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"WHOSE VOICE IS HEARD?" EXISTENTIALIST TRACES IN OLGA NEUWIRTH'S *AMERICAN LULU*[*]

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Abstract
Alban Berg's incomplete opera, *Lulu*, has inspired several reinterpretations, among them is Olga Neuwirth's music theater *American Lulu* (2006-2012), in which the composer reimagines Berg's opera within the context of Civil Rights Movement, directing our attention to the subjects of racial discrimination and social injustice. By recasting the White queer characters, Lulu and Countess Geschwitz -in Neuwirth's adaptation "Eleanor"- as African Americans, the composer presents an intersectional approach to race, gender, and sexuality. In her portrayal of the subjugated characters, Lulu and Geschwitz, as emancipated subjects, Neuwirth advocates for agency, a perspective examined in this article through the lens of Sartre's existentialism and de Beauvoir's concept of the Other. *American Lulu* explores Black self-determination through the figure of Eleanor, who evokes the Sartrean notion of "for-itself", contrasting with the portrayal of "white-masked" Lulu, representing inauthenticity. This dichotomy is reflected in the distinct musical expressions of the two characters: While Lulu's European musical language, echoing Berg, evokes "in-itself" as a symbol of the character's immanent nature,

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Eleanor's music, reminiscent of 1970s soul, is identified with her Blackness, hinting at her authenticity. In *American Lulu*, Neuwirth navigates Black liberation with an attitude that fosters courage. However, the composer's engagement with race contains certain problematic aspects, one of which is the romanticization of the Black experience.

Keywords: Black experience, gender, agency, Olga Neuwirth, American Lulu

"Kimin Sesi Duyuluyor?" Olga Neuwirth'in American Lulu Eserinde Varoluşçu İzler

Özet

Alban Berg'in tamamlanmamış operası Lulu, çeşitli uyarlamalara ilham kaynağı olmuştur. Bunlardan biri de Olga Neuwirth'in 2006-2012 yılları arasında bestelediği müzik tiyatrosu American Lulu'dur. Neuwirth, Berg'in operasını ABD'deki Sivil Haklar Hareketi bağlamında yeniden yorumlayarak ırksal ayrımcılık ve toplumsal adaletsizlik konularına dikkat çekmektedir.
Besteci, uyarlamasında Beyaz queer karakterler Lulu ve Kontes Geschwitz'i Afrikalı Amerikalı olarak kurgulayarak, ırk, cinsiyet ve cinsellik konularına kesişimsel bir yaklaşım sunmaktadır. American Lulu'da Berg'in Lulu ve Geschwitz (Eleanor) karakterlerini özgürleşmiş bireyler olarak tasvir eden Neuwirth, bu makalede Sartre'ın varoluşçuluğu ve de Beauvoir'ın "Öteki" kavramları üzerinden incelenen bir perspektifle, bireylerin özne olma yetisini savunmaktadır. Eleanor Siyahların kendi kaderini tayin hakkının bir yansıması olarak Sartre'ın kendi-için-varlık kavramını çağrıştırırken, buna tezat olarak Lulu, kendinde-varlığı ve ötekiliği simgeler. Bu ikilik, iki karakterin müzikal ifadelerini de yansımaktadır: Lulu'nun Berg'i anımsatan Avrupalı müzikal dili karakterin içsel doğasının bir sembolü olarak otantik olmayan bir varoluş durumunu temsil ederken, Eleanor'un 1970'lerin soul müziğini andıran tarzı Siyah kimliğiyle özdeşleşerek otantikliğine işaret eder. American Lulu'da Neuwirth, Siyah özgürleşmesini cesaret aşılayan bir tavırla ele almaktadır. Ancak, bestecinin ırk konusuna yaklaşımı Siyah deneyiminin romantikleştirilmesi gibi bazı sorunlu yönler de içermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Siyah deneyimi, toplumsal cinsiyet, eylemlilik, Olga Neuwirth, American Lulu

Introduction

Alban Berg's latest opera *Lulu* is widely regarded as one of the most compelling operas written in the 20th century. Since its premier in 1937 *Lulu* has gained attention in the opera scene and the field of musicological research[1]. As a representative of Second Viennese School, Berg demonstrates his post-tonal compositional style in *Lulu*, with a libretto adapted from German playwright Frank Wedekind's *Lulu* plays, *Earth Spirit* (1895) and *Pandora's Box* (1904). Berg's *Lulu* introduces as the leading character a femme fatale and depicts her rise and fall within bourgeois society. Frequently portrayed in the turn-of-the-century art forms, the femme fatale embodies a myth of feminine evil, marked by her possession of a destructive and irresistible power over men, and through her excessive sexuality, she symbolizes the irrational over reason or nature in contrast to culture (Dijkstra, 1986). Although the Lulu figure may initially appear to be a social criticism focusing on issues such as gender and bourgeois morality, as Doane asserts, rather than a "heroine of the modernity", the femme fatale is "a symptom of male fears about feminism" (1991: 3).

Berg's *Lulu* was reinterpreted by another Austrian composer, Olga Neuwirth, under the title *American Lulu* (2006-2012), in which the composer intended to provide a new perspective on the androcentric approach towards women protagonists in the opera tradition (Neuwirth, 2011). Neuwirth's *American Lulu* reimagines Berg's *Lulu* in the context of Civil Rights Movement and with her depiction of queer characters Lulu (High soprano) and Eleanor (Blues singer) as African Americans it presents an intersectional approach to race, gender and sexuality[2]. The Black culture throughout the opera is represented by a reorchestration of Berg's score into a jazz band in the first two acts, along with the inclusion of African American music styles. In *American Lulu*, instead of a hyperreal construction, the

[1] For works published on Berg's opera *Lulu*, see Perle, 1985; Jarman, 1989, 1991; Hall, 1996; Pople, 1997; Bruhn, 1998; dos Santos, 2014.

[2] In Black feminist theory the intersectionality describes specific types of intersecting oppressions, including the intersections of race, gender, sexuality and nation (Collins, 2000: 18). The term was first used by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) in her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color".

composer creates a more realistic narrative which represents Lulu and Geschwitz (named Eleanor in Neuwirth's adaptation) as anti-male fantasies.

Rather than aiming for an authentic portrayal of Berg's *Lulu*, in *American Lulu*, Neuwirth offers her own interpretation of the characters Lulu and Geschwitz approached from her perspective as a woman and a composer of her generation (Neuwirth, 2011). Regarding Lulu's characterization, which reflects misogynistic interpretations on women's sexuality, especially from a Freudian perspective (Latham, 2017), Neuwirth does not appear to sympathize with her. Instead, portrayed as a passionate artist, Eleanor represents the composer's ideal type of an operatic figure symbolizing the qualities of independency, self-determination and genuineness.

In *American Lulu*, Neuwirth champions agency and challenges the idea that oppression inevitably pushes individuals into roles of victim, a perspective I analyze in this article through the lens of existentialist thought, drawing from theories of Sartre and de Beauvoir[3]. In contrast to the portrayal of Geschwitz as a saintly, self-sacrificing lover of Lulu, in Neuwirth's version, Eleanor embodies existentialist qualities of authenticity and transcendence, whereas Lulu as contrary to that, evokes Sartre's notion of "in-itself" representing the immanent, the inauthentic, and in Beauvoirian terms, the Other. Reflecting their contrasting characterizations, Lulu and Eleanor epitomize distinct musical expressions in the newly composed act III. Eleanor's soul music resonates with her Black identity, implying her genuineness, while Lulu's vocal parts in a European musical language, reminiscent of German expressionism, reflect her character's inauthenticity. With her rejection of Lulu in the final scene of *American Lulu*, as the emblem of Neuwirth's feminist perspective, Eleanor symbolizes the notion of self-determination and becomes the protagonist.

[3] In her analysis of *American Lulu*, Clara Hunter Latham(2017) similarly suggests that Neuwirth's adaptation of Berg's opera is characterized by the composer's emphasis on agency, as the author examines the two operas from a post-Freudian perspective on women's sexuality.

Representation of Black Culture

Establishing an entirely different social context for Berg's *Lulu*, Neuwirth sets *American Lulu* within the Civil Rights Movement. The action takes place in New Orleans and New York. With this setting, Neuwirth directs our attention to the subjects of racial discrimination and social injustices, issues that, according to the composer, we still encounter nowadays (Mahogany Opera, 2014). In *American Lulu*, the three central characters, Lulu, Eleanor and Clarence -in Berg's opera named as Schigolch- are depicted as African Americans. This newly created social context demonstrates itself in the reorchestration of Berg's score into a jazz band and the inclusion of African American music styles assigned to Eleanor and Clarence. As a European composer, who grew up with the influence of both jazz and Western art music, Neuwirth asserts that she intentionally creates a link between these music cultures in her adaptation of Berg's *Lulu* (Mahogany Opera, 2014).

Neuwirth states that it was important for the composer to create an analogy with Berg's *Lulu* and in the creation of this analogy, the reorchestration of Berg's score for an ensemble based on the jazz band in *Lulu* plays an important role (Neuwirth, 2011). Analogous to Berg's jazz band that appears in the forms indicated by Berg as "Ragtime" and "English Waltz", *American Lulu* is scored for brass and woodwinds, electric guitar and piano, percussions and strings resembling Berg's instrumentation in the same sections that include brass and woodwind sections with percussion, banjo, piano, violins and double bass. *American Lulu* pays homage to Black music culture through Eleanor's parts in the style of soul and Clarence's ragtime in the newly composed act III.

American Lulu captures Black culture through multiple artistic mediums, including audio samples and video. An example is the use of calliope, a late 19th century keyboard aerophone operated by steam, which was often installed on the rooftops of the showboats along the Mississippi River (Owen, 2014: 1). The calliope appears for the first time in *Black 1* where the roof of a steamboat is described. The music which accompanies the video via a sample recorded on a calliope, features a melody in the style of ragtime. The composer's use

of this calliope music has two functions in the opera: first as a flashback to Lulu's past for the following "Recollection" section, and second as a reference to New Orleans, one of the birthplaces of jazz and blues (Neuwirth, 2011). The sample of calliope music and its use of ragtime is the first example of African American music incorporated in *American Lulu*. However, Neuwirth's music theater consists of other examples of Black music, this time included directly in Berg's score, such as Eleanor's part in blues style in act II (mm. 814-850).

The *Black* videos serve as interludes between scenes and resonate with the social and political context of the era. These interludes feature audio samples, including excerpts from Martin Luther King's speeches, as well as poetry by Djuna Barnes and June Jordan. In doing so, *American Lulu* engages with and celebrates the legacy of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The speeches by Martin Luther King that are quoted in *Black* sections address societal inequalities and racism, and his support for non-violent actions. "Rape is not a poem" by June Jordan appears in *Black 5*, right before act II, in which we see a video of a Black girl sexually assaulted by an unidentified man, indirectly alluding to the experiences of Lulu and Eleanor. In the poem, Jordan criticizes the normalization and justification of rape, approaching it from an intersectional perspective as a Black woman.

The Black Power movement, the period that aligns with the 3rd act of *American Lulu*, endorsed the concept of Black self-love and advocated for Black self-determination and self-empowerment (Ogbar, 2019: 191-92); themes that Neuwirth explores through the character of Eleanor. In *American Lulu*, in alignment with Black Power's emphasis on affirmation of Blackness, Eleanor is portrayed as an activist who celebrates her racial identification and strives for a genuine artistic expression. This portrayal aligns with the ethos of the Black Arts Movement, an artistic activist movement that emphasized the political role of Black artists (Neal, 1968: 29). The movement aimed to break free from White power structures and celebrate African American culture through literature, music, and the arts. The concept of Black consciousness which was central to the movement, is represented in *American Lulu* through the character of Eleanor, who unlike Lulu, embraces her racial identity as a Black

activist and artist, and seeks to liberate herself from Lulu in an environment that is marked by racism and misogyny.

Existentialist Traces in *American Lulu*

Neuwirth's feminist perspective in *American Lulu* recalls Sartre's existentialism and de Beauvoir's concept of the Other. This perspective is especially evident in the opposite characterization of Countess Geschwitz as Eleanor. Instead of being an upper-class aristocrat in Berg's opera, in Neuwirth's version Eleanor is an artist who shares similar social struggles with Lulu. Both women face racism and struggle to succeed in a society dominated by White, wealthy men, but they deal with these challenges in different ways. In contrast to the portrayal of Geschwitz as a selfless, devoted lover of Lulu, in Neuwirth's version, as the protagonist, Eleanor represents existentialist qualities of self-determination and self-realization, as well as authenticity and transcendence. She is a Black activist and singer, who explores her artistic expression and embraces her racial and sexual identities. In Berg's *Lulu*, Geschwitz is the secondary character of the opera who dies with Lulu at the hands of Jack the Ripper, while in Neuwirth's adaptation, she is the one who survives. Drawing from these alterations in the storyline, I argue that Neuwirth advocates for agency and stands against the notion that oppression dictates individuals' roles as victims or victimizers. In Wedekind's plays and Berg's opera, contrary to that, this is the main message shared through Lulu and Geschwitz.

Sartre's *en-soi* and *pour-soi*

In *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1992) Sartre discusses his ideas on the self that form the basis of his existentialist philosophy. According to Sartre, being exists in two interacting dimensions, the *en-soi* (in-itself) and the *pour-soi* (for-itself). In *American Lulu,* the characterizations of Eleanor and Lulu mirror existentialist notions of "in-itself" and "for-itself", the first embodied by Lulu and the latter, by Eleanor. The for-itself, which is "nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself" (Sartre, 1943/1992: 617) is the transcending,

creative and future-oriented self while the in-itself is described as immanent and ultimately inauthentic (Donovan, 2006: 133)[4].

Sartre forms his concept of self based on Heidegger's notion of the self being divided into two modes: the inauthentic and the authentic (Donovan, 2006: 133). In Sartre's conception, being in-itself is the "non-conscious Being" (1943/1992: 629) that is subject to change and transcendence: "…while being in-itself is contingent, it recovers itself by degenerating into a for-itself. It is, in order to lose itself in a for-itself." (1943/1992: 81). The notions of transcendence and authenticity encapsulated in his well-known claim "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, 1996/2007: 22) which implies the idea that individuals are not born with a predetermined essence or nature but instead create themselves through their choices and actions, is the process of the for-itself going beyond the given in-self in order to attain self-consciousness that is the foundation for the for-itself (Sartre, 1943/1992: 634). In Sartre's existentialism, the self-consciousness can only be acquired by transcending the in-self, the self that is "beyond becoming", "solid" and "exhibiting undifferentiation" (as cited in Gardner, 2009: 73). Sartre's theory of ontological freedom, which is the basis for existentialist ethics, suggests that freedom is inherent in the for-itself and the realization of the good occurs in any project the for-itself may undertake (Gardner, 2009: 193). This perspective asserts that the ethical or moral dimensions are intertwined with individual freedom and responsibility.

Her marriages with rich men are a means for Lulu to become the bourgeois woman she aspires to be, and in return she is expected to surrender her body and soul to them, but she refuses the role of being the loyal wife to her husbands. Instead, her affairs are a playground where she can achieve the satisfaction of being desired. The weakness of her partners, whom she manages to manipulate with her charm, increases her admiration for herself, and to a certain extent she emerges from every relationship stronger. Lulu constructs herself in the realm of materialized relationships through being the object of desire for her partners;

[4] A feminist critique of Sartre's theory by Collins and Pierce (1976: 119) highlights that the in-itself predominantly embodies feminine qualities, contrasting with the masculine attributes associated with the for-itself.

she exists through them and, from a Beauvoirian perspective, internalizes otherness. Different than Berg's final act, in *American Lulu* she is depicted as a high-class sex worker but unable to achieve fulfillment despite the wealth and status she has attained. Rejecting her role as a passive mistress, after she was blackmailed by one of her clients, the Banker, in the final act of *American Lulu*, we witness her death as murder by unknown assailant. In this way, Lulu, as reminiscent of Sartre's concept of "in-itself", evokes the immanent, the inauthentic and the Other, the latter which is discussed by de Beauvoir when formulizing her gender theories conceived within existentialist feminism (Donovan, 2006: 131).

Reading Lulu from a Beauvoirian Perspective

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1956) analyzes the power relations behind gender roles and how woman, as the secondary sex, is constructed on the societal level. According to de Beauvoir, woman is a cultural construct, constituted historically (1949/1956: 273). While it would be inadequate to claim that Beauvoir's work was entirely written from a Sartrean perspective (Simons, 1999: 41-42), in *The Second Sex*, she expresses that the fundamental idea underlying her thoughts on women's liberation is existentialist ethics (1949/1956: 27)[5]. For de Beauvoir, women are relegated to the roles of fertility, motherhood or wife, to passivity (1949/1956: 88)[6], a perspective that identifies the situation of woman with the immanence of being-in-itself that Sartre mentions. In contrast to the status of woman, utilizing the transcendence of being-for-itself, the man dominates nature and women through his designs and creates his future according to his own values (de Beauvoir, 1949/1956: 91).

Interpreting *Lulu* through a Beauvoirian approach reveals that the male/female dichotomy creates a conflict between Lulu and the male characters of the opera, in which Lulu is objectified as a sexual being over whom power should be exercised. She is the one who is defined by the male subject's point of view, lacking individual agency. While her partners,

[5] For de Beauvoir, it is a moral responsibility for woman to embrace *pour-soi*; thus, she can escape the status of the Other.
[6] Donovan (2006: 139) argues that although Beauvoir's theory offer important insights into women's subjugation, it predominantly focus on the White bourgeois housewife, neglecting other factors than sexism, such as racism and class struggle.

Professor, Painter and especially Dr. Bloom, exist through their own values, Lulu cannot think of herself without them. Especially in her relationship with Dr. Bloom, she is nothing but the judgements that he makes about her. De Beauvoir argues that woman is utterly recognized as sex: "And she is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex - absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute -she is the Other" (1949/1956: 15-16).

One of the most notable examples of Lulu internalizing Otherness, positioning herself as the object rather than the subject of her life, is evident in her own words: "I have not once in my life ever tried to be something other than what I have been taken for." (Neuwirth and Utz, 2012: 21). De Beauvoir argues that women who internalize immanence and passivity are subjected to biological destiny (Donovan, 2006: 137). Although Lulu is not a completely passive character because of her sexuality, which she insists on experiencing freely, her body becomes an object of exchange in the eyes of men: she must be acquired, possessed and controlled.

According to de Beauvoir, woman has historically adopted the role of the Other, a role assigned to her by man, and it is only through her rejection and transcendence of immanence that she can be liberated from this role (1949/1956: 27). In this way, she gains the power of self-determination. This perspective overlaps with Sartre's concepts of "in-itself" and "for-itself, in which the existentialist freedom can be acquired by embracing the transcendence and authenticity, the *pour-soi*. Both Berg and Neuwirth's portrayal of Lulu constructs her self-worth through the judgments of her partners, embracing the status of the Other to define herself. She is the woman defined through the perspective of masculine subject. Although in Neuwirth's version, she does not fully embody the passivity described in "in-itself", her inauthentic self or ascriptive identity as dos Santos (2004) suggests in his analysis of Berg's *Lulu*, does not bring her satisfaction. Similarly, from Lochhead's point of

view, Lulu's "performance of feminine" prepares her tragic end in Berg's opera (1997: 228-229)[7]. When we interpret the character of Lulu from a Sartrean perspective, we can assume that she has paved her own way to the "bad faith" which "occurs when the self, instead of choosing to engage in authenticating project of self-realization, consents to become an object, to exist as en-soi" (Donovan, 2006: 136).

From Subjugation to Emancipation

In the final act of Berg's *Lulu,* we witness Lulu's life turned upside down after the death of Dr. Schön. After being released from prison thanks to Geschwitz, Lulu, who has lost her beauty and youth and therefore her power of influence, is exploited by those around her, forced into prostitution and thus compelled to return to the streets from which she had escaped in the past. Having to face the frustration of losing her charm, Lulu becomes powerless as she becomes an object of exploitation for those around her. At the end of the opera, her life is ended along with Geschwitz by Jack the Ripper, whom she encounters on the uncanny streets. As Barbara Hannigan puts it in a speech she gave on the figure of Lulu, in the final scene of Berg's opera, she actualizes her own death through the hands of Jack the Ripper (Southbank Centre, 2013). However, in the third act of *American Lulu*, we are confronted with a different portrait of the victim in Berg's *Lulu*. In Neuwirth's adaptation, Lulu is portrayed as an independent woman at the peak of her career instead of a subjugated character deprived of agency, but the path she chooses to take as a sex worker leads her to frustration: "I'm not cut out for this profession anymore. I used to enjoy it. I was the queen bitch, supreme bitch…" (Neuwirth and Utz, 2012: 26). Meanwhile, Eleanor is portrayed as a stark contrast to Geschwitz, embracing her true identity and choosing the path of self-realization as an artist.

Eleanor, whom Neuwirth portrays as the antithesis of Geschwitz in *American Lulu*, is reimagined as a character capable of shaping her own future without dependence on anyone else, particularly Lulu, and boldly explores her authentic self as a Black queer artist.

[7] Here Lochhead refers to Judith Butler's theory on gender performativity, in which the philosopher discusses the categories of sex, gender and sexuality, arguing that all are constructed in social and cultural dimensions through the repetitive performative acts of gender roles (Butler, 1988).

In contrast to Berg's and Wedekind's Geschwitz, Eleanor chooses to emancipate herself from Lulu, and achieves her freedom from the domination of White bourgeois men and Lulu by embracing her queer identity and her artistic creativity. As such, Eleanor appears as a transcendental character with "for-itself" existence, who constructs her self according to her own values. In *American Lulu*, Eleanor embodies the concept of self-determination championed by the Black movement of the period. Empowered by her commitment to this cause, she emerges as the central figure, a stark departure from Countess Geschwitz, the secondary character in Berg's original, who draws attention with her exaggerated loyalty to Lulu.

Musical Identities of Lulu and Eleanor in Act III

The newly composed act III of *American Lulu* consists of heterogeneous sections put together with a collage-like technique, in which each character and event cycle is represented in a different musical style. In the context of musical composition, the term "collage" is used to describe a technique where different musical elements, fragments, or styles are juxtaposed to create a composite and eclectic musical work (Burkholder, 2001: 1). In this regard, we can consider the last act of *American Lulu* as an example of pluralism, which is considered one of the distinctive features of postmodernist aesthetics (Kramer, 2002: 16). Stylistic pluralism can be defined as the combination of different elements to form a whole through quotation or borrowing, collage or montage, which we encounter in the field of music and other branches of art, especially in the post-war period. Although there are no direct quotations of particular musical compositions in *American Lulu*, we observe imitations of certain styles and genres. As in the previous acts, the characters Eleanor and Clarence appear in Act III as imitations of African American musical styles, such as ragtime and soul. As opposed to that, Lulu's newly composed music with highly chromatic construction of her vocal line and the high level of dissonances in the orchestral accompaniment resembles 20th century German expressionism and thus acts as a reference to Alban Berg.

Neuwirth introduces her own interpretation of the character Lulu in the 3rd act. The act opens up by introducing Lulu and Clarence in Lulu's luxury apartment in New York in the 1970s when she is in her late 50s. The repetitive cross-rhythms written in tutti give the opening a minimalistic quality, a musical style originated in the U.S. during the 1960s. Contrary to Berg's last act in which Lulu's decline is depicted, in *American Lulu* now she is a high-class sex worker serving in elite circles for wealthy White man. However, despite her material wealth, she appears anxious and discontented, expressing to Clarence her dissatisfaction with her achievements: "Wanted it all, but now I've got it, there's just loneliness, sorrow and pain" (Neuwirth and Utz, 2012: 27). In parallel with opera's dramatic context, after the vivid and flamboyant minimalistic opening, during the Clarence-Lulu dialogue the musical environment suddenly changes to a more tense atmosphere by the occurrences of high-pitched siren-like gestures in glissando. This siren motive, very much on the foreground within a thin orchestral texture, functions to create tension that parallels Lulu's tense psychological state during the scene.

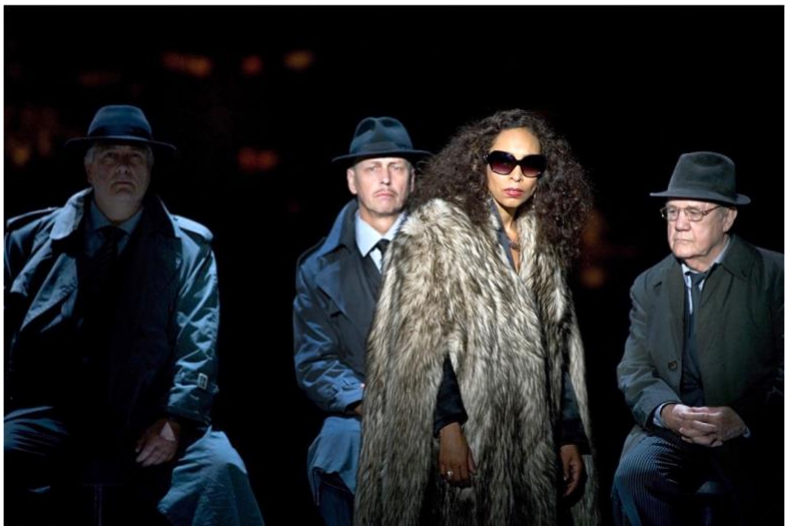
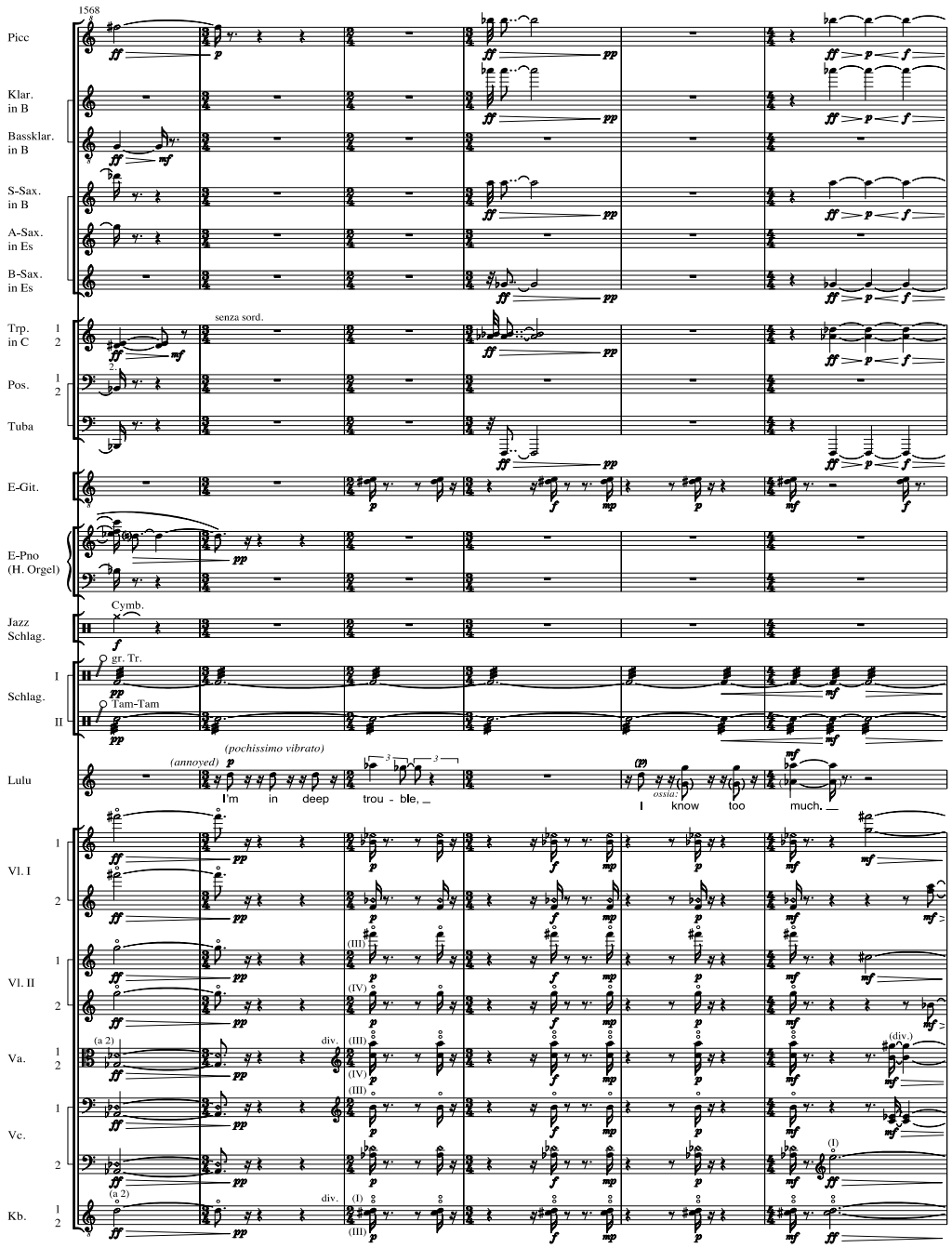
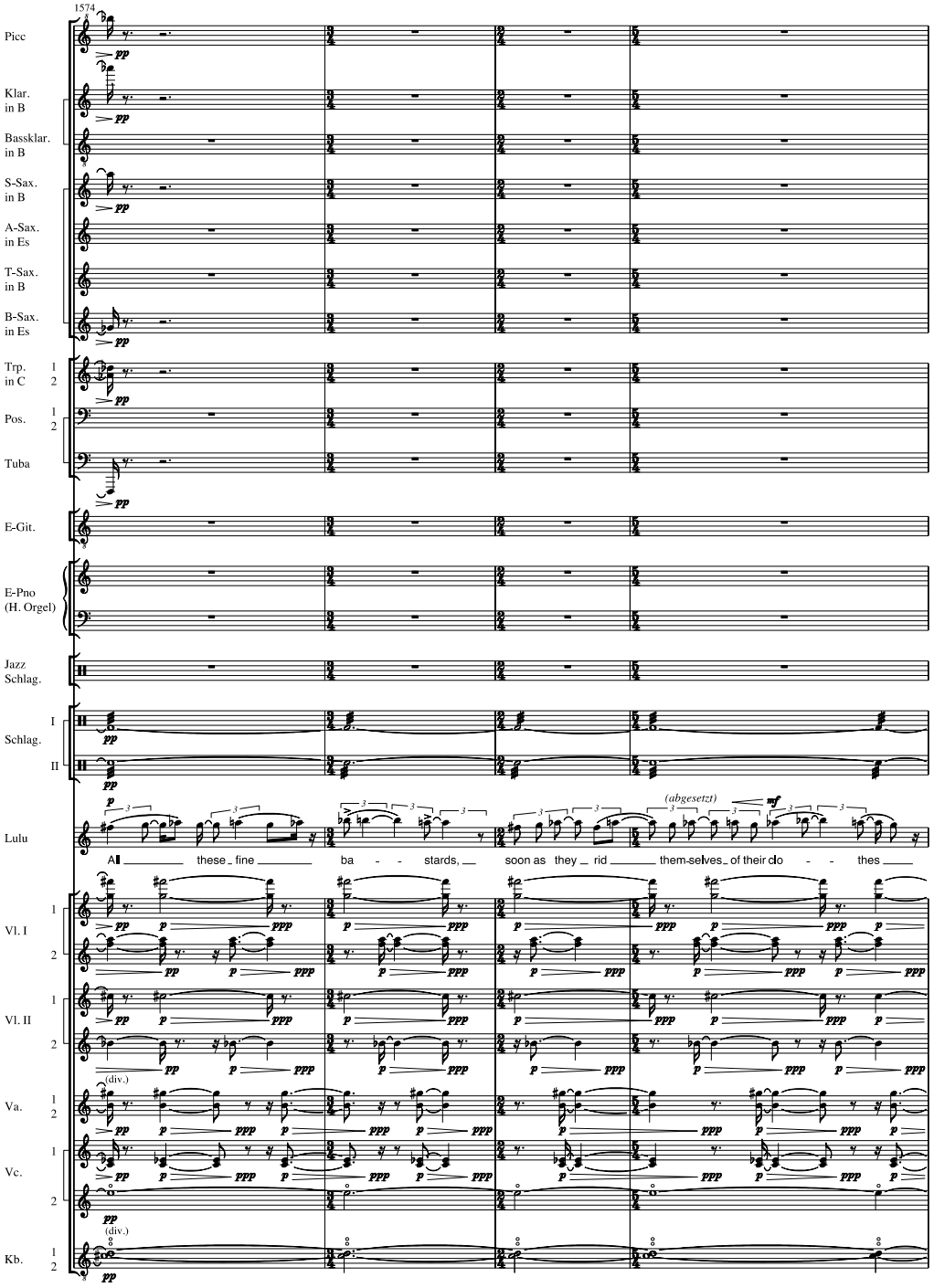


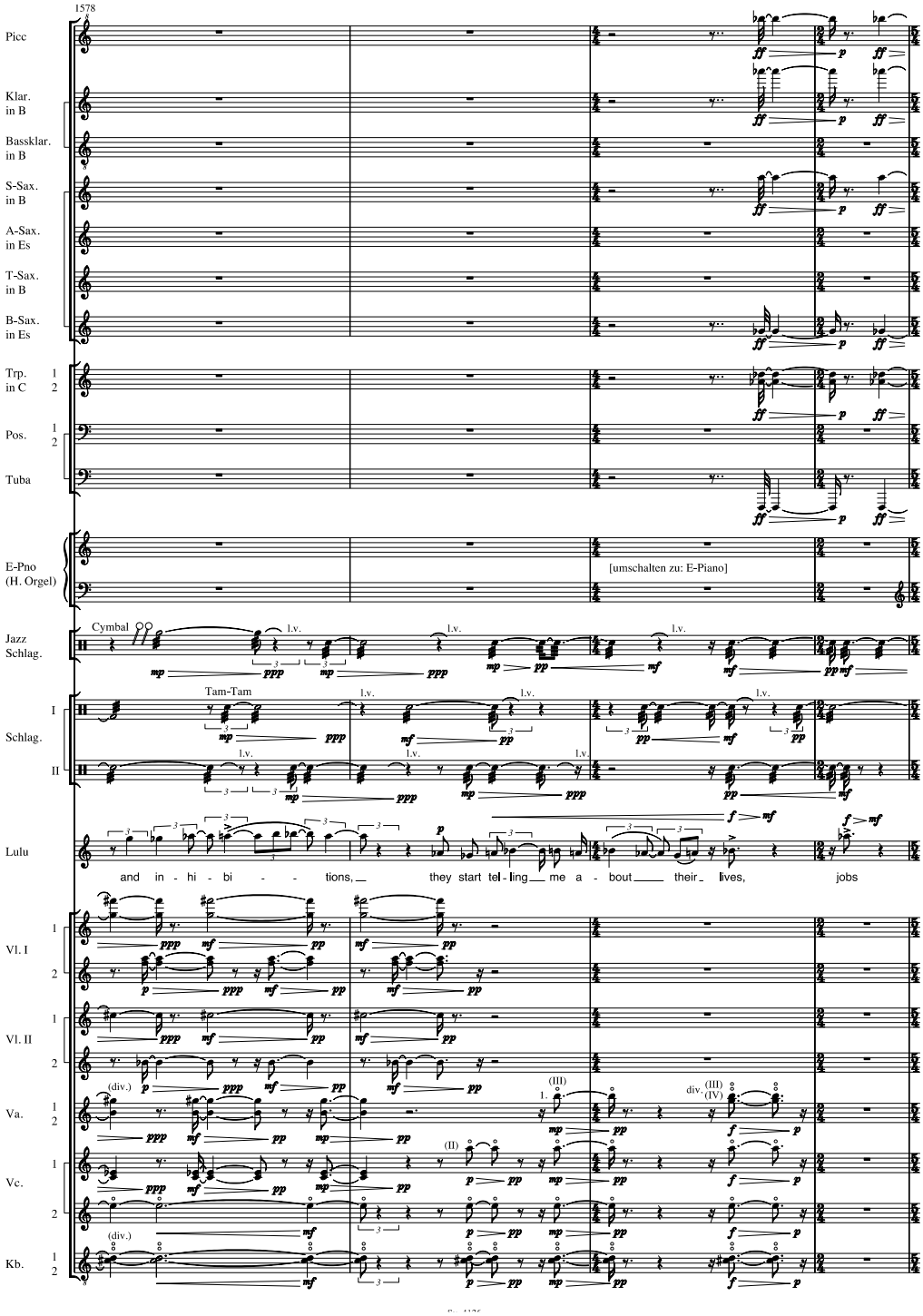
Figure 1. Scene with Marisol Montalvo as Lulu at Komische Oper Berlin (Freese, 2012)

In the following scenes, we witness Lulu's uneasiness intensifying even more, especially because one of her clients, The Banker, blackmails her for all the information she acquired about him. Throughout the 3rd act we encounter several confrontation scenes that Lulu

experiences with all of the other characters and parallel to that, Neuwirth consistently represents Lulu with a musical language that enhance our perception of her nervousness and rage. Her attitude is musically manifested in a vocal style reminiscent of German expressionism, characterized by an excessive chromaticism in her vocal line within a considerably high tessitura and narrow range, fluctuating between D5 and her highest note of B-flat5, with occasional melismas (Figure 2). Similarly, the sustained high-register tones in the orchestral accompaniment create dissonant clashes within a sparse texture, thereby amplifying her tense emotional state.


1568
Picc
Klar. in B
Bassklar. in B
S-Sax. in B
A-Sax. in Es
B-Sax. in Es
Trp. in C
senza sord.
Pos.
Tuba
E-Git.
E-Pno (H. Orgel)
Jazz Schlag.
Cymb.
gr. Tr.
Schlag.
Tam-Tam
Lulu
(annoyed)
(pochissimo vibrato)
I'm in deep trou - ble,
ossia:
I know too much.
Vl. I
Vl. II
Va.
Vc.
Kb.
div.
(a 2)


1574
Picc
Klar. in B
Bassklar. in B
S-Sax. in B
A-Sax. in Es
T-Sax. in B
B-Sax. in Es
Trp. in C
Pos.
Tuba
E-Git.
E-Pno (H. Orgel)
Jazz Schlag.
Schlag.
Lulu
(abgesetzt)
All these fine ba - stards, soon as they rid them-selves of their clo - thes
Vl. I
Vl. II
Va.
Vc.
Kb.
(div.)


1578
Picc
Klar. in B
Bassklar. in B
S-Sax. in B
A-Sax. in Es
T-Sax. in B
B-Sax. in Es
Trp. in C
Pos.
Tuba
E-Pno (H. Orgel)
[umschalten zu: E-Piano]
Jazz Schlag.
Cymbal
Schlag.
Tam-Tam
Lulu
and in - hi - bi - - tions, they start tel - ling me a - bout their lives, jobs
Vl. I
Vl. II
Va.
Vc.
Kb.

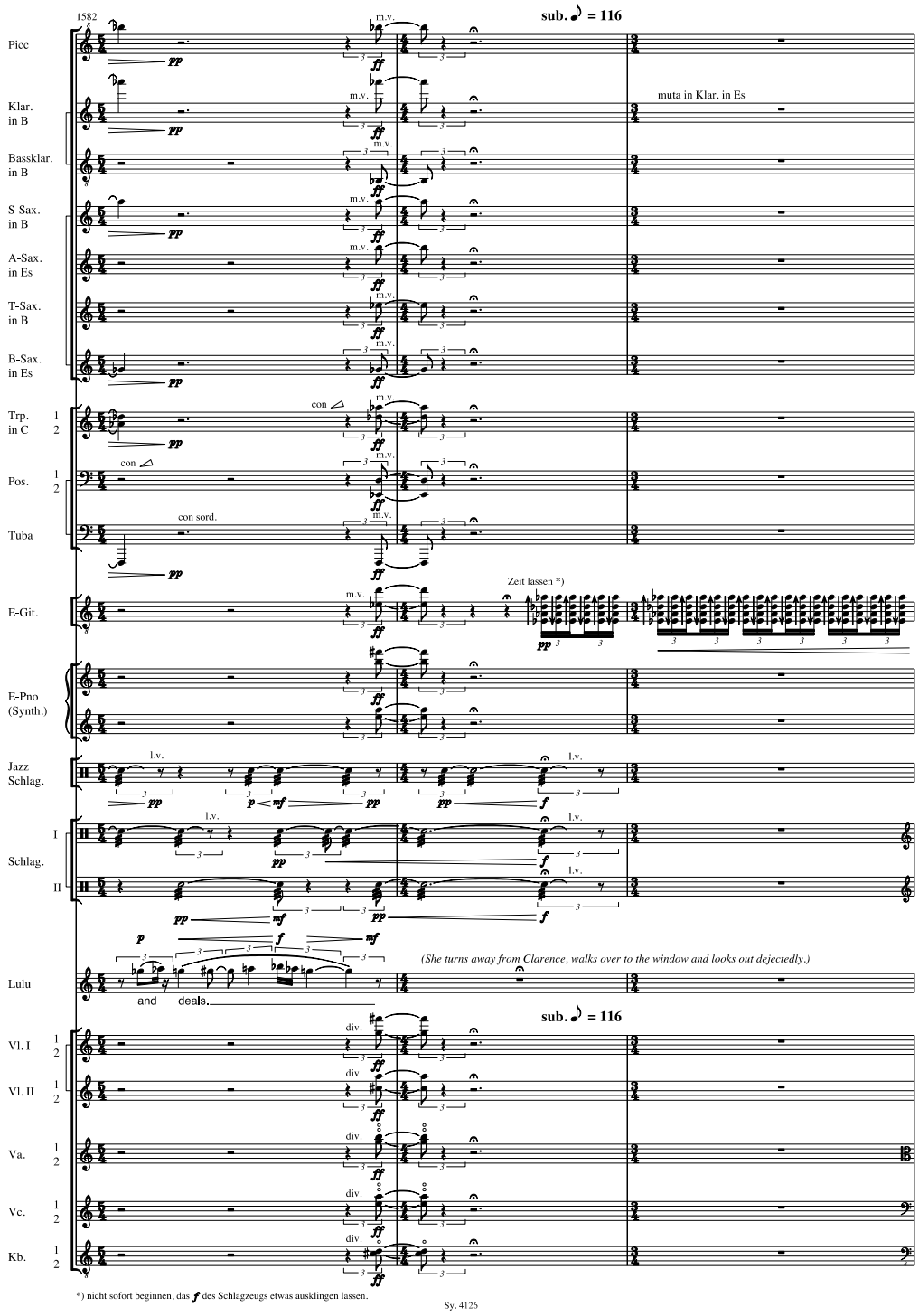


Figure 2. Lulu's vocal part, mm. 1568-1583 (Neuwirth, 2006-2012)

Eleanor & Lulu Confrontation

The Eleanor-Lulu encounter, which we can define as the climax of *American Lulu,* appears in the 3rd act (mm. 1729-1910). In this scene, we witness Eleanor's confident and nonchalant rejection of Lulu. In response to Geschwitz's altruistic love for Lulu, Eleanor chooses to be free from her because of Lulu's humiliating attitude towards Eleanor's queerness: "Look at you! How different you are from others! There is not enough to make a man out of you and you are too smart for a woman. That's why you are crazy! You'll never make it" (Neuwirth and Utz, 2012: 28). The dialogue continues as follows:

> **ELEANOR**
>
> *(Eleanor is stunned, but after a moment she recovers)*
>
> True, I am unable to exactly describe my private Eden, but this doesn't make my internal worlds less beautiful but more – even if they are sad.
>
> You think you're free 'cause you've money and power over others, but you exist through them! I was welcome as long as I was serving you. But all you've ever felt for me is contempt.
>
> **LULU**
>
> *(throws back her head, laughing disdainfully)*
>
> I don't give a damn about anyone! Get off your high horse! You're foolish and needy.
>
> **ELEANOR**
>
> You will not kill my free spirit! I've had it since I was young. Even wrote my own songs back then. True, I've always loved you, but never denied myself totally.
>
> *(Lulu merely smiles condescendingly. Eleanor forces a smile and calmly declares.)*
>
> I have to distance myself from you and refocus on my talents. I've finally found myself again. (Neuwirth and Utz, 2012: 28-29)

In the mentioned scene, the contrasting moods of the two characters are reflected in the music in the form of juxtapositions of different musical styles that follow each other with

sudden changes (Figure 4). These abrupt changes, one of which occurs with the entrance of Eleanor in measure 1744, immediately after Lulu's part, are characterized by the sudden appearance of a swing groove on the jazz drums, marking Eleanor's soul-like music, which unfolds until Lulu's second appearance in measure 1751. This unexpected shift in rhythmic feeling, immediately following Lulu's part, which includes an irregular metric organization with frequent syncopations and an unsteady pulse, contrasts with the steady swing groove of Eleanor's music. The juxtaposition also extends to the instrumentation: Lulu's parts are dominated by wind and string sections with sustained high-pitched sounds, in contrast to Eleanor's jazz band, which includes a rhythm and horn section and is characterized by melodic, soloistic gestures. These contrasting musical elements enhance the stark differences in the emotional states of the two characters throughout the scene, encouraging listeners to experience shifts in mood and serving as a powerful tool for narrative purposes.

As in the earlier parts of act III, Lulu's tense and angry mood is reflected also in her vocal part. Her ear-splitting vocal utterances, reminiscent of screams, along with the chromatic structure of her vocal part and dissonant leaps, give the impression of an imitation of Berg. This European musical language of Lulu recalls Sartre's "in-itself" as a symbol of the immanence and inauthenticity of her character. Neuwirth's portrayal of Lulu, characterized by a "white-masked" persona, maintains her agitated psychological state, which seems to be the result of the kind of alienation mentioned by Fanon (1952/1986)[8], until *American Lulu*'s finale. In contrast to Lulu, Eleanor's style, reminiscent of 1970s soul, is identified with her Black identity, hinting at her genuineness. Her blues scale-like vocal part is accompanied by a jazz band that includes electric guitar and piano, jazz drums and a horn section. Throughout the scene, the stark differences between characters' moods reveal themselves as distinct timbres and textures. As opposed to the lighter texture of Lulu's music, which is characterized by a bright, shimmering sound quality in the orchestral accompaniment,

[8] Frantz Fanon, a psychoanalyst and theorist, explores the psychological effects of colonialism in "Black Skin, White Masks", focusing on the impact of racism and Eurocentrism on the psyche of Black individuals. The notion of the "white mask" refers to the internalization of the values and norms of the dominant White culture by colonized and oppressed groups (Fanon, 1952/1986: 12-13). Fanon suggest that this internalization leads to an alienation from one's authentic self and results in psychological conflicts, such as neurosis (60).

Eleanor's parts consist of melodic gestures that foreground the electric guitar within a thicker texture. The tense psychological state of Lulu, which is also apparent in her vocal line as explained above, is intensified by the piercing, high-frequency sustained sounds in the wind and string sections, including harmonics, and bell-like gestures on the marimba, all of which together create an alerting effect. The melismatic phrasing and expressive use of dynamics in Eleanor's vocal part creates a speech-like singing quality that resembles gospel. The swing groove corresponds with her relaxed attitude towards Lulu, while her exuberant and resonant singing sympathizes with the spirit of soul. Neuwirth's decision to represent the character of Eleanor as a soul singer denotes Black consciousness and aligns with the political and cultural atmosphere of the era. Soul, as a cultural tradition beyond a musical style, flourished during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and shares similar concerns with the Black Arts Movement (Stephens, 1984: 21). As a generic term for Blackness (Ogbar, 2019: 110), soul denoted the themes of "unity, ethnic consciousness, self-acceptance and awareness" (Stephens, 1984: 41), concepts embraced by Black communities during the time. Eleanor's smooth, passionate and heartfelt attitude, which is a characteristic of soul music, brings to mind Aretha Franklin's songs emphasizing self-worth. As in her songs, Eleanor is aware of her self-worth and expects respect in her relationship with Lulu. Neuwirth emphasizes independence and self-reliance by constructing a self-determined Eleanor instead of Geschwitz, who was described by Berg as "another satellite of Lulu" (as cited in Perle, 1985: 240). In *American Lulu*, as in Berg's opera, Lulu, unable to escape her ill fate, is brutally murdered in the opera's finale, while the emancipated Eleanor, in contrast to Geschwitz, identifies with life as a symbol of existential transcendence.

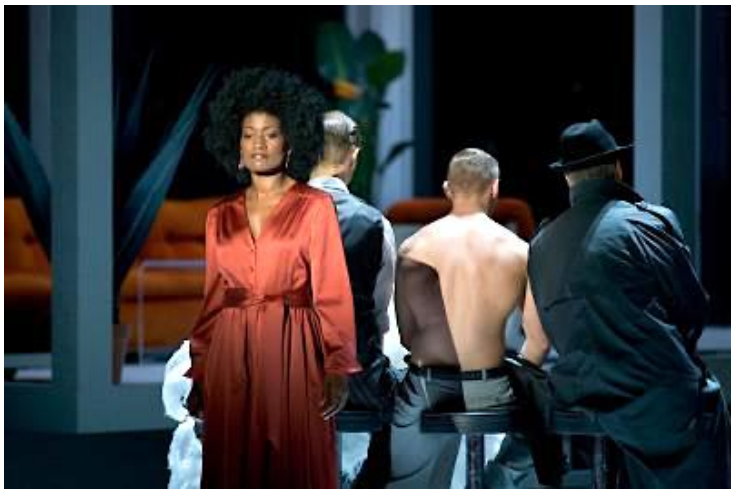
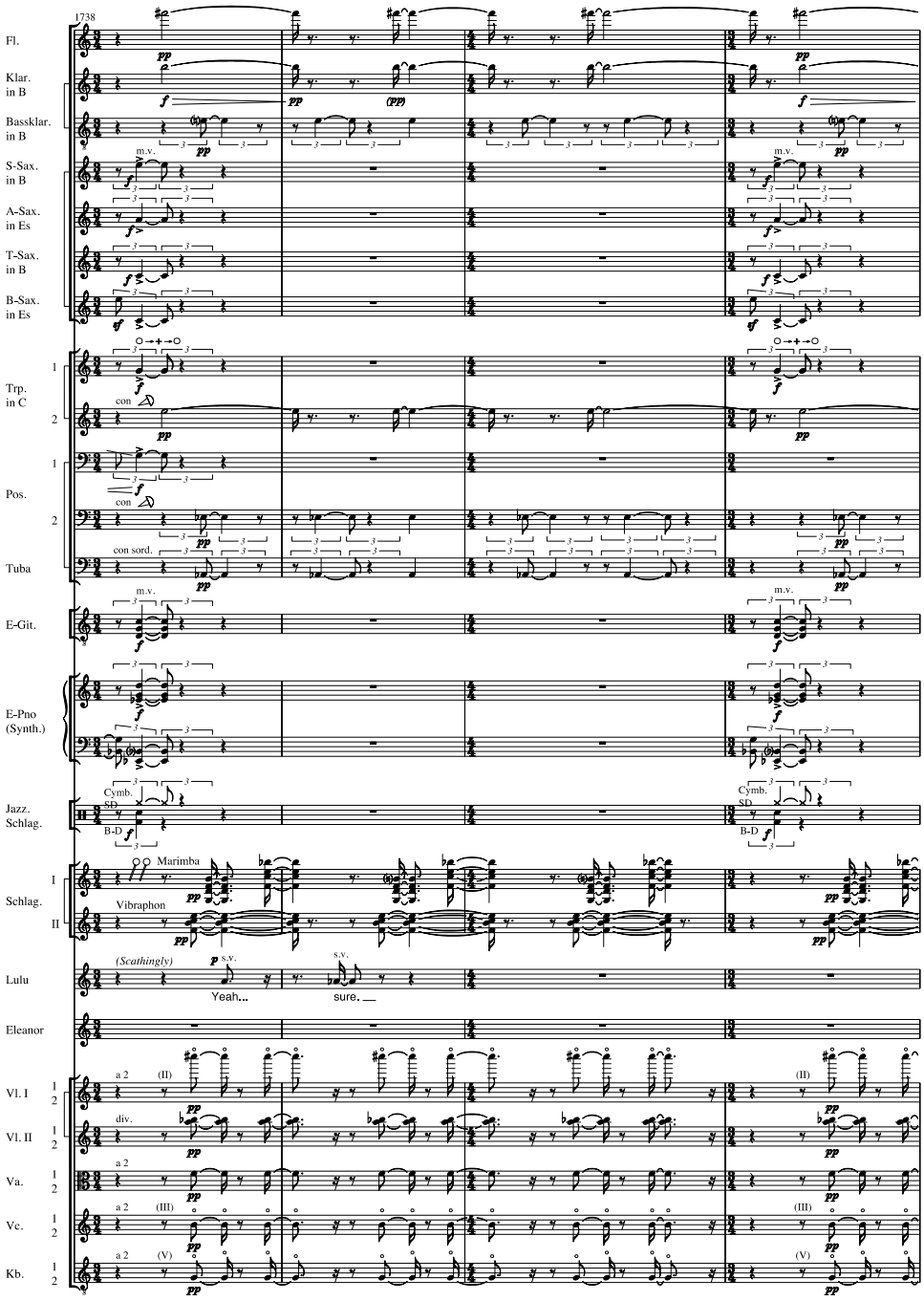
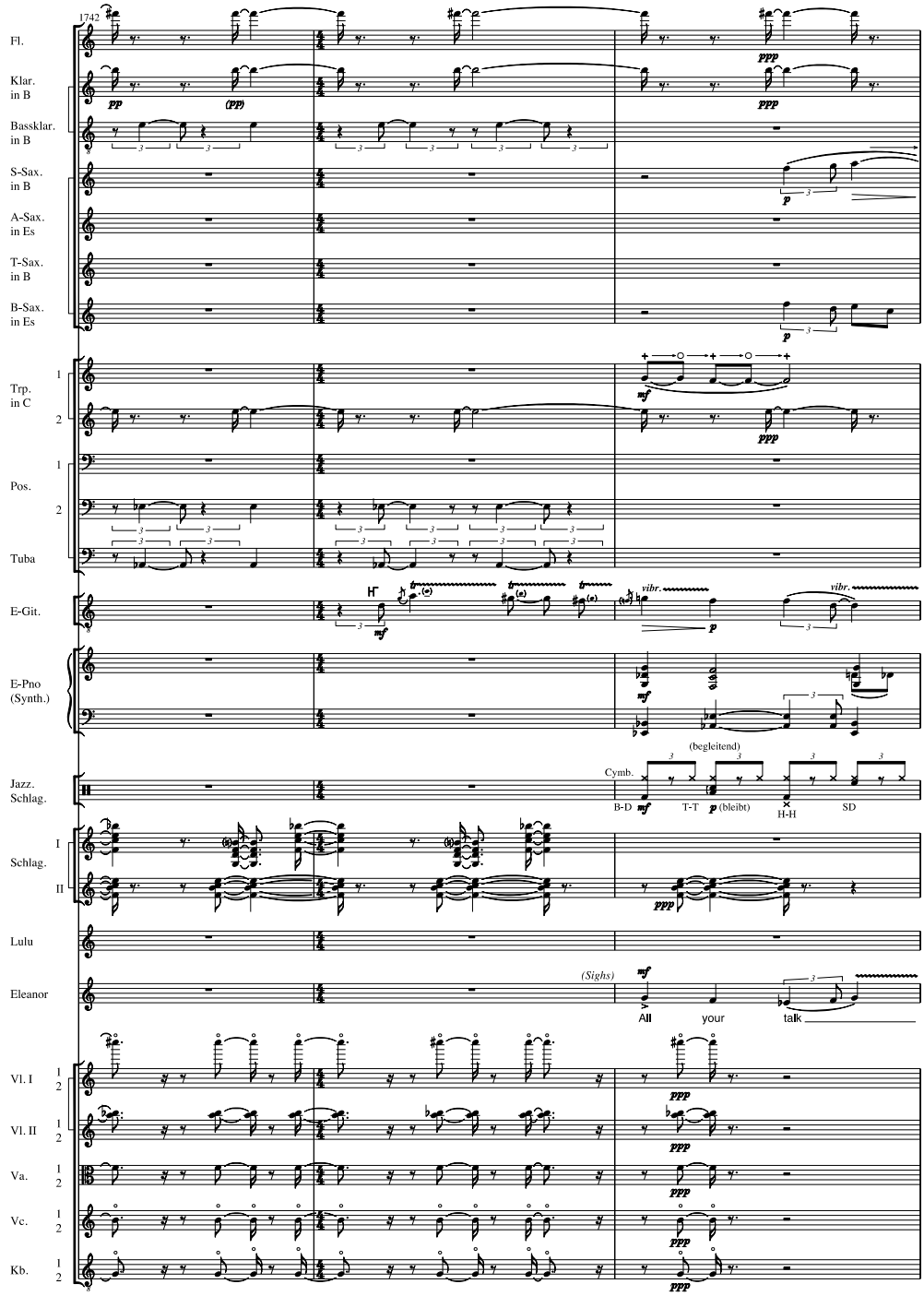
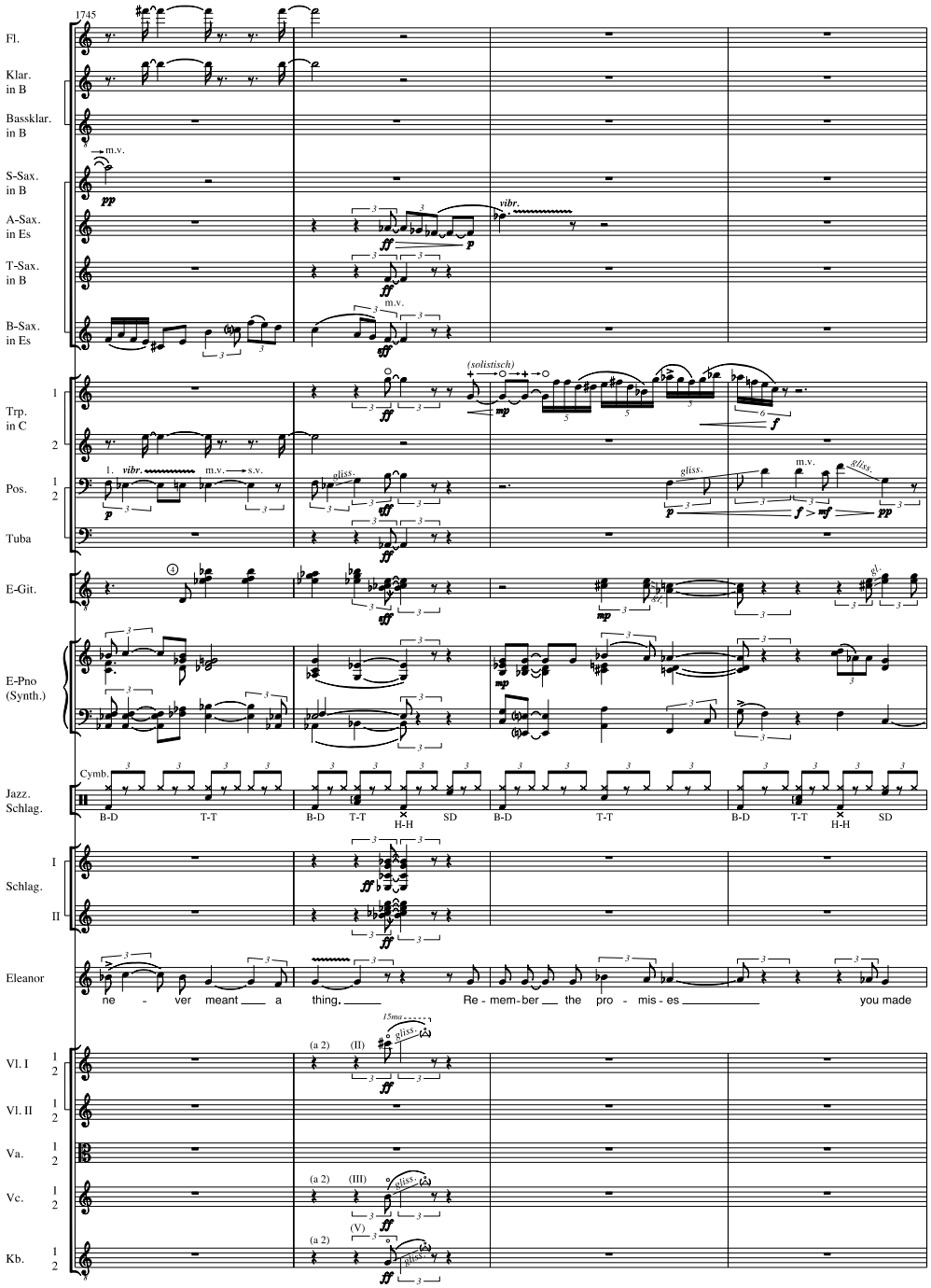


Figure 3. Scene with Della Miles as Eleanor at Komische Oper Berlin (Freese, 2012)


1738
Fl.
Klar. in B
Bassklar. in B
S-Sax. in B
A-Sax. in Es
T-Sax. in B
B-Sax. in Es
Trp. in C
Pos.
Tuba
con sord.
E-Git.
E-Pno (Synth.)
Jazz. Schlag.
Cymb.
SD
B-D
Marimba
Vibraphon
Schlag.
Lulu
(Scathingly)
Yeah...
sure.
Eleanor
Vl. I
Vl. II
Va.
Vc.
Kb.
m.v.
s.v.
div.
a 2


♩742
Fl.
Klar. in B
Bassklar. in B
S-Sax. in B
A-Sax. in Es
T-Sax. in B
B-Sax. in Es
Trp. in C
Pos.
Tuba
E-Git.
E-Pno (Synth.)
Jazz. Schlag.
Schlag.
Lulu
Eleanor
Vl. I
Vl. II
Va.
Vc.
Kb.
(begleitend)
Cymb.
B-D
T-T
(bleibt)
H-H
SD
(Sighs)
All
your
talk
vibr.


1745
Fl.
Klar. in B
Bassklar. in B
S-Sax. in B
A-Sax. in Es
T-Sax. in B
B-Sax. in Es
Trp. in C
Pos.
Tuba
E-Git.
E-Pno (Synth.)
Cymb.
Jazz. Schlag.
B-D
T-T
H-H
SD
Schlag.
Eleanor
ne - ver meant a thing. Re - mem - ber the pro - mis - es you made
Vl. I
Vl. II
Va.
Vc.
Kb.
m.v.
vibr.
gliss.
(solistisch)
(a 2)
(II)
(III)
(V)

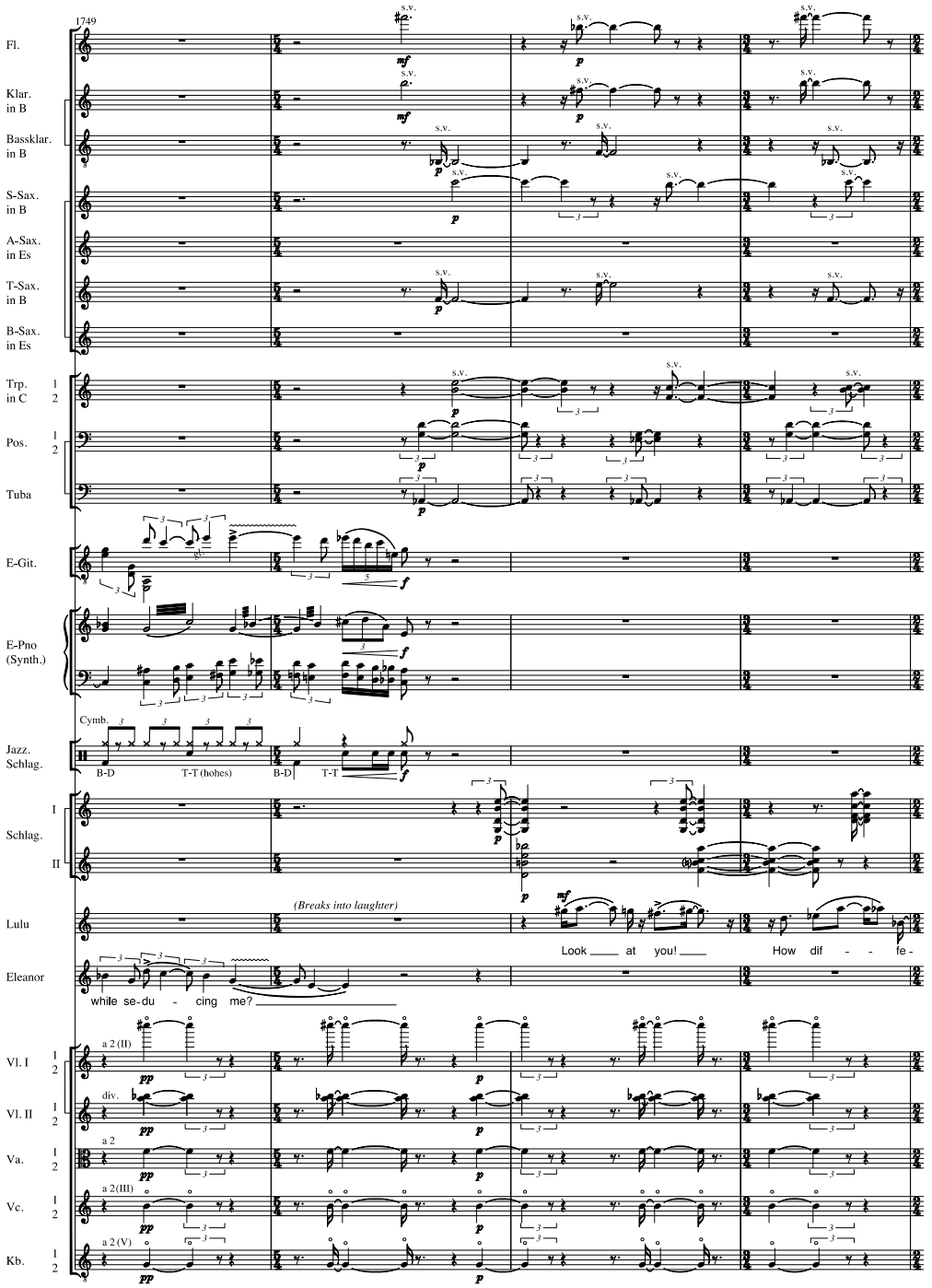


Figure 4. Excerpt from Eleanor & Lulu scene, mm. 1738-1752 (Neuwirth, 2006-2012)

In *American Lulu*, Eleanor's disaffection with Lulu is the focal point of the music theater. In this way Neuwirth puts Eleanor, instead of Lulu, at the foreground, and raises this crucial question: "But once again, what ultimately counts for us today is: Whose voice is heard?" (Neuwirth, 2011). Eleanor's soul music juxtaposed in a musical language reminiscent of Berg can be seen as an analogy to the question raised by the composer. It can also be considered as a comment on the dominance of post-serialist and sound-based approaches in contemporary classical music. Thus, the question can be reframed as "Whose music is heard?" Lulu's vocal parts that mimic serialist aesthetics (Hart, 2013: 130), or the direct and plain style of soul that is embodied by Eleanor? The question also seem to represent Neuwirth's position within the domain of new music, since her style is heavily shaped by popular music genres and themes that are outside of the so called classical "high" culture. Similarly, Neuwirth's path to becoming a renowned opera composer is also unconventional because, she is highly successful in the institutionally supported, male-dominated scene of opera production as a freelance composer, often subjected to sexism (Neuwirth, 2015). Parallel to Latham's perspective, wherein the author interprets Eleanor as the embodiment of Neuwirth's voice (2017: 308), I would argue that Eleanor's authenticity and autonomy in *American Lulu* seem to represent the composer herself.

Concerns about the Portrayal of Blackness

With her version of Berg's *Lulu*, Neuwirth challenges androcentric perspectives on woman operatic figures and emphasizes agency through her characterization of Eleanor and Lulu. Instead of Lulu, Eleanor represents the composer's ideal figure, symbolizing the qualities of self-realization, independency and genuineness. However, this idealization can be subjected to criticism since Neuwirth's treatment of Black experience contains some problematic aspects regarding its representation.

Collins asserts that historically women of African descent have been linked to a primal and wild sexuality, contributing to the portrayal of Black woman as "uncivilized". (2004: 27). Even though Neuwirth's intention in *American Lulu* is to draw attention to racism, discrimination and heterosexism, by recasting Lulu as African American, she recreates the

stereotype of the Black woman associated with wild sexuality that Collins mentions. Although the composer expresses her criticism of the women characters represented in operas in her writings, we do not encounter a Lulu figure that is very different from the original storyline. Wedekind's Lulu, who was fictionalized more than 100 years ago, is problematically reconstructed in *American Lulu* this time as a Black femme fatale. While Eleanor, Neuwirth's ideal character, clings to her identity as an artist, Lulu continues her path as a sex worker, and this is portrayed as a morally wrong choice. In the newly conceptualized opening of *American Lulu* we witness Lulu lamenting her choices: "… I have trashed my body and soul" (Neuwirth and Utz, 2012: 2). Why doesn't Neuwirth, a composer of her generation, who states that she is reinterpreting *Lulu* from a woman's point of view, portray a Lulu figure, diverging from the original characterization? How would a Black feminist interpret Berg's *Lulu*? Instead of the Eleanor-Lulu dichotomy, why do we not see the kind of solidarity based on strength? Why does Lulu's story end in death, as in the original story? Or, as Hart points out (2013: 137), what does Lulu's disemboweled corpse at the finale of Komische Oper production serve?

In *American Lulu*, Neuwirth portrays Black emancipation through the figure of Eleanor in an encouraging manner, yet she gives very little space to her character within the narrative. Similar to bell hooks' criticism of the romanticization of the difficulties faced by Black women in feminist theory (Hooks, 1990: 6), Eleanor's or Lulu's coping with the oppression and abuse is not included in the narrative. Although the sexual abuse experienced by Black women is emphasized through June Jordan poems in the *Black* sections, we do not encounter a narrative about how Eleanor copes with her rape by the Commissioner. Similarly, messages about Black liberation are conveyed through secondary voices or from a male perspective, such as through quotations from Martin Luther King's speeches, while statements from Black women activists of the period, such as Ella Baker or Elaine Brown, could have been included[9]. Moreover, in a narrative whose main theme is racial

[9] Here, I am specifically referring to Ella Baker and Elaine Brown, as Collins (2000: 7) points out, Black women activists have frequently faced challenges in expressing feminist ideas and have been underrepresented in leadership positions within Black organizations as a result of gender discrimination.

discrimination, which is set in the Civil Rights era, and treats the subject of the power of White men over Black women, race is not even mentioned in the relationships between the characters. In the context of this portrayal of romanticized Black experience, race appears to function as a means of emancipation through queerness, thereby creating a hierarchical perspective to intersectionality. As pointed out by Latham, the emancipation of White characters of Berg's opera, Lulu and Geschwitz, within the narrative of Black liberation constructs a fantasy of Blackness from the viewpoint of a White composer (2017: 313). In *American Lulu*, Neuwirth's primary critique is of the assimilated Black identity she constructs through Lulu. While Eleanor is heroized as an example of the "strong Black woman" stereotype encountered in White feminism mentioned by bell hooks (1990: 6), Lulu cannot escape death in Neuwirth's version as well this time because of the choices she makes according to her material interests. However, as Collins emphasizes, it should be seen as usual for Black individuals to take on particular stances, engage in struggles, and experience internal divisions based on their differing positions (2000: 24-25).

Reception

Neuwirth's reinterpretation of Berg's *Lulu*, widely regarded as a masterpiece of the operatic literature, has drawn negative criticism from some music critics, either as a bold move or with the sarcastic remark, "no one feels a need for such a thing" (Maddocks, 2013). In a similar vein, one reviewer questioned whether Neuwirth's *American Lulu* was a "worthwhile exercise" (Clements, 2012). The same critic interpreted Neuwirth's version as a betrayal of the masterpiece, describing *American Lulu* as an "aural mush" and Martin Luther King and June Jordan quotes as "muddle". In an interview, Neuwirth herself acknowledges that she expected criticism for her reworking of Berg's opera and willingly took the risk: "Berg's music is genius… With its rich musical language and construction, it's obsessed with the mythical figure of Lulu. In other artforms – visual art or film – it's accepted that it's possible to do rethinkings. But in classical music or new music, it's still a scandal" (as cited in Service, 2013). Such criticisms exemplify the notion of the monumentalizing of the artistic work attributed to the work-concept in Western art music, which is marked by a kind of anxiety and, at times, an exaggerated motivation for preservation. The *Werktreue* ideal,

which implies "being true or faithful to a work" (Goehr, 2007: 1), -perhaps more obedience than fidelity- also manifest itself in the approaches to musical performance in Western art music in which the performer's interpretation is seen as something to be controlled and policed by composers, music historians and critics. One of the best examples of this kind of approach can be found in Stravinksy's *Poetics of Music* where he asserts the role of the performer, in the division of labor between the composer and performer, as a medium (1947: 122). From this perspective, I see Neuwirth's attempt of reworking Berg's opera, despite its problematic aspects, as a positively provoking and courageous approach. At the same time, this attempt of Neuwirth epitomizes a postmodernist approach to the art work conceiving it as a fluid rather than solid phenomenon that is open to interpretation and reinterpretation. Moreover, since Berg's opera is an incomplete work -the 3rd act of *Lulu* exists only as a short-score-, it is a suitable example for reworking. Although it cannot be conceived as an entirely original composition, Friedrich Cerha's completion of act III which is based on Berg's sketches and annotations, conceived as standard for *Lulu* productions until today. Another version of Berg's act III is provided by German conductor and composer Eberhard Kloke, in which the performers have an option to shape scenes and dramatic content of the last act more freely. Another example is David Robert Coleman's reworking of Berg's *Lulu* with a recomposed 3rd act commissioned by Berlin State Opera in 2012. Similar to Neuwirth's conception, Coleman's orchestration in the last act drew upon the jazz band of the Berg's opera (Schmid, 2012).

The same critic who described *American Lulu* as an "aural mush" criticizes Neuwirth's rendition because the figure of Lulu is portrayed as being deprived of "humanity and vulnerability" (Clements, 2012). Femme fatale portrayals in literature, visual arts, and film often involve a duality inherent in this characterization, evoking both admiration and antipathy on the part of the spectator or reader. The desire to witness Lulu's vulnerability in Neuwirth's version, as noted by the aforementioned author, exemplifies a type of male fantasy often encountered in femme fatale depictions, where the woman is seen as inherently dangerous yet, at the same time, vulnerable and sensitive enough to be

controlled. This kind of a criticism justifies Neuwirth's critique of the male perspective in the portrayal of female characters in the operatic tradition, as well as composer's attempt to subvert the fantasy by reworking Berg's opera with a more realistic approach seen from the perspective of a woman.

Mark Berry (2014), in his book *After Wagner*, examines 20th century music-dramatic works from political and cultural-historical perspectives, with a short section on Neuwirth's *American Lulu* (264-266). Berry suggests, that the readings of Berg's *Lulu* usually tend to focus on existentialist issues, and that Neuwirth's version can be appreciated because it offers an interconnected perspective on the aspects of individuality and the social (265). This, I would argue, is a valid comment, but as I discussed in the previous section, Neuwirth's attempt to provide an intersectional perspective on identity, in this case the gender and race, has some problematic aspects, particularly because the idea of emancipation through queerness, represented by the character of Eleanor, overshadows the racial aspects and raises questions about Neuwirth's intention with the social context of the music theater. It is probably for that reason that some reviewers couldn't make sense of quotations by Martin Luther King's speeches (Loomis, 2012), which are interspersed throughout, without any direct connection to the actual storyline. As the original plot, Neuwirth's adaptation is based on Lulu's story, and therefore the connection between the theme of Black liberation and *Lulu* may seem incoherent in the eyes of the audience and of the critics. As stated in a review article on *American Lulu*'s performance in Vienna, the relevance of the social context with the storyline and characterizations as well as with the portrayal of Lulu and Geschwitz as African Americans, have little consequences in terms of content, lacking any reference to racial discrimination and Civil Rights Movement (Weidringer, 2014). As I mentioned before, Neuwirth's treatment of racial discrimination solely through King's speeches without referring to any women activists involved in the Black movements also attracts Berry's attention (2014: 266). As an example of that, the author cites Luigi Nono's opera *Intolleranza 1960*, in which Nono addresses oppression from an anti-capitalist perspective, incorporating statements by women representatives of liberation movements and revolutionaries.

In one of the reviews of the 2013 Edinburgh production, I came across the surprising information that *American Lulu* was receiving a new co-production by John Fulljames with Scottish Opera and the Opera Group, following its world premiere in Berlin, at the Komische Oper in 2012. In this new production, according to the author of the review article, the Lulu figure was portrayed as an activist fighting for civil rights (Service, 2013) Although it was not mentioned in the article, I assume that this major revision probably occurred because of the negative criticism the Komische Oper production with Serebrennikov received. The review article doesn't mention whether Neuwirth made any changes to the plot, and since I didn't have the opportunity to see this new production, I cannot imagine how the Lulu figure, who was characterized primarily by her oblivious attitude to social circumstances in the Komische Oper production on which my research was based, was reimagined as a completely opposite character, namely, as a freedom fighter. Apparently, the problematic aspects of the representation of Blackness in *American Lulu*, also caught Neuwirth's attention, and with these revisions in the production, I assume that the composer decided to place more emphasis on the Black experience, a theme that was overlooked in Berlin premier.

Conclusion

Olga Neuwirth's *American Lulu* reimagines Alban Berg's *Lulu* within the context of Civil Rights Movement and with her depiction of queer characters Lulu and Eleanor as African Americans presents an intersectional approach to race, gender and sexuality. Through their characterizations, Neuwirth advocates for agency, a perspective I analyzed in this article through the lens of existentialist thought, drawing from theories of de Beauvoir and Sartre. In Neuwirth's adaptation, as the protagonist of the opera, Eleanor embodies existentialist qualities of authenticity and transcendence, whereas Lulu as contrary to that, evokes the notion of "in-itself" representing the immanent, the inauthentic and the Other. Reflecting their characterizations, we encounter two contrasting musical representations. Lulu's newly composed music in act III evokes German expressionism, serving as a reference to Alban Berg. On the other hand, Eleanor's musical style, reminiscent of 1970s soul, resonates with

her Black identity and implies her authenticity, as opposed to Lulu's adherence to European musical language. Neuwirth's portrayal of Lulu, with her demise in the finale, cannot escape her fate as was the case in original story, while Eleanor, with her rejection of Lulu emerges as the character endowed with survival.

In *American Lulu*, Neuwirth's intention to confront racism and heterosexism is evident, yet her portrayal of Blackness retains some problematic stereotypes, such as the depiction of hypersexualized Black woman represented by Lulu. While Neuwirth advocates for Black self-determination through Eleanor, the composer's portrayal of the Eleanor figure remains limited, situating it to the narrative's periphery. Furthermore, the narrative's failure to address both characters' strategies for resisting oppression romanticizes Black experience. Additionally, Neuwirth delivers messages about Black liberation through a secondary lens, without any direct articulation from characters. In *American* Lulu, Neuwirth's emphasis on self-determination appears to originate from her perspective as a European composer, juxtaposing the "white-masked" Black woman represented by Lulu against Eleanor, who emerges as figure similar to the narrative of the strong Black woman within White feminist discourse.

Through this article, my objective was to contribute to the field of music scholarship by examination of an operatic work, *American Lulu*, which has received limited attention within the field of opera studies. A critical reading of *American Lulu* reveals both its progressive aspects and problematic engagement with race, inviting discussion from the perspective of critical race theory, with a particular emphasis on intersectionality.

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