

Freedom in Post-Tonality: “Lyric Suite”

Grace Stevens

Music 243: Music Theory VI

June 15th, 2026

Abstract

This paper contains an analytical look at Alban Berg's "Lyric Suite". It is known for being an incredibly detailed, autobiographical look into the composer's life. It was Berg's first serialist composition, which was directly influenced by his mentor, Arnold Schoenberg. It includes many details specific to the affair that Berg was having with his friend's wife at the time. It was dedicated to this woman and tells the story of their union. Berg quotes from a variety of places throughout the piece, and tells a full narrative story of himself through them. He uses the twelve-tone row technique and highlights specific things, like the note C, and B major chords to storytell. Overall, Berg used a variety of techniques and experience to compose his "Lyric Suite".

Keywords: music, twelve-tone row, Schoenberg, autobiographical, quoting

Alban Berg is one of the more well-known composers to employ 20th century serialism. His "Lyric Suite", which he completed in 1926, was Berg's first work to employ Arnold Schoenberg's tone row. Berg was an avid devotee of Schoenberg's, and the first movement of the "Lyric Suite" is written in the style of a sonata and is entirely composed with the twelve-tone technique. The piece is also recognized as a gift to someone, and is considered to be autobiographical.

Berg studied under the tutelage of Schoenberg starting in the year 1904. This impacted his later writings greatly. Schoenberg wrote the first piece of music to use the twelve-tone row, a style that he invented himself, in his *Suite for Piano, Op. 25* (1921-1923). This departure from traditional harmony was viewed by Schoenberg as transcending above tonality. When Schoenberg wrote the aforementioned Suite for Piano, he was quoted to think that it would ensure the supremacy of German music for the following century. His idea was that one would use all 12 unique pitches in each phrase, and expand on the initial motive through regression, transposition, and inversion.

"Lyric Suite" was written as a gift to Hanna Fuchs-Robettin, née Werfel, who was married to Herbert Fuchs-Robettin at the time. It was a romantic gift in nature, and has many hidden messages alluding to Hanna and Berg's affair. A note written on the original score of "Lyric Suite" translates to,

"How my Hanna allowed me even greater freedom! For example, to secretly include our letters, H, F and A, B, in this music again and again; to connect every movement and every part of a movement to our numbers, 10 and 23. I wrote this and many other references meant for you

(for whom alone - in spite of the official dedication overleaf - every note, in fact, has been written) into this score. May it thus be a small monument of a great love.” (ONB, F21.Berg.3437 [A/Berg 6], vi)

Through his "Lyric Suite", Berg found freedom in the post-tonal techniques that he utilized. Through the break from the very strict rules of traditional harmony, Berg was able to express himself in an entirely new way. Considering that many of his pieces following "Lyric Suite" were also serialist, it appears that this new avenue of expression through music spoke to Berg in a special way. He connected "Lyric Suite" to his personal life in some very interesting ways. The overarching theme tells a story of love that ends in tragedy. In the first movement it highlights the fresh and exciting firsts of a new relationship. This Allegretto Giovane section ends with frantic chromatic scales and a final B major 7 chord with the rhythmic pattern of two sixteenths, followed by an eighth. The recurring B major chords throughout the piece serve as a reminder of Hanna, since in Germany the B in music was referred to as H. Another source of inspiration for this piece was Alexander Zemlinsky, who conducted one of Berg's own operas, *Wozzeck*. The title of "Lyric Suite" is even derived from Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony*, which is quoted by Berg.

In this piece, although atonal, Berg utilizes chords. He especially emphasizes B-major chords, as an allusion to his relationship with Hanna. The tempo markings which are prescribed for this piece are referencing how many letters are in Hanna and Berg's names respectively. Another interesting feature that Berg slips in is a quote of the "Tristan" chord, popularized by Wagner's famous opera. This chord is played over C, representing the syllable "do" in solfege. This is a reference to Dorothea, Hanna's child. The freedom given through the twelve-tone row allowed for Alban to craft a thorough story in his music.

There were many profound influences acting on Alban Berg as he worked on this piece. Buzzing from an affair, and inspired by his tutor and friends, Berg carefully selected every single note to represent something in this piece.

Bibliography

“Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951): Biography, Music + More | CMS - Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center.” n.d.

<https://www.chambermusicsociety.org/about-the-music/composers/arnold-schoenberg>.

“Lyric Suite”, Alban Berg.” n.d. LA Phil.

<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/472/lyric-suite>.

Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf. 2019. Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction. Vol.

00001. De Gruyter. EBSCOhost.

Newlin, D., Kuiper, K. "Arnold Schoenberg." Encyclopedia Britannica, April 30, 2026.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Arnold-Schoenberg>.

“Lyric Suite”, Alban Berg.” n.d. LA Phil.

<https://www.laphil.com/musicdb/pieces/472/lyric-suite>.

Thought, Fugue For. 2017. “Berg: "Lyric Suite".” Fugue for Thought. July 2, 2017.

<https://fugueforthought.de/2017/07/22/berg-lyric-suite/>.