



Alma Mahler in 1909

ALMA

MAHLER, MATER AND MINX

GAVIN PLUMLEY

While Gustav Mahler's Vienna is to be found on the Ringstrasse, specifically at the Hofoper (now the State Opera), Alma Mahler's true Vienna is situated on the city's limits. Her home, before she married Mahler, was the Hohe Warte, a small hill in Döbling, the 19th district (close to Beethoven's former retreat in Heiligenstadt). This bucolic knoll may now seem like the periphery, but it had a major impact on Vienna's culture at the turn of the last century. And it was here that Mahler came a-courting in 1901.

Alma had not been living on the Hohe Warte for long. The villa in which she resided with her mother Anna and her painter stepfather Carl Moll had only recently been completed by Josef Hoffmann, a founding member of the Secession and the mastermind behind the Wiener Werkstätte. This was a 'seceded' space, positioned at a suitable distance from Vienna's imperial heartland, and a decidedly comfortable one at that, an early, brilliant example of Hoffmann's domestic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the culmination of which would be the Palais Stoclet in Brussels. But as well as offering a fusion of architectural and visual arts, the Villa Moll was the site of actual meetings between the city's pianists, composers and theatre directors, alongside Secession habitués such as Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser and Joseph Olbrich.

These characters provided the backdrop to Alma's early years. Born in 1879, she was coming of age when the Moll family moved to the Hohe Warte, by which time Alma was readily joining and, indeed, emulating her parents' circle. Her appetite for matters artistic was as astounding as it was voracious. Editing her 'suites' of diaries, in which she recorded her reading, her trips to the theatre and her increasingly wide knowledge of music, Antony Beaumont wrote that 'even before her years with Mahler, Alma's world was immense and to annotate it exhaustively would have amounted to writing a new cultural and social history of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna'.

In many ways, Alma's cultural pursuits were a refuge, following the loss of her father, Emil Schindler. An esteemed landscape painter, favoured at court, he died on 9 August 1892 due to an intestinal blockage, which was mistaken for cramps caused by cholera (then epidemic in Central Europe). While Alma's mother quickly moved on to marry Moll, a student of her late husband, Alma grieved deeply and disappeared into her reading, as well as into her musical studies with Josef Labor, the blind organist who also taught



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A detail from Anna Moll, *am Schreibtisch Sitzend* [c.1903] oil on canvas by Carl Moll (GAP)

Alma frequently parroted the inveterate anti-Semitism of the Moll household – ‘his appearance at our house provoked a chorus of dismay’ – yet she continued to be rebelliously attracted to the Sephardic Zemlinsky, fortified in her aims by his friendships with Schoenberg and *Jung Wien*. The influence of such forces is already evident in Alma’s earliest songs, which she rushed to share with Zemlinsky, including the barely-veiled eroticism of ‘Waldseligkeit’, setting a text by Richard Dehmel (the poet behind Schoenberg’s controversial *Verklärte Nacht*).

Alma sought Zemlinsky’s approval for 18 continuous months, becoming peevish when this ‘wonderful fellow’ was late or failed to turn up at the Hohe Warte. But everything changed at the end of 1901, when Alma transferred her affections to a much more important musical celebrity: Gustav Mahler. Their introduction was formally made through Berta Zuckerkandl, a shrewd and vivacious bridging post between Vienna’s imperial core and its bourgeois, Secessionist margins. In fact, Alma and Gustav had first met briefly in the Salzkammergut in 1899, where Mahler had gone to compose, yet it was at a Zuckerkandl dinner party,

Arnold Schoenberg. She discovered Wagner and memorized vast passages from the music dramas, sitting at the piano singing Brünnhilde and Siegfried, Isolde and Tristan to an imaginary audience. By the time she met Mahler in 1901, Alma was therefore already deeply versed in contemporary repertoire.

In matters romantic, too, Alma was no neophyte. Lacking a father figure, she formed strong bonds with her stepfather’s friends. Her attachments to Max Burckhard, director of the Burgtheater, and Gustav Klimt began as intellectual fascinations, but the sexual interests of both men – to say nothing of Alma’s own appetite – soon proved problematic. Alma was quite willing to accept Klimt’s advances, though her mother was quick to quash the affair during the summer of 1899, no doubt feeling it was inappropriate for her daughter to begin a relationship with one of her husband’s closest allies. While Alma was still writing ‘Klimt, my beloved, come to me’ in her diary in March 1900, it was with another *fin-de-siècle* figure that she now formed a close connection: Alexander Zemlinsky. ‘He’s dreadfully ugly, almost chinless – yet I find him quite entralling.’



Decorative details from Josef Hoffmann’s Villa Moll I on the Hohe Warte (GAP)

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ANTHONY BEAUMONT

Mahler, who entirely dictated the relationship's parameters. Furthermore, he derided Alma's indulgence within Secessionist Vienna. 'You have spent your entire youth – your whole life, in other words', he wrote from Dresden that December, 'in danger of being stifled by certain friends who have accompanied you, taken you by the hand and misled you'. Having dismissed Zemlinsky, Klimt and Burckhard, among others, Mahler then outlined how his music should be paramount in any future marriage.

You write of "your" music and "my" music. Forgive me, but I cannot remain silent! [...] I find myself in the curious position of having to compare my music – in a certain sense – with yours. I have to defend my music, which you actually do not know and certainly do not yet understand, against yours, and show it in its true light. Surely, Alma, you will not consider me vain, and believe me, this is the first time I have ever discussed my music with someone who had not found the right approach to it. From now on, would you be able to regard my music as if it were your own? For the moment, I would prefer not to talk specifically of your music – let me return to that later. Let me speak in general terms. A husband and wife who are both composers: how do you envisage that? Such a strange relationship between rivals: do you have any idea how ridiculous it would appear, can you imagine the loss of self-respect it would later cause us both? If, at a time when you should be attending to household duties or fetching me something I urgently needed, or if, as you wrote, you wish to relieve me of life's trivia – if at such a moment you were befallen by "inspiration": what then? Don't get me wrong! I don't want you to believe that I take the philistine view of marital relationships, which sees a woman as some sort of diversion, with additional duties as her husband's housekeeper. Surely you wouldn't expect me to feel or think that way? But one thing is certain: if we are to be happy together, you will have to be "as I need you".

on 7 November 1901, that the two were formally introduced. The evening featured a typically impressive guest list. Berta's sister Sophie was present, whom Mahler had met in Paris and who was the wife of Paul Clemenceau, brother of the future French prime minister. Opposite Mahler were Klimt and Burckhard, Alma's closest friends, as well as Berta and her husband Emil, an esteemed Hungarian-Austrian anatomist.


Despite the glamorous company and surroundings – the Zuckerkandls were keen adherents of *Jugendstil* design – it was not an easy dinner, as Alma and Gustav quickly began an argument about Zemlinsky's music. Both proved somewhat outspoken: Alma through guilt over her waning feelings; and Gustav wilfully overlooking that he had accepted and decided to conduct the premiere of Zemlinsky's *Es war einmal* at the Hofoper in January 1900. Alma was nonetheless transfixed, confessing in her diary that 'I liked him enormously'. 'To be sure, he's very keyed up. He was like a bull in a china shop. He's pure oxygen: you'll burn if you go too close.'

She did not heed the warning and quickly entered into an unequal partnership with

By any account, this is a strange document, yet what is even more extraordinary is that Alma



Gustav Mahler, Alma Mahler, Maria Moll (Alma's stepsister) and Anna Mahler at the Pragser Wildsee (South Tyrol) in 1910


 GUSTAV OPENED
 OUT AND UNSETTLED
 MY LIFE IN SUCH A
 WAY THAT I AM ONLY
 NOW BEGINNING TO
 RETURN ONCE AGAIN
 TO THE LIFE I GAVE
 UP YEARS AGO.


 ALMA MAHLER

accepted its terms and married Mahler in March 1902.

The resulting denial of Alma's creative outlet was to unbalance the marriage significantly. By that summer, she was already complaining, 'I've sunk to the level of a housekeeper!', disproving Mahler's previous claims of not taking 'the philistine view of marital relationships'. Still, Alma took to the role of dutiful wife and mother, with their first daughter Maria, nicknamed 'Putzi', born in November 1902 and the birth of Anna following in June 1904. Mahler meanwhile kept to his previous regimen, conducting during the opera and concert season and then disappearing into his composing hut for hours, even days, when the summer arrived.

Alma was similarly abandoned to her grief when Putzi died as the result of scarlet fever and diphtheria in the summer of 1907. While Mahler quickly returned to Vienna, Alma left their Maiernigg home and spent the remaining summer months in Toblach (where they would

likewise settle for their holidays in 1908, 1909 and 1910). But the couple would never rekindle what constituted their relationship and Alma turned to others for support, not least her mother, before finding comfort in the arms of the young Walter Gropius, with whom she embarked on a tempestuous affair in 1910, all the time encouraged by the Molls.

It was during August that year that Mahler finally discovered the truth about the Gropius relationship, due to an incorrectly addressed letter. In response, he scrawled anguished annotations on the short score of his (incomplete) Tenth Symphony, before belatedly acknowledging Alma's own creative needs and urging his publishers, Universal Edition, to issue a collection of her songs. But it was too late, both professionally for Alma and for their relationship, long typified by the locked door between their bedrooms.

Mahler sought the counsel of Sigmund Freud – 'it was as if one were digging a single deep



Alma Mahler with her daughters, Maria (standing) and Anna (seated), in 1906



Liebespaar (c.1913)
oil on canvas by
Koloman Moser (GAP)

tunnel through a building complex' was the psychoanalyst's later appraisal of the composer's 'compulsive neurosis' – and, secretly, Alma continued her liaison with Gropius (even during the world premiere of the Eighth Symphony in Munich that September), while trying to explain to Mahler why their marriage had failed.

I told him I had longed for his love year after year and that he, in his fanatical concentration on his own life, had simply overlooked me. As I spoke, he felt for the first time that something is owed to the person with whom one's life has once been linked. [...] This strange marriage with Gustav Mahler – this abstraction – had left me inwardly a virgin for the first ten years of my conscious life. I love Mahler's mind, but his body was vague to me.

After 'this strange marriage' and Mahler's death, Alma and Gropius were fully united, though there were affairs with others too, beginning, somewhat pathologically, with composer Franz Schreker, followed by Oskar Kokoschka and Franz Werfel.

Alma also vented her vexations in print, wielding a mighty pen over the story of Mahler's life. Events and emotional responses were reconstructed according to her agenda, though Mahler's appallingly self-absorbed behaviour often endorsed such readings, with contrary proof being elusive. Having balanced these and other accounts of the marriage, however, it is difficult now to blame Alma entirely for her behaviour. A highly intelligent woman, with a dizzying knowledge of the culture of her time, she was denied creative agency by the father figure she had so desperately craved. Her attempt to transform perceptions of Mahler and her other lovers' lives (and reputations) – she famously kept Kokoschka in semi-aroused anticipation for months until eventually deeming his portrait



Walter Gropius

of her, *Die Windsbraut*, a masterpiece – was the vengeance of an unfulfilled creator. Left solely with the hope of being represented in her partners' work, she insisted upon an authorial presence. Alma was a good composer – she was probably not a great composer – but regardless of the quality of her embryonic talent at the turn of the last century, nobody should have to live 'as I need you'. 🍷

GAVIN PLUMLEY is a writer and broadcaster specializing in the music and culture of Central Europe. He appears frequently on BBC Radio 3 and has written for newspapers, magazines and opera and concert programmes worldwide. Gavin is the commissioning editor of English-language programme notes for the Salzburg Festival and commissioning editor for the Oxford Lieder Festival.