

Constructing a Narrative: Reexamining Theodor Adorno's *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link* through Source Study

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In his 1968 monograph, *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*, Adorno posits a revolutionary understanding of Berg's idiosyncratic musical language, portraying Berg as a composer able to construct the grand totality of a piece from an atomistic detail. Yet this monograph is often misunderstood because of its seemingly nostalgic view of the composer, considered to be a vehicle for the late Adorno to reflect fondly upon his teacher. Because of its highly personal narrative, Adorno is criticized for lacking detailed analysis and ignoring many elements of Berg's musical language. To be sure, as a culmination of his life's work on Berg, the monograph was a calculated combination of essays and analyses intended to form a narrative of Berg's character and his music. The background ideas for this work originate from several of Adorno's previous essays on Berg: from "Zur Uraufführung des *Wozzeck*" (1925) to "Bergs kompositionstechnische Funde" (1963).

Based on previously unexamined manuscripts by Adorno, housed in both the Theodor W. Adorno Archiv as well as the Alban Berg Archiv at the *Oesterreichische Nationalbibliothek Musik Sammlung*, I demonstrate that this monograph was planned as early as 1936, but underwent periodic changes, being constantly reshaped until its publication in 1968. Even Adorno played a part in the misconceptions of this book, stating in the preface that its genesis was the result of a request from the publisher Elisabeth Lafite in the late 1960s. He also states, perhaps purposely misleading, that while a few materials were adapted from analytical essays published in a 1937 volume on Berg edited by Willi Reich, most of the materials were newly written in 1968.

As I argue in this paper, from the moment he met Berg in 1925, Adorno systematically constructed a dialectic narrative of Alban Berg and his music, resulting in *Alban Berg: Master of the Smallest Link*. For the first time I offer a detailed look at the archival materials, whose documents range from handwritten drafts from 1936 to multiple typed drafts and pre-publication exemplars from the 1950s through 1968. The ideas he kept from 1936 to the edits he made in consecutive drafts illustrate the process under which Adorno crafted his narrative.