *Chamber Concerto* also contains a host of other personal allusions, some of which we recognise and understand, some of which we know about without fully understanding their significance, and some which will perhaps always remain a secret.⁷⁶

Karen Monson, too, in her biography of Berg, instinctively felt that Berg was concealing something in his *Chamber Concerto*, even though her book pre-dates Dalen's paper and revelations: "Berg had written no more secrets into the music [Berg's *Lyric Suite*] than he had put into the *Chamber Concerto*. (Or, perhaps, there is more in the *Chamber Concerto* than anyone has yet discovered)."⁷⁷

Almost certainly, the Breuer affair, and Gertrud's abstruse recollections could be those missing pieces of the puzzle.

However, it is also worth looking at the view of the late musicologist, Antony Pople, who, somewhat contradictorily to many of his contemporaries, regarded Berg's musical references to Schönberg in a facetious light. Pople points out that the rift that had occurred between them in 1915 had been partially patched up by 1918, at which point Schönberg offered Berg the "Du" form of address,⁷⁸ for which Berg was typically obsequiously grateful. Soon after, Berg recommenced work on his opera, *Wozzeck*. However Berg may never have entirely shaken off his resentment to his isolation and to gain a plausible sense of Berg's subsequent underlying attitude to Schönberg, attention should be given to Pople's telling observation on the subject:

Berg . . . seems never to have forgiven Schoenberg, who had also more than once expressed opposition to an operatic treatment of *Wozzeck*. The central scene of *Wozzeck* ostensibly pays tribute to Schoenberg, both in its reduced orchestration, which follows the layout of the older man's First Chamber Symphony and in its use of the Sprechstimme device. *But in view of the likelihood that the correspondingly central movement of Berg's next work, the Chamber Concerto, is secretly critical of Schoenberg's reaction to his wife's unfaithfulness*⁷⁹, it is tempting to speculate on the backhandedness of Berg's tribute to his teacher at the very juncture in the opera where *Wozzeck* challenges Marie to admit her relationship with the Drum Major . . .⁸⁰

Pople gives no indication, nor did he leave any notes or basis, as to why he believed that many of Berg's references to Schönberg were made, not out of esteem, but rather out of animus. Nonetheless, he evidently had a visceral feeling that an alternative conclusion could be drawn, and since the particular scene, *Wozzeck* Act 2 Scene 3, was composed in 1920, immediately after the Breuer affair it may now be reasonable to suggest that the Breuer affair may have had an influence on Berg's biting symbolism in *Wozzeck*, perhaps leading Berg to adopt a similar stance in the *Adagio*.

In which case, several interpretations could be mooted. The *Chamber Concerto* as a whole could simply be a metaphor for Berg's own fluctuating relationship with Schönberg. Certainly, Berg describes the first movement as "scherzoso" or playful, so it is not really beyond imagination that this too was a case of Berg exercising some sort of sardonic exorcism on his teacher, from whom he had received such frequent opprobrium. This might explain Berg's role in the Breuer affair, as, in knowingly keeping the truth from his friend and master, Berg must surely have been either most

⁷⁶ Douglas Jarman, *Secret Programmes*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, p. 170.

⁷⁷ Monson, Karen: *Alban Berg A Biography*, Macdonald and Jane's, London, 1980, p. 232.

⁷⁸ 23 June 1918, *Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence*, p. 268.

⁷⁹ My italics.

⁸⁰ Anthony Pople, *The musical language of Wozzeck*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Berg*, ed. Antony Pople, Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 151/152.

uncomfortable, or have gained a perverse satisfaction. Conceivably he felt both, in which case, given Berg's previous obsequious desire to seek Schönberg's forgiveness (notably in his long, rambling letter of November 1915⁸¹), a counterbalancing view might suggest that the *Chamber Concerto* could also be taken as one long apologia for Berg's complicity in failing to report Mathilde's behaviour to her husband.

Alternatively, Berg might indeed have intended "*Freundschaft*" as a perfectly genuine gesture to Schönberg, but used it as a smokescreen to camouflage his pointed representation of Mathilde in the succeeding movement. It is this "*pointed representation*" in the *Adagio* that gives most food for thought. Perhaps "*Liebe*" ironically represents Mathilde's apparent love of younger, tall, bohemian men, not necessarily characteristics that applied to her 5' 1" husband, but which certainly did to Gerstl⁸² and Berg⁸³ and, possibly Breuer as well. It is certainly incongruous to believe that Berg composed a 13 minute *Adagio* purely as a tribute to Mathilde and Arnold, whilst blithely ignoring the recent Breuer affair, or indeed the Gerstl, or any other affair. And, without making false accusations, could it just be possible that a, perhaps, innocent liaison between Berg and Mathilde will eventually turn out to be the clandestine rationale behind the *Adagio*?

Such speculation should perhaps be left to others, for the principal purpose of the foregoing is to furnish an exposition of a specific series of events, thus offering an insight into the way that certain circumstances in the personal lives of Berg and Schönberg may have influenced their work. In particular, in illustrating the artistic implications of the alternative scenarios that may have made up Berg's intentions in his *Chamber Concerto*, a sense can be gained of the myriad of ideas and possibilities that might be found in the work.

This impression was perfectly summed up by Pierre Boulez, whose characterisation of the musical and technical aspects of the *Chamber Concerto* can equally apply to the representation of events and emotions that are now revealed in the work. Interviewed in 1975, he described the work as:

a world so profound, dense and rich and inexhaustible that one can, after thorough analysis, still come back to it a third or fourth time to find fleeting references that one had not noticed before.⁸⁴

For above all, given this newly informed and challenging biographical perspective, the *Chamber Concerto*, irrespective of whether it is taken on purely musical terms, or as an opus of programmatic self-representation, exhibits Berg's extraordinary creative power. Here, Berg reveals the pinnacle of his compositional art, taking a series of sensational events, worthy of any soap opera, and by a brilliant process of transition, transforming these, whatever they might have been, into a prime and rewarding example of his imaginative and affecting genius.

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⁸¹ Berg-Schoenberg Correspondence, pp. 256 -264/ASC ID: 19953.

⁸² "Er [Gerstl] schlüpft in die Rolle eines Bohemiens." Schröder Klaus Albrecht: *Richard Gerstl 1883-1908*, Kunstforum der Bank Austria, Wien, 1993

⁸³ Peter Altenberg, around 1909, half-seriously warned Helene about marrying "so einen jungen Bohémien." Morgenstern, Soma, *Alban Berg und seine Idole; Erinnerungen und Briefe*, herausgegeben von Ingold Schulte, Lüneburg: zu Klampen, 1995, p. 65

⁸⁴ Pierre Boulez, *Conversations with Célestine Deliège*, Eulenberg, London, 1975, p. 24