

Alma Mahler: The Beauty of Vienna

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Alma – the Beauty of Vienna

What made Alma so beautiful? The answer is quite simple. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. All of the men who loved Alma were products of Viennese cultural society, bewitched by her magic. Whether artists, sculptors, writers, or architects, all saw in Alma the embodiment of the society that they strove to fully belong to. Alma was beautiful to them, because she was the female embodiment of the lustful, intelligent, and artistic society of their day.

Alma was also the embodiment of the paradox of Vienna. Able to simultaneously convince herself of her love for one man and one man only, while also knowing that there were several others that she could, and would, direct her love at in the next instant. Strong, independent, and musically talented as she was, she made only a small contribution to the world of music, as she gave it up young for the world of men.

Part I, Alma’s Youth:

Alma was born in 1879 to Emil Jakob Schindler and Anna Sofie Bergen. Alma’s mother had several affairs during Alma’s childhood. Alma adored her father, who was an artist. Her father encouraged her interests in music and literature. Alma was devoted to music, despite the fact that she was deaf in one ear.

Alma’s father died in 1892, when Alma was 13, and her mother immediately remarried the man she was currently having an affair with – Carl Moll. Alma blamed many of her relational failures on her mother’s example. Alma’s half-sister, Grete, was born from Julius Victor Berger, yet another of her mother’s lovers.

Alma’s stepfather Moll was a Secessionist, and there were many meetings of prominent

secessionist members at her house. This was how 17-year-old Alma met and fell in love with Klimt.

“I still love him as much as ever. I felt it when he came in, felt it as my heart began to pound, as my joy overflowed. He’s he one appointed for me.... My soul thrills to him, I desire him with every fiber of my body. I long for him as for a savior, a deliverer, my only redeemer! Were I to have met him alone – today – I could vouch for nothing.” (Alma’s Diary, 243-44)

Klimt was Alma’s first love and first kiss. Yet, whether they went farther than just a kiss is unclear.

As Alma recorded in her diary, “We both knew that such an opportunity would never arise again, both knew we’d never belong together. The tacit agreement was: live for the moment. ... Wonderful memories, to cherish for the rest of my life.” (Alma’s Diary, p. 152)

When Moll found out about 17 year old Alma’s affair, he swiftly ended the relationship.

Part II, Nietzsche and Max Burckhard:

Max Burckhard, director of the Viennese Burgtheater, was another of Alma’s admirers during her youth. Together they followed Nietzsche, a philosopher and strong anti-Semite of the day.

Nietzsche taught that strong people should break free from the chains of traditional morality tying them down, and exert their power over the weak, promoting themselves no matter the cost to others. This strongly influenced who Alma was, as she trod upon her many unsuccessful lovers without remorse.

“What is the meaning of morality, what is morality? Tradition. A felling handed down from one generation to the next. Surely

everyone should strive to imitate Nature, to abandon themselves to those they love (of the opposite sex). A woman must subordinate herself. A man must rule. I don't give a damn for morality. It simply doesn't exist – it's something with which you are brought up, an illusion drummed into you. I loathe all sermonizers – and all morality. For I love Nature. And morality is unnatural. Freedom – that's what I long for and can never attain. O spirit of complete freedom, O Ubermensch, you don't yet exist, your day is still to come. Let that day dawn! O day of great wisdom, O day of freedom, of complete freedom: even if I never live to see you, I greet you at least from afar – as a champion of spiritual freedom – of the great future.” (Alma's Diary, p. 244)

The intelligent Alma would go to bed with a book on Nietzsche or Darwin when most upset about men.

Part III, Alexander von Zemlinsky:

Despite Alma's anti-Semitism, Alma had mostly Jewish lovers, or as she referred to them, “little Jews”.

One of these was Alexander von Zemlinsky, whom Alma met when she was 20. He was young, and considered to be one of the most promising young Viennese musicians.

Alma wrote in her diary : “A caricature – chinless, small, with bulging eyes and a maniacal way of conducting, yet he pleased me exceptionally.”

Alma, a proficient pianist and composer, began to take composition lessons from him. Soon, she was madly in love with Zemlinsky, and he returned her passion. They had an extremely intense relationship, and Alma would allow Zemlinsky everything but that one thing he wanted most, which drove Zemlinsky nearly insane.

“How far will it go!? I drank from a man's mouth, kissed him all over his hands, his head. I love him! – He kept repeating softly: I'm going crazy, Alma. We both quivered with boundless longing. I long to bear him a child. I want to be a wife to him, as never a woman has ever been before. To marry for money – what does that mean? You only live once - and you have to enjoy life while you can. And I can get more out of life in simple, modest style with my beloved husband than in luxury with some smug, boring Jew-boy (man). “ (Alma's Diary, p. 442)

Yet, the fact that Zemlinsky was a Jew troubled Alma.

“I would love him even more – freer, less inhibitedly – if that ominous word ‘marriage’ were not beckoning from afar. For the idea of marrying him, of bearing his children – little, degenerate Jew-kids... On the other hand, I would be perpetuating his name. I love the word ‘Zemlinsky’.” (Alma's Diary, p. 421)

Alma feelings were quickly shifted one day at Berta Zekermandl's salon, where she met Mahler in 1901.

Part IV, Gustav Mahler:

Gustav Mahler had a difficult childhood. He was raised by a self-educated father of “fierce vitality”, and a delicate mother from a high social standing. His father came to resent the social status of his mother, and mistreated and abused her. This caused Mahler to dislike his father, and adore his mother. Mahler had a slight limp, an “unconscious imitation” of his mother's lameness, as well as a weak heart that he inherited from her, which ultimately caused his death. Many of his 11 brothers and sisters became sick and died.

Mahler's father was a Jewish freethinker, and thus Mahler inherited the Jewish ethnicity, but not the Jewish faith. He converted to

Catholicism and was baptized in 1897, which made it easier for him to be appointed to his future Viennese Opera Director position.

“This unsettling early background may explain the nervous tension, the irony and skepticism, the obsession with death, and the unremitting quest to discover some meaning in life that was to pervade Mahler’s life and music. But it does not explain the prodigious energy, intellectual power, and inflexibility of purpose that carried him to the heights as both a master conductor and a composer. The positive elements in his makeup stemmed no doubt from his father’s side of the family, as did his great physical vitality. Despite his inherited heart trouble, he was an extremely active man—a ruthless musical director, a tireless swimmer, and an indefatigable mountain walker.”

<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustav-Mahler>

Mahler began composing at the age of four, and made his debut at age ten. He was accepted to the Vienna Conservatory at fifteen, where he obtained his degree. He was an incredible and acclaimed conductor, and became artistic director of the Vienna Court Opera in 1897, at age 37. This was one of the most powerful music positions at the time. Despite this, his compositions were not accepted by the public. Mahler composed ten main symphonies, as well as other romantic compositions.

Mahler devoted his summers to composing, and his years to conducting. He composed *Tragic Symphony No. 6*, and he ended the piece with three hammer blows. He said that those three blows symbolized the three blows that fell on him in 1907: his resignation was demanded at the Vienna Opera, his daughter Maria died, and a doctor diagnosed his fatal heart disease.

At the age of 47, after being fired from his position, he began conducting in America. He

became the conductor of the Philadelphia Society of New York. Yet he still returned to Vienna each summer to compose, where he died in 1911.

“In terms of the personal content of his art, it can be said of Mahler, more than of any other composer, that he lived out the spiritual torment of disinherited modern man in his art, and that the man is the music.”

<http://www.britannica.com/biography/Gustav-Mahler>

Part V, The Decision:

The choice between Zemlinsky and Mahler was a very hard decision for Alma.

“I’m on the horns of a *terrible* dilemma. I keep repeating the words ‘my beloved’ and follow them with ‘Alex’. *Can* I really love Mahler as he deserves and as I am really able? Shall I ever understand his art, and he mine!? With Alex the sympathy is mutual. He loves every *note* of me. Mahler just said: This is really serious. This I didn’t expect!” (Alma’s Diary, p. 448)

Alma’s feelings had the ability to sway like the wind, based on her current mood, and which lover she had seen most recently. This caused her life, and her romantic decisions, to be a roller coaster of emotion. It certainly did not help that at the same time that Zemlinsky and Mahler pursued her, Burckhard chased her, and the respectable and handsome Muhr proposed to her. Not only this, but she felt herself to be in love with all of those men at once. This time in her life serves as a perfect example of the turmoil of Alma’s overall existence. This decision was further complicated by Mahler’s controlling personality, and the fact that he viewed Alma’s composing as a competition, rather than looking at it as a benefit to their relationship.

“He (Burkhard) advised me against Gustav, saying that when two strong personalities come together, they usually fight until one of them is forced into submission. And that would probably be me – which he would regret. Must I be subdued? I can and will not.” (Alma’s Diary, p. 459)

As Alma debated whether or not to marry Mahler, she received an interesting letter from him. Both Alma and Mahler were composers, and Mahler could not bear the idea of his future wife competing with him in the world of composition. So, he wrote Alma a 20 page long letter, asking her to give up composing due to her love for him, and to devote her life to serving him.

Alma said that if Mahler had been a good composer, like her previous lover Zemlinsky, she would not have minded. But, she said that she did not like Mahler’s work anyway, and he did not like her work. So, she did not want to give it up. Despite this conflict, Alma acquiesced to Mahler’s wishes.

“This morning I reread his letter – and suddenly I felt such warmth. What if I were to *renounce* (my music) *out of love* for him?... I must live *entirely* for him, to make him happy.” (Alma’s Diary, p. 462)

Part VI, The Decision Alma-Mahler:

Alma and Mahler were married on March 9, 1902. Their friends were shocked. The age difference, health difficulty, and difference in personalities was extreme.

“Justi told Mama that Gustav kept saying: Isn’t it a crime that I – the autumn - should bind myself to the spring? She will forgo her summer.” (Alma’s Diary, p. 464)

Alma served Mahler extensively. Ten months a year Alma would walk her husband home from his work at the Hofoper, even when she was

pregnant and it was cold. Every summer, they would go together to Toblach, on the Italian-Austrian border, where Mahler would compose.

Their 1st daughter, Maria, was born on November 2, 1902. Their 2nd daughter, Anna Justina, was born June 1st, 1904.

Despite the children, Alma and Mahler’s relationship began to develop conflict, and Alma began to feel bored – as if she was Mahler’s housekeeper. Alma began flirting with Hans Pfitzner, and began to get together with Zemlinsky again.

After Mahler was fired from his Viennese Court Opera Director post, he went to the New York Opera for an appointment there. Alma came, yet she felt alone and forgotten. When they returned to Vienna, she began spending extensive time away from home at resorts. At one of her times away, she had a flamboyant affair with architect Walter Gropius, whom she would later marry.

Gropius “mistakenly” sent one of his love letters for Alma to Mahler. Mahler was devastated. Despite this, Alma continued the affair in secret.

Part VII, The Freudian Solution:

In 1910, Mahler went to Freud, who said that each member of the couple suffered from the Oedipus complex. Mahler loved his mother, who had been mistreated by his father, and was sad and lonely. Alma loved her artistic father, who had been mistreated by her mother due to her mother’s many affairs. Thus, each member of the couple was subconsciously treating the other one as their beloved parents had been treated. They subconsciously wanted their spouse to resemble that parent.

After this revelation, their relationship changed somewhat. Mahler dedicated his 8th symphony

to Alma. He also published five of Alma's earlier compositions, and begged Alma to go back to composing, as Freud instructed him to do. He felt horribly selfish for making Alma stop composing. Despite this, she never did, and her composing career remained cut short from the beginning of their marriage.

Mahler died May 18, 1911, at the age of 51. He was buried next to their daughter Maria.

Part VIII, The "Alma Problem":

Alma falsified nearly all of her letters from Mahler, and destroyed nearly all of her letters to Mahler, so that subsequent generations would not judge her.

She also went back and edited her diaries. She created what is known as the "Alma Problem". Mahler, one of Vienna's greatest conductors, is mainly known from Alma's edited interpretations of him. Thus, the present world does not have a clear picture of either Alma or Mahler—we can only see what Alma wants us to see.

Alma Mahler and Oskar Kokoschka (1912 – 1915)

(Contribution, Rachel Patel)

After the death of Gustav Mahler, Alma had short relationships with composer Franz Schreker, and Mahler's doctor, Joseph Fraenkel who asked for her hand in marriage. She rejected the proposal. A biologist, Paul Krammerer, asked Alma to assist him in his study over praying mantises, which she agreed to. After approximately 6 months, Alma ended the relationship. Why, you ask? Paul Krammerer threatened to shoot himself at Mahler's grave (Spring 1912).

Oskar Kokoschka was a "revolutionary, eccentric and *provocateur*, as well as a brilliant painter," (. In April of 1912, Carl Moll called Oskar Kokoschka to paint his beloved stepdaughter, Alma. He instantly fell in love. "How beautiful she was, how seductive behind her mourning veil! I was bewitched by her!" (http://www.alma-mahler.at/enq/almas_life/almas_life2.html). He wrote her a love letter in April of 1912, and wrote her 400 more after that.

Through the relationship, Alma dealt with Kokoschka's unpredictable outbursts of feeling, including unconditional love, but also much jealousy towards her friends and Gustav Mahler. Before Mahler's 9th Symphony premiered in the same year, Alma and Oskar had an argument. He questioned why Alma cared so much about the work of a man who was more a stranger than he had been a husband. Before things got better, Alma became pregnant with Kokoschka. Sadly, the baby was terminated just a couple months into the pregnancy. Kokoschka was devastated, so much so, that he kept the blood ridden cloth of his wife with him. This event became the topic of many of Kokoschka's drawings and paintings.

Kokoschka tried to persuade Alma into marrying him, however, the closer Kokoschka got to Alma, the more she withdrew from him. The relationship couldn't function for much further. Oskar noticed this. In 1913, he painted "Bride of the Wind" where he was convinced that they were "united for eternity," (http://www.alma-mahler.at/enq/almas_life/almas_life2.html)

In May of 1914, Alma lamented to her diary that the relationship was over, "*I would like to settle up with Oskar. He no longer suits my life. He drags me back into the realm of the libidinal. I can't do anything with that any more. And however sweet and helpless that big baby is, he is also unreliable and indeed treacherous as a man. I must tear him out of my heart! The stake is embedded deep in my flesh. I know that I am sick because of him - have been sick for years - and have been unable to tear myself away. Now, the moment is there. Away with him! - My nerves are shattered - my imagination ruined. What fiend sent him to me?*" (Alma's Diary).

Alma continuously called Kokoschka a coward until he signed up for the war service after that. In December 1914, he was recruited into the No. 15 Dragoons Regiment, the most elite Calvary regiment of the Austrian Monarchy. Ironically, he sold his painting "Bride of the Wind" in order to pay for his horse for the Calvary.

In August of 1915, Oskar was severely injured on the Russian Front. He requested the presence of Alma at his sick bed, but she did not care enough to go. "*The whole thing doesn't affect me very much. I don't really believe in his injuries. I just don't believe this person at all anymore.*" (Alma's Diary).

Besides all his paintings and drawings of Alma, nothing testifies more to the loss he felt than the life-sized doll he made of his beloved. In

1918, he asked Hermine Moos, a Munich doll maker, to create a very life-like doll to console him over his loss; the doll was very similar to Alma's size and body, down to the most intimate details. The doll, however, was not preserved, and was destroyed in Dresden at Kokoschka's studio in 1919.

Alma Mahler and Walter Gropius (1915 – 1920)

(Contribution, Rachel Patel)

Alma's relationship with Walter Gropius is weaved through her years spent with Kokoschka and Mahler as well. Walter Gropius, now one of the pioneering masters of modern architecture, was not so famous during the time he was with Alma.

Alma and Oskar's relationship was ongoing when Alma contacted Gropius again. In February of 1915, Alma, along with her friend Lilly traveled to Berlin to meet him. By August that same year, she married Walter Gropius. According to Alma, Gropius was the only man who was her "racial equivalent." During the time of her marriage to Walter, Alma turned her attention back toward Gustav Mahler's musical legacy. Alma looked at her famous dead husband, and then back at Gropius and thought Walter needed to be higher on the social ladder; Alma wanted Walter to be equivalent to her in social class standard.

In 1916, Alma gave birth to Manon Alma Anna Justine Caroline Gropius (later on in her years, Manon dies at age 19 of polio). The social stature of her husband did not come to mind then, after the birth of Manon as she says, *"His spirit, my body! The consummation of us both must give rise to a demigod!" (Alma's Diary).*

During the First World War, social activity carried on at Alma's Salon in

Elisabethenstrasse. Composers, artists, painters, writers, conductors, and even actors all gathered regularly at her salon to discuss interests and inspirations and aspirations and all things aesthetically appealing.

In 1917, the writer Franz Blei brought along Franz Werfel to the salon. This is the first encounter Alma has with this lyricist at the time. She doesn't find Werfel very attractive at the time but she is intrigued by his interest in her music, opposite of Gropius, her husband. He begins to show up at the salon more frequently as he and Alma write more music together.

While still married to Gropius, Alma becomes pregnant with Werfel's child in 1918. The child, however, is born prematurely. Franz was unable to control his unsatisfied lust and forcefully pushed the baby out of his beloved's womb in a bloodbath.

The baby, Martin Carl Johannes, suffered from hydrocephalus and passed away just ten months after the fact. Walter Gropius found out about the baby by overhearing a conversation Alma and Franz were having on the telephone and forced himself to accept the fact that the child was not his.

In 1920, Alma Mahler and Walter Gropius ended their relationship in divorce. By this time, Alma's and Franz's relationship had already been public, however, Walter Gropius refused to believe anything else. He believed that he himself was to blame for the failure of his marriage.

Later, Gropius found even more interest in architecture and became a key player in the architecture of the modern years and became a significant part of the Bauhaus movement.

Contribution: Ricardo Martinez

Alma Mahler with Franz Werfel

Franz Werfel was a Jewish Novelist, play writer, and poet. Alma Mahler first met Franz Werfel at her salon in Vienna in fall of 1917. At first Alma described Werfel as "fat bow-legged Jew with bulging lips." Franz was 11 years younger than her. Soon Alma would sleep with Franz in his room at hotel Bristol. In the Early 1918 Alma became pregnant, who was still with Gropius, by Franz Werfel. Franz had a strong desire for the baby that he forced it out of Alma's womb. The baby was born prematurely. Ten months later baby Martin passed away due to hydrocephalus. Before Baby Martin was born, Gropius thought he was the father until he overheard Alma talking on the phone with Franz one night. In 1922 Alma and Franz bought a house in Venice (Italy). On 6 July 1929 the couple got married in a civil ceremony at the Vienna City Hall. Around 1930 while still with Franz, Alma made a new friend named Johannes Hollnsteiner who was a professor of theology at the University of Vienna. It was reported that Alma had rented an apartment for that affair.

In 1938 Alma and Franz moved to France due to the Germans taking over. At the end of May 1940, the couple was no longer safe in France. Alma and Franz left their house in Sanary-sur-mer. They were contacted by Varian Fly an emissary of the Emergency Rescue Committee. Fly arranged their journey to Spain. From Spain, The couple traveled to Portugal and then boarded a ship for New York City. While in New York, Alma and Franz stayed at the St. Moritz Hotel. At the end of December the Couple Moved to California and found a

house at 6900 Los Tilos Road in Hollywood. The Werfels' house became her new "salon" where emigrants in Los Angeles met. Her guest included Thomas Mann, Arnold Schonberg, Lion Feuchtwanger, Igor Strawinsky, and many more. March 1941, the couple went to Mexico in order to re-enter the United States as immigrants. After their visitor's visas expired they applied for U.S citizenship. In fall of 1942 purchased a new house in Beverly Hills. Franz wrote his best-selling novel "*The Song of Bernadette*," which was made into a prize winning film in 1943. On Sept 13, 1943 Franz suffered from a heart attack which left him unable to finish some of his work. Although he never recovered from the first heart attack, in August 1945 he suffered another heart attack that killed him. With Franz sudden death, Alma first tried to finish his unfinished work. Her and William Melnitz (Franz's secretary) worked together to produce a typescript for publications.

At the end of 1951 Alma moved to New York City. She had bought four small residential apartments which she rented out and reserved two floors for herself. She sold her house in Beverly Hills. In her later years Alma continued to play a public role in connection with the musical legacy of Gustav Mahler. She became a rich widow again with royalties from Werfel's publications and profited from extensive writings he left behind. On December 11, 1964 Alma Mahler-Werfel died in New York at the age of 85. Her body was buried in the Grinzing section of Vienna (same cemetery as her first husband Gustav Mahler)

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