

Nature, Heart, Life: The Life and Works of Alma Mahler

By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the early life of Austrian composer Alma Mahler (1879-1964), the conditions of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, her perception in academic literature, and her surviving works. Her 1911 set, *Fünf Lieder*, is studied in detail and subjected to brief harmonic analysis. Her compositional practices are compared to her teacher, Alexander Zemlinsky.

The first section provides historical context for Alma's early life in Vienna. The arts scene that Mahler's family was so immersed in is discussed along with the Vienna Secession and general attitudes and expectations surrounding women in society. The second section is a biographical portrait of the young Alma Mahler from her birth until her marriage to famed composer and conductor Gustav Mahler. That marriage and its effects on Alma's life and composition are also discussed in some detail, as well as Alma's perception in academia since her death, including the so-called Alma Problem. The final section is a study of Alma as a composer, including descriptions of her compositional style, analysis of her lieder, and an argument for the recognition of her music alongside the works of Zemlinsky and Schoenberg.

Nature, Heart, Life: The Life and Works of Alma Mahler

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Introduction

This thesis will study the life and works of composer Alma Schindler, later Alma Mahler-Gropius-Werfel, with thorough exploration of historical and cultural context. Surviving works will be harmonically and textually analyzed and compared to similar works of other prominent Viennese *fin-de-siècle* composers, with special attention paid to the music that was written before her marriage to Gustav Mahler in 1902. Historically, she has been known merely as the wife of Gustav Mahler. It is only in recent years that real attention has been paid to her music.

Europe saw strides towards female empowerment in the arts as early as 1857 with the establishment of The Society of Female Artists in England, which was followed by the establishment of similar societies in France, Germany, and finally Vienna—The *Verein der Schriftstellerinnen und Künstlerinnen in Wien* (Association of Women Writers and Artists in Vienna) was formed in 1885 “to encourage and promote the work of creative women in literature and the fine arts since such women were accorded neither acceptance by their male colleagues nor respect from the public at large”.¹ Indeed, derogatory attitudes towards women were culturally ingrained and commonly held in Vienna. Arthur Schopenhauer, who molded nineteenth century culture with his writings on philosophy and music, expressed his misogynistic views in the 1851 essay “On Women,” which defines women as weak, dishonest, and unintelligent. This kind of unashamed misogyny was the cultural norm, and it comes as no surprise that Alma was not afforded the same artistic support as her male colleagues such as

¹ Harriman, Helga H. “Women Writers and Artists in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna.” *Modern Austrian Literature* 26, no. 1 (1993), 1.

Alexander Zemlinsky and Arnold Schoenberg, despite the similarities in their music. Even Alma herself internalized these views, writing critically of herself and her work—“Yes, it is a curse to be a girl, for one cannot overcome one’s defects”—and the works of other women.

Alma Mahler, née Schindler, carries a long list of titles and almost as many surnames. Though Alma was unmarried during her most productive years of study and composition, she is most well-known in the literature as Alma Mahler, and for the sake of clarity, this thesis will also refer to her as such. Her life is the subject of countless books and a handful of movies, and her music carries all the depth and complexities of the *fin-de-siècle* style that bridged the gap between Romanticism and Modernism. As an upper-middle class socialite in the heart of Vienna, it was expected she be musically literate, but any serious and professional pursuit of composing was considered unbecoming. Alma was born to a successful painter Emil Schindler and was well-connected in the Viennese art and music scene from her youth. Her family was close with a number of prominent cultural figures such as Max Burckhard and Gustav Klimt. She had the privilege of studying the arts and found a passion for composing in her private studies with Josef Labor and Alexander von Zemlinsky.

In most publications about her life, much attention is paid to Alma’s romantic relationships. Historically, discussion of her life and works have been tainted by misogyny and lack (or disregard) of context—for example, Sarah Connolly described the thirty-six year old Gustav Klimt’s sexual pursuit of the seventeen year old Alma as a romantic relationship and references Alma’s “affairs” with Berg and Schoenberg, though I’ve found little evidence for

anything beyond an acquaintanceship between the composers.² She has been portrayed as the morally bankrupt vixen, muse, femme fatale, and at worst, blatant liar.³ Often, she is listed merely as the wife of Gustav Mahler. Gustav Mahler scholars have been so critical and skeptical of her writings that they refer to them with the term, “the Alma Problem,” which discredits all of her written accounts of Mahler’s life. The nature and validity of the “Alma Problem” will be dissected and examined in this paper.

This thesis aims to examine her life and compare her works to her more well-remembered contemporaries, namely Schoenberg and Zemlinsky. This analysis will reveal that Alma was more than wife, mother, socialite, and music—it will show that, before anything, she was a skilled composer who navigated complex harmony and is deserving of a place in history along other Viennese *fin-de-siècle* composers. As with other composers of the day, the Vienna Secession greatly influenced Alma’s work. This paper will study the Secession as both art society and cultural movement and point out its influences in Alma’s music.

Before her marriage to Gustav Mahler, Alma was an active composer. Her diaries paint a picture of a bright young woman with a deep understanding of and passion for the arts. Many pieces beyond what survives today are mentioned, both named and unnamed, and scarcely an entry goes by without some mention of composing, music lessons, or piano practice. She

² Sarah Connolly, “The Alma Problem,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, December 2, 2010), <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/dec/02/alma-schindler-problem-gustav-mahler>.

³ Newman, Nancy. “#AlmaToo: The Art of Being Believed.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 75, no. 1 (2022): 54. Newman details the many ways Gustav Mahler’s biographer, Henry-Louis de la Grange, attacked Alma’s character in his writings. François Grioud, too, points to Alma’s perceived character flaws in his 1991 biography of her, *Alma Mahler or the Art of Being Loved*, painting her as the “ruthless queen” and Gustav Mahler as her “obedient subject.” As recently as 2020, the UK newspaper *The Telegraph* published an article on Alma titled, “The ultimate femme fatale: Alma Mahler, the muse who seduced Vienna.”

frequented musical performances and art exhibitions and aspired to compose and even premiere larger works.

Alma's musical achievements were not taken as seriously as the work of her contemporaries, and today they are often forgotten, sentenced to the same performance frequency as the works of Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann. There are exceptions, of course, as interest in female composers has grown in recent years. The works of Susan McClary have been endlessly valuable in the study of Alma Mahler's life and music. Cate Haste's 2019 biography, *Passionate Spirit: The Life of Alma Mahler*, has also been a detailed and unbiased resource.

Though Alma had the support and privilege of an artistic and well-connected family and was ambitious about her career in music, there was little support for women composers at the turn of the century. Feminist movements were only just beginning to sprout in Europe, and even if Alma were able to publish more music during her lifetime, she likely would not have been able to make a career out of composing. When Gustav Mahler demanded she stop composing upon their engagement, Alma relented. I will explore some of the details surrounding this infamous arrangement between Alma and Gustav, the letter that triggered it, and some possible explanations as to why Alma set aside her ambitions to marry Gustav.

Alma's studies with Zemlinsky will also be examined in regard to her own compositional style. The diaries, again, are a valuable resource in this research, as they often go into detail about her personal relationships and her compositional practices. Publication details and the circumstances surrounding these compositions will be presented along with a broad analysis of each piece. *Fünf Lieder*, her first published collection of songs, will be subject to harmonic,

formal, and textual analysis. Each of these pieces is harmonically complex and a perfect example of the *fin-de-siècle* style, simultaneously pulling from Romantic traditions and forging ahead into Modernism, which will provide a basis for the argument that Alma's works deserve a place in the early twentieth century canon among those of more remembered and respected composers of the time.

I. Historical Context

To understand Alma Mahler's life and compositional achievements, it is first necessary to understand the social conditions of the time. Attitudes towards women and their place in the world would change drastically over the course of the 20th century, but when Alma was growing up and starting to compose, many Victorian era ideals persisted. Though Alma was independent and strong-willed, she was nonetheless held back by the conditions of her time and status.

Born in 1879, Alma became a young woman in the thick of the *fin-de-siècle* movement in Vienna. The departure from Romanticism into Modernism in music, and from the Victorian to the progressive, would greatly influence Alma's works and philosophies.

Century's End: Fin de Siècle and the Vienna Secession

Fin de Siècle is a term often used to describe the cultural movements at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Merriam-Webster defines *fin de siècle* as “of, relating to, or characteristic of the close of the 19th century and especially its literary and artistic climate of sophistication, world-weariness, and fashionable despair,” and though the term is French, it is broadly used for Europe as a whole.⁴

This period between the Romantic and Modern eras is somewhat resistant to classification. In the years leading up to World War I, composers found themselves competing with the Classical canon, and there was no uniform harmonic language. Much like today, audiences and musicians revered the classics: “[...] musicians and audiences in the early 1900s

⁴ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “fin de siècle,” accessed May 2, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fin%20de%20si%C3%A8cle>.

expected that most concert music they performed or heard would be at least a generation old, and they judged new music by the standards of the classics already enshrined in the repertoire”.⁵

There is a rich diversity in the compositions of this transitional period at the end of the old century and the beginning of the new as artists and composers struggled to find their footing in the face of social change.

The Vienna Secession was formed by modern artists in response to the predominant preference for neo-classical styles. One of the Secession’s goals was to elevate the visual arts to the same cultural prominence as music in Vienna. Existing institutions in Vienna were resistant to modernist styles that began to develop at the end of the nineteenth century. The two leading visual art institutions in nineteenth-century Vienna were *Die Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien* (The Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna), established in 1692, and the *Vienna Künstlerhaus*, home to the Vienna Artists’ Society, established in 1861. In the nineteenth century, the *Künstlerhaus* was the premiere exhibition spot but remained in the grip of the Naturalism movement long into the nineteenth century. In 1896, after years of exclusion and the re-election of a conservative president, a group of artists led by Gustav Klimt seceded from the *Künstlerhaus* and formed their own society: The Vienna Secession.⁶ The Secession was not confined to any one art style, but took a pluralist approach. Though often associated with the *Jugendstil* style,⁷ the Secession fostered its own style that was the product of many, embodying the German (Wagnerian) ideal of the *Gesamtkunswerk*—a total work of art.

The *Secessionsgebäude*—Secession building—itself rejected the Classical architecture along the Ringstrasse in Vienna, but embraced a more modern design. The architect, Josef Olbrich, was himself a member of the Secession. The face of the building is white, symmetrical,

⁵ Burkholder, *A History of Western Music*, 779.

⁶ Rosenman, Roberto. “The Vienna Secession - A History.” *Vienna Secession (Website)*: 2023

⁷ The *Jugendstil* style was the German counterpart to the more well-known French *Art Nouveau* style.

and without windows (see Fig. 1). Above the entrance is gold accent work surrounding a carving of three gorgons, and above these is the Secession's motto carved into stone: *Der Zeit ihre Kunst. Der Kunst ihre Freiheit*: "To each time its art. To art its freedom." Atop the building sits its most striking feature, a dome of golden leaves colloquially called the "golden cabbage." *Ver Sacrum* is spelled in golden letters to the left of the entrance, the title of the Secession's magazine, Latin for "sacred spring"⁸ and a reference to the ancient Roman city of the same name, the "undisputed world capital of the visual arts."⁹

In their effort to make the Viennese public more aware of visual arts, Secessionists branched out from paintings and architecture into interior, fashion, and furniture design. Their efforts would contribute to the development of the Jugendstil style: "Thanks to the Secession's efforts, visual design became a vital part of every Viennese home - be it through a wallpaper pattern, the design of a liquor cabinet, or the cut of a new ball gown."¹⁰

⁸ "Ver Sacrum." The Vienna Secession, September 9, 2020. <https://www.theviennasecession.com/ver-sacrum/>.

⁹ Celenza, Anna Harwell. "Music and the Vienna Secession: 1897-1902." *Music in Art* 29, no. 1/2 (2004): 204.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 205.



Fig. 1: Josef Maria Olbrich, Secession Building, Vienna 1897–98 (photo: John Lord, CC BY 2.0)

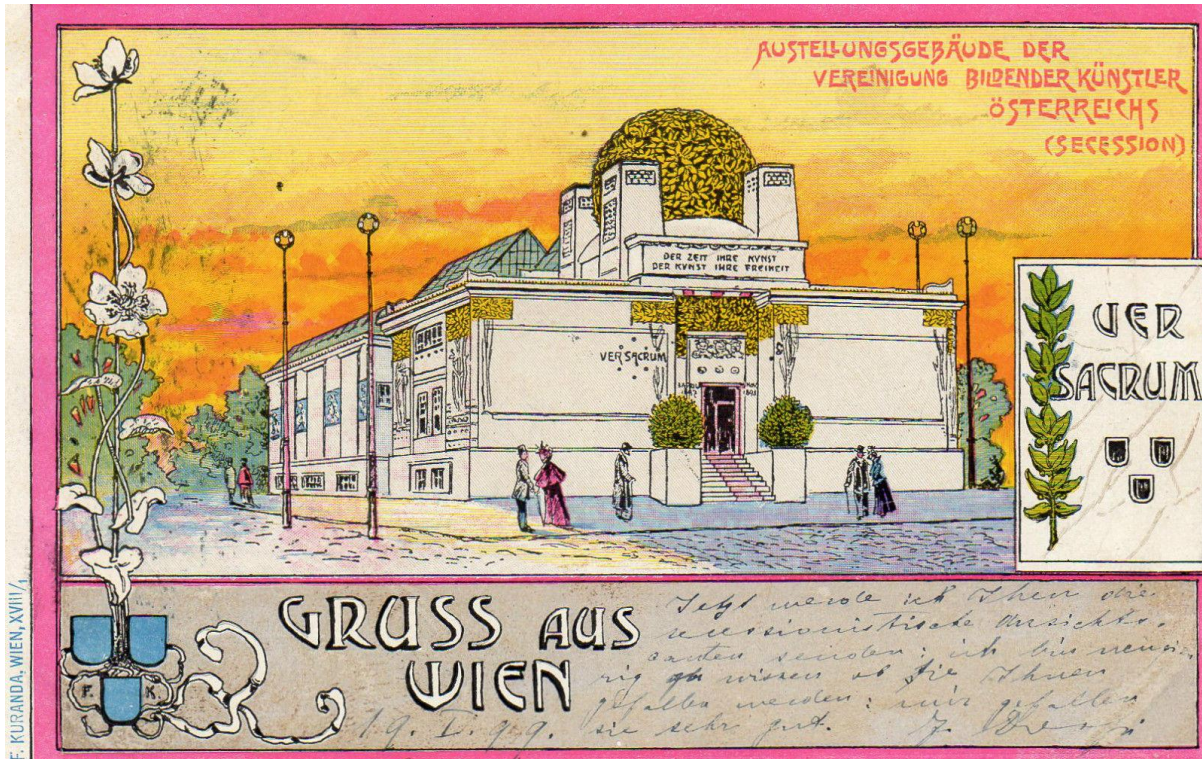


Fig. 2: Postcard featuring art of the Secession Building (from the collection of Paul M. Robinson).

<https://www.theviennasecession.com/vienna-secession/>

The Secession, however, could not garner attention without tapping into Vienna's true cultural love: music. Max Klinger—not a regular Secessionist but certainly associated with the Secession—did not shy away from music's influence and produced works that were respected by both the Secession and the Künstlerhaus. He drew inspiration from Schumann's writing, ascribed to Wagner's idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and created monuments to the likes of Liszt, Wagner, Beethoven, and Brahms. His Beethoven Monument would become one of the most famous Secession exhibits. Gustav Klimt did not share the same reverence for music, but was not opposed to its influence: he would create another famous Secessionist exhibit, the Beethoven Frieze, a large-scale work representing Beethoven's ninth symphony, painted directly onto the walls of the Secession building.¹¹ At the turn of the century, the Secession wove its way into public consciousness and became the principal representation of the times: the Secessionists did not aim to make timeless works, but artworks that pertained to their time, as is written in stone on the face of the building.

Carl Moll, Alma's stepfather, was a founding Secessionist, so it comes as little surprise that the Secession would influence Alma's own compositional style. The Secession was a central part of her life in Vienna, mentioned often in her diaries. She often attended exhibits and was personally acquainted with Klimt himself. She even longed to write an opera titled *Ver Sacrum*. She attended the first Secession exhibit in 1898 and enjoyed the experience: "It was delightful! [...] This afternoon at the Gartenbaugsellschaft there was art, true art, and real people."¹²

¹¹ Ibid, 209.

¹² Beaumont, *Diaries*, 17.

Kinder, Kirche, Küche: Attitudes Towards Women

Though Vienna saw some strides towards progressivism and gender equality at the turn of the century, the prevailing attitudes towards women were rooted in nineteenth century patriarchal standards. Strict gender roles were upheld, and a woman's position could be summed up succinctly in a popular expression from the time of the German Empire: *Kinder, kirche, küche*—Children, church, and cooking.¹³ There is no shortage of nineteenth century essays and books that attempt to define women and their role in society.

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), one of the leading philosophers of the nineteenth century, influenced Romantic composers with his writings on aesthetics in music. Schopenhauer's writings had a profound effect on Wagner—Alma's musical idol.¹⁴ Wagner's adoption of his aesthetics would, in turn, influence the likes of Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss. Schopenhauer's influence, however, went beyond music and aesthetics: his 1851 essay, "On Women," details a cruel view of women and their place in society. He describes women as weak, claims that they exist "solely for the propagation of the species, and are not destined for anything else," and even insults feminine appearance and physical qualities:

It is only the man whose intellect is clouded by his sexual impulses that could give the name of *the fair sex* to that undersized, narrow-shouldered, broad-hipped, and short-legged race: for the whole beauty of sex is bound up with this impulse. Instead of calling them beautiful, there would be more warrant for describing women as the unaesthetic sex. Neither for music, nor for poetry, nor for fine art, have they really and truly any sense or susceptibility; it is a mere mockery if they make a pretence of it in order to assist their endeavor to please.¹⁵

¹³ Macarthur, Sally. *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*. Vol. no. 61; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (2002): 68.

¹⁴ For further reading on Wagner and Schopenhauer: Eric Chafe's "The Tragic and the Ecstatic: The Musical Revolution of Wagner's Tristan und Isolde."

¹⁵ Schopenhauer, Arthur, 1788-1860. *The Essential Schopenhauer*. New York: Allen & Unwin (1962): 107.

There was, too, the Western idea of a dichotomy between culture and nature, the former associated with men and the latter with women: “Culture encompasses knowledge and human-made social structures. Nature implies a pure state unmediated by intellect”.¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, another hugely influential writer and philosopher, perpetuated this idea and reduced women to their role as reproducers: Woman is more closely related to Nature than men and in all her essentials she remains ever herself. Culture is with her always something external, a something which does not touch the kernel that is eternally faithful to nature”.¹⁷ These kinds of essentialist views reduced women to biological processes, vessels for procreation and keepers of the home, inherently incapable of complex thought or creativity. If a woman *was* creative, skilled, talented, or intelligent, the source was not within herself, but due to a man.

Reactionary philosopher Otto Weininger (1880-1903) authored an entire book on the subject shortly before his suicide. “*Geschlecht und Charakter*”—Sex and Character—fascinated the intellectual and arts scenes in Europe. With rising movements towards female liberation and women’s suffrage threatening the very foundations of patriarchal institutions, this kind of misogynistic rhetoric resurfaced in response. “*Geschlecht und Charakter*” upheld ideas of German patriarchy, and though it was blacklisted by the Nazi regime in 1934 on the basis of Weininger’s Jewish heritage, Hitler lauded Weininger as “the only honorable Jew.”¹⁸ Again, the woman’s role was reduced to reproduction, and any interest or talent she may have was because of or in service to men.

¹⁶ Citron, Marcia J. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. Cambridge [England];New York,: Cambridge University Press (1993): 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸ Anderson, Susan C. “Otto Weininger’s Masculine Utopia.” *German Studies Review* 19, no. 3 (1996): 433.

Weininger, a Jew who had converted to Christianity, explained that women have no “original capacity,” only the power to imitate, a characteristic he believed they shared with the Jews—an argument later used by the Nazis against Jewish creative artists. A superior male, who belonged to the rank of the genius, was capable of realizing his existence: “that he exists, that he is, and that he is in the world” was a capacity “altogether lacking in women.”¹⁹

In artistic spheres, misogyny was rampant, the role of the women delegated to the role of the muse—an object of inspiration for (male) creative minds. Karl Kraus, successful Austrian writer and editor of *Die Fackel*—a newspaper lasting from 1899 to 1936—praised Weininger and “admired his arguments against women’s emancipation because Kraus felt that such liberty would detract from a woman’s ‘natural’ role of providing the creative spark for men and keeping a cultural gender balance.”²⁰ Anderson claims that Kraus dissented from Weininger’s misogyny, but Kraus was no feminist, often degrading women in quips such as “I love to carry on a monologue with women. But a conversation with myself is more stimulating” and “Artistic women: the better the poetry, the worse the face.”²¹

There were, of course, calls for equality at the end of the nineteenth century. Much of the drive behind feminist movements at the start of the twentieth century was the desire for economic independence—a new kind of independence that would give women more freedom in terms of marriage. With options available beyond the roles of *Kinder, Kirche, Küche*, women may not have prioritized marriage as much as before. This idea, of course, was fought by men who may have found themselves without the guarantee of a dutiful wife to manage the home.²²

¹⁹ Gorrell, Lorraine. *Discordant Melody: Alexander Zemlinsky, His Songs, and the Second Viennese School*. Vol. no. 64, Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press (2002): 100.

²⁰ Anderson, “Otto,” 436.

²¹ Gorrell, “Discordant Melody,” 100.

²² West, B. June. “The ‘New Woman.’” *Twentieth Century Literature* 1, no. 2 (1955): 57.

There was much debate surrounding this idea of a “New Woman”²³ who brushed off Victorian ideals in favor of independence and equality.

Those who objected to these feminist ideals cited a threat to the institution of marriage and stereotyped the “New Woman” as sexually immoral, primitive, “animalistic”.²⁴ Many objections were aimed at the New Woman’s adoption of traditionally masculine characteristics and how they might affect—or destroy entirely—her role as wife of men and bearer of children. It is important to note that not only men fought against women’s liberation; patriarchal values were ingrained in all of society. For example, Eliza Lynn Linton was the first salaried female journalist in Britain, but wrote extensively on the “wild woman” who threatened the institution of marriage and demanded “supreme power over men”.²⁵ Blanche Aletha Crackanthorpe argued boldly for independence for women in her 1894 article “The Revolt of the Daughters,” but still stressed the importance of marriage: “Marriage is the best profession for a woman; we all know and acknowledge it; but, for obvious reasons, all women cannot enter its strait and narrow gate.”²⁶

So, women were not expected to pursue academic, creative, or professional goals, but devote themselves to marriage, motherhood, and the keeping of the home. Though marriage was meant to be woman’s only fulfillment, in reality it was more servitude than satisfaction: “Her marriage is not the same thing as his marriage: their domestic and emotional labour is different; marriage has a different impact on their public lives; intimacy is a gendered experience; and

²³ The term “New Woman” was adopted from Sidney Grundey’s 1894 comedy, “The New Woman.”

²⁴ Ledger, Sally and Scott McCracken. *Cultural Politics at the Fin De siècle*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press (1995): 154.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

marriage divides the economic position, psychology, and physical and mental health of men and women.”²⁷ There existed in Vienna an organization dedicated to women writers and artists, the *Verein der Schriftstellerinnen und Künstlerinnen*. Alma, however, was not a member, nor did she express interest in the group. Besides, entrance into the *Verein* required some professional establishment and recognition, and most of its members were older unmarried women.²⁸ It was also quite small, boasting at most seventy members, and I have found no evidence of Alma even being aware of its existence.

All of this is to illustrate how ubiquitous these sentiments were, and how deeply misogyny was ingrained into Western society—and *fin de siècle* Vienna, though on the cutting edge of cultural Modernism, was no exception. Wagner, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche were the philosophical fathers of the Vienna Secession, the art movement Alma Schindler grew up within. This is the climate she found herself in as a young woman and aspiring composer. Indeed, these sentiments can be seen in her own writing, where she sometimes criticizes herself and other women based on internalized misogynistic ideals. Her diaries, so often ambitious and passionate, are also marked with insecurities: After a good lesson with Josef Labor, she says, “I’d never imagined I’d get that far. Considering my thoughtlessness — and perhaps intellectual shortcomings — that’s saying quite a lot.”²⁹

It doesn’t come as a surprise that Alma would think this way—it was deeply ingrained in the culture, and these sentiments came from those she knew and respected. She quotes Labor from one of their lessons: “A most respectable accomplishment. . . for a girl.” This was clearly

²⁷ Oakley, Ann. *Forgotten Wives: How Women Get Written Out Of History*. Bristol, Policy Press (2021): 2.

²⁸ Harriman, Helga H. “Women Writers and Artists in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna.” *Modern Austrian Literature* 26, no. 1 (1993): 5.

²⁹ Beaumont, Antony. *Alma Mahler-Werfel: Diaries 1898-1902*. London: Faber Music (1998): 29.

taken to heart, as she immediately reflects, “It’s a real curse to be a girl, there’s no way of overcoming your limitations.”³⁰ Though not all of her self-deprecations mention her womanhood, it’s clear that Alma had been engrained with the idea of women’s inferiority in intelligence and creativity: “Lesson with Zem. I’m dreadfully stupid. He proved it again today.”³¹

Zemlinsky, too, would add to this sentiment despite being Alma’s teacher and advocate. Alma writes of a lesson with him on March 28 of 1901: “He was delighted with my work. Said it was a pity I wasn’t born a boy, that it was detrimental to my talent. ‘As a girl, if you want to make your mark, you’ll experience countless setbacks.’ And I *want* to make my mark.”³²

³⁰ Ibid., 88.

³¹ Ibid., 378.

³² Ibid., 393.

II. Alma the Woman

The Most Beautiful Girl in Vienna



Fig. 3: Alma (left) with mother, Anna, and sister, Grete in 1893. The Mahler Foundation.

Alma Maria Schindler was born in 1879 under the Austro-Hungarian Empire to accomplished landscape painter Emil Jakob Schindler and his wife, Anna Sofie Schindler. She was born into the arts, a self-proclaimed “daughter of an artistic tradition,”³³ her mother having been a trained singer and her father’s paintings having been noticed by Austrian nobility. Emil and Anna had met as singers in a production of *Lenardo und Blandine* in 1877. Their story foreshadows the path Alma would take later in life: Emil and Anna were fifteen years apart in age, and though Anna was offered a contract at the Leipzig Stadttheater, her singing career would come to an end in 1878 when she and Emil announced their engagement, immediately followed by the conception of their first child, Alma.³⁴

³³ Mahler, Alma. *And the Bridge is Love*. [1st]. ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace (1958): 4

³⁴ Haste, Cate. *Passionate Spirit: The Life of Alma Mahler*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing (2020): 9

In *And the Bridge Is Love*, Alma describes an idyllic childhood in the Viennese countryside, watching her father paint, growing up in a manor alongside her sister and traveling often with her family. She claims to have begun composing at the piano and writing down her music at nine years old.³⁵ She did not attend school regularly, but was tutored at home, as was the norm for upper-class families in Vienna: “Girls had been admitted to secondary school in Vienna since 1868, but until 1892, when Alma was 13, they were still barred from the *Gymnasium*—the grammar school—and graduation from university was still impossible. The education of girls, including Alma, tended to focus on social skills—French, dressmaking and piano—rather than the philosophy and literature that inspired her.”³⁶

Emil Schindler died suddenly in 1892, weeks before Alma’s thirteenth birthday. It is clear in her writing how highly she regarded him, crediting him for much, if not all of her early inspiration. He’d introduced her to Goethe’s *Faust*, engaged in serious conversation with her, and had let her spend hours in his studio to watch him work. She speaks poignantly of his passing: “He had been my cynosure—and no one had known. All my ambition and vanity had been satisfied by a twinkle of his understanding eyes.”³⁷

Alma’s mother’s life parallels her daughter’s in terms of musical promise, affairs, and marriages. In the late 1870s, Emil and Anna shared an apartment with Viennese painter Julius Victor Berger. Anna and Julius had an affair while Schindler traveled, which resulted in the birth of Alma’s half sister, Margarethe Schindler, often referred to as Grete. Shortly after Emil’s death, Anna would marry his pupil, Carl Moll, in 1895.

³⁵ Mahler, “And the Bridge is Love,” 8.

³⁶ Haste, “Passionate Spirit,” 7.

³⁷ Mahler, “And the Bridge is Love,” 9.

Carl Moll would go on to co-found the Vienna Secession alongside Gustav Klimt and others in 1897. In 1899, Maria Moll was born, giving Alma another, much younger half sister. Alma, Maria, and Anna appear in Moll's 1901 painting, "At the Lunch Table" (fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Carl Moll, *At the Lunch Table*, 1901. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Alma was not overly fond of her stepfather. Of the marriage between Carl and Anna, Alma says, "The poor woman, I thought. There she went and married the pendulum, and my father was the whole clock."³⁸ The newly founded Secession began to meet at Carl Moll's house just as Alma was coming of age, and this is when she would meet Gustav Klimt. Klimt was seventeen years Alma's senior, and though their involvement is often written about as a mere relationship, it's easy to see the predatory nature of his perusal when viewing through a modern lens. "I was still quite childish when I met him," Alma says in *And the Bridge is Love*. "My

³⁸ Mahler, "And the Bridge is Love," 11.

ignorance in matters of love was appalling, and he felt and found my every sensitive spot.”³⁹

Though Alma speaks highly of Klimt and enjoyed his attention, her mother tried to put a stop to their “romance” (Alma’s words) in 1897 after reading of a kiss between Alma and Klimt during the family’s travels to Italy. This separation was so distressing to the young Alma that she threw herself entirely into composing, and describes a very productive period.



Fig. 5: Alma Mahler in 1900. Credit: The Mahler Foundation

Alma’s diaries from this time, translated and published by Antony Beaumont, provides insight to her formative years in Vienna. The published diaries begin in 1898, when Alma is only 19, and lead up to her marriage to Gustav Mahler in early 1902. In her own words, the reader is

³⁹ Mahler, *And the Bridge is Love*, 12.

afforded a glimpse into Vienna's cultural scene. Alma clearly enjoyed writing and may have even made a good music critic in another life. She documented nearly every concert attended, and none without some comment. Some—especially Wagner's operas—were afforded entire reviews, detailing the music, drama, and performance. She did not mince words, but spoke quite plainly about her opinions. This becomes a theme: the young Alma was an opinionated young woman and unafraid to speak her mind, even in the company of men, even in the company of Vienna's culture elites—after all, she was acquainted with them all.

In her diaries, Alma expresses lofty goals and intense hopes to continue composing. All of her surviving works are lieder, and it seems from the diaries that many of the works that were lost were written for voice. Her ultimate goal was to compose an opera, perhaps to follow in the footsteps of her lifelong idol, Wagner.

On January 6, 1899:

O Lord God, give me the strength to achieve what my heart longs for — an opera. It must be titled 'Ver sacrum' and must express and glorify the 'struggle' of youth against old age. That would be my dream! The more symbolism, the better. I wish I had the physical and moral strength to see it through. I almost despair, yet my whole being strives to achieve this one goal. Help me, divine power. I pray to you that I may suffer no defeat in the battle against my weakness, against my femininity.⁴⁰

A few months later, Max Burckhard asked Alma if she'd like to write the music for an operetta for which he'd been commissioned to write the libretto. Alma recalls her response in the diaries:

I was overjoyed, for I feel *certain* that it would go well. At any rate, it was his way of expressing confidence in me. Unfortunately I feel little urge to write an operetta, I strive only for opera. To write an opera and experience its successful first performance — that

⁴⁰ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 85.

would be utter bliss. I long for fame and success. Nature! Heart! Life! God! The one and only!!!.⁴¹

Wagner's music was more than artistic inspiration for Alma; she was devoted to him, often singing his praises in the diaries. In her diaries, she cited *Tristan und Isolde* as her favorite opera, wrote glowing reviews after each (Wagner ?) opera, and included pictures of him. After seeing *Parsifal* in the summer of 1899, she writes, "The day will remain indelible in my memory – inconceivable that a mere mortal could have created all this. Happiness does still exist, then . .

⁴²



This is what a god looks like.
Rome, April

Fig. 6. A print of Wagner in Alma's diary (p 107). Antony Beaumont: *Alma Mahler-Werfel: Diaries 1898-1902*.

⁴¹ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 165.

⁴² Beaumont, *Diaries*, 176.

In February of 1900, Alma met composer Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942). Alma recounts the evening they met in her journal; the pair spoke all night, discussing music and gossiping about mutual friends. Even Gustav Mahler came up in conversation. She was charmed by the interaction, writing sweetly:

At the table Zemlinsky asked me softly:
And what do you think of Wagner?
The greatest genius that ever lived, I replied casually.
And which work of Wagner's is your favorite?
'Tristan' — my reply.
That so delighted him that he became entirely transformed. He grew truly handsome. Now we understood each other. I find him quite wonderful. I shall invite him to call.
For me the evening wasn't wasted. — It was a taste of life.⁴³

Zemlinsky was respected in Vienna's music scene, having studied under Fuchs and Bruckner at the Vienna Conservatory. By the time he met Alma Schindler, he had written his first opera, *Es War Einmal* ("Once upon a time") and was the Kappelmeister at Vienna's Carltheater. Zemlinsky was also Arnold Schoenberg's teacher—the only one he would ever study with. Schoenberg took lessons from Zemlinsky between 1895 and 1897,⁴⁴ and the pair would be close for much of their lives, Schoenberg eventually marrying Zemlinsky's sister, Mathilde, in 1901. Alma talks about Zemlinsky and Schönberg in *And the Bridge is Love*:

Alexander von Zemlinsky was one of the finest musicians and a magnificent teacher. When I went to him for lessons—usually he came to our house—I often met his favorite student, Arnold Schönberg. "He'll be the talk of the world someday," said Zemlinsky. And that is exactly what Schönberg, the composer, has become, aside from teaching and influencing others, such as Alban Berg, Anton von Webern, Ernst Krenek. To this entire musical generation Zemlinsky was the teacher par excellence. His technical brilliance was unique. He could take a little theme, take it mentally in hand, so to speak, and squeeze it, and form it into countless variations. That he is not known as the master of our

⁴³ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 254.

⁴⁴ Frisch, Walter. *The Early Works of Arnold Schoenberg, 1893-1908*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (1951): 6. The lessons may have began in 1896; the exact date is not known.

time, I thought, must be due to his rickety physique. A low shrub, no matter how precious, cannot grow into a tall tree.⁴⁵



Fig. 7: Zemlinsky and Schönberg, 1917. The Mahler Foundation. (Move to Comparative Analysis?)

Alma's earlier writings on Zemlinsky oscillate between indifference, fervent love and desire, and cruel teasing. There were stark differences between the two: Zemlinsky was Jewish, moody, and regarded by many as unattractive, while Alma was "the most beautiful girl in Vienna,"⁴⁶ sociable, and Catholic. However, Alma and Alexander were both headstrong, intelligent, and quick witted. After their initial meeting, they spent quite a bit of time together, cycling and picnicking and talking for hours on end. They spent the summer apart, but in November of that year, they would reunite and begin working together as student and teacher. Alma found herself enjoying their lessons together, challenged by Zemlinsky and motivated to improve. By the time Alma began to work with Zemlinsky in 1900, she'd been studying with

⁴⁵ Mahler, Alma. *And the Bridge is Love*. [1st]. ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace (1958): 13.

⁴⁶ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 94.

Labor for six years, but Labor seemed to have little real expectation of her work—again, her status as a woman made composition more a hobby than a serious academic pursuit. Zemlinsky acknowledged Alma’s talent, but pushed her to improve in counterpoint and harmony. He held her to higher standards, which she appreciated.⁴⁷ It wouldn’t be long until the two fell in love, a relationship that was “volatile from the start”.⁴⁸

In 1900, another family friend began to pursue Alma, though this would be short-lived. Max Burckhard, director of Vienna’s *Burgtheater* from 1890 to 1898, was twenty-five years Alma’s senior when he began to court her. Initially, she enjoyed the attention and gushed about Burckhard (often referred to only as B) in her diaries:

*How I like him. He said he’d give anything to travel with me. I would dearly have replied: ‘I’d give anything to live with you.’ I’m so unbelievably fond of him. So handsome, so noble, so masculine, so free! In the night I dreamt we had kissed – and I awoke overcome with bliss. O daylight! Horrid, cold, grey daylight! What a dreadful awakening!*⁴⁹

However, only days after this entry, on December 14th of 1900, Alma describes an assault that would leave her disenchanted: a forceful kiss from Burckhard despite her resistance. On December 15th, she details an uncomfortable conversation that involved her denouncing his advances and him continually aiming to convince her.

*And then, when he started making passes, I kept repeating: No – that leads to nothing, don’t, it’s not right. –
But listen, child, if you only do what’s right. . .
Then he took my left hand and smothered it with kisses.
Tell me, how come you have such a sweet little visage?*⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 57.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁹ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 354.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 357.

Alma ends the entry with, “The man is so self-assured. . . I hate him. . .” Following entries call him a “frivolous” and a “bogus Don Juan,” and Alma writes what she wished to tell him: “I’m not and shall *never* be your plaything”.⁵¹

In November of 1901, Alma accepted a dinner invitation from Emil and Berta Zuckerrandl, a married couple who supported the arts scene and owned one a popular salon in Vienna. They were well acquainted with Gustav Mahler, who would also attend this November dinner. At this time, Mahler was well-established, the director of Vienna’s Hofoper since 1897—though his appointment to the position was controversial given his age (38 at the time) and his Jewish heritage: “Although he was baptized a Catholic, it did not prevent the anti-Semites seeing Mahler as Jewish.”⁵² After all, during this time, a person’s Judaism was seen not as a religion, but as a race.⁵³ Though his religion had changed, Mahler would always be a Jew in the eyes of the public. Mahler was recognized as a celebrity in Vienna, and Alma had heard of him. He is mentioned a handful of times in Alma’s diaries with much admiration; in December of 1899 she wrote, “Dr. Pollack gave me [a picture of] Mahler, my beloved Mahler, with his autograph.”⁵⁴

Alma turned down a previous invitation from the Zuckerrandls to come to dinner and meet him. Alma had seen Mahler several times, being a frequent patron of the Hofoper, but had never formally met him. He had a reputation in Vienna for his casual relationships with Hofoper singers and Alma had avoided meeting him because of the stories she’d been told. However, she admired him greatly as a conductor, and this admiration would outweigh her reservations, eventually leading their paths to cross.

⁵¹ Ibid., 357.

⁵² Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 100.

⁵³ Knittel, K. M. “‘Ein Hypermoderner Dirigent’: Mahler and Anti-Semitism in ‘Fin-de-Siècle’ Vienna.” *19th-Century Music* 18, no. 3 (1995): 259.

⁵⁴ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 84.

It was in the Zuckerandl salon that Alma and Gustav would finally meet—and argue. They clashed at the table and debated after dinner, and Berta Zuckerandl found them both angry with each other over philosophical discussions.⁵⁵ Alma went on to challenge Mahler’s programming—Gustav had not replied to Zemlinsky’s request for a performance of his ballet, *Triumph der Zeit*, and Alma defended her teacher. Despite their disagreements, or perhaps because of them, the pair became acquainted and seemed to enjoy each other's company. By the end of the night, Mahler had asked Alma to bring him one of her pieces, to which she agreed. Alma writes of their meeting in her diary: “I must say, I liked him *immensely* — although he’s dreadfully restless. He stormed about the room like a savage. The fellow is made *entirely* of oxygen. When you go near him, you get burnt. Tomorrow I shall tell Alex *some* of this. . .”⁵⁶ Mahler also spoke of their first meeting to Max Burckhard: “I didn’t care for her at first. I thought she was just a doll. But then I realized that she’s also very perceptive. Maybe my first impression was because one doesn’t normally expect such a good-looking girl to take anything seriously”.⁵⁷

In the following weeks, Alma and Gustav would encounter each other more and more frequently. Alma became quickly infatuated—Gustav’s position as director of the Hofoper was especially tantalizing, given her love for opera and her longing to compose and premiere one. He even promised to allow her to conduct. Though she was still entangled with Zemlinsky, Mahler began to consume Alma’s attention. The ensuing guilt and internal conflict is detailed in her diaries, but it seems that Alma’s fiery love for Zemlinsky was very quickly snuffed out upon capturing Mahler’s attention.

⁵⁵ CITE diaries / haste

⁵⁶ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 445.

⁵⁷ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 78.

Carl Moll rejected the idea of any sort of relationship between Alma and Gustav, and so did Max Burckhard. On the other side, Mahler's sister, Justine, also had reservations about Gustav's pursuit of Alma. Gustav was nineteen years Alma's senior and in poor health, and again, there was a difference in faith. Opposition to their involvement, however, was ultimately unsuccessful; less than a month after their initial meeting, there was talk of marriage between Gustav and Alma. Though pursued by Burckhard, proposed to by Felix Muhr (an acquaintance and young architect who had vowed suicide if she rejected him), and loved by Zemlinsky, Alma chose Gustav.

This partnership, however, would come at a dreadful price: On December 20 of 1901, Gustav wrote the infamous letter that would command Alma to abandon composing if they were to marry.

Would it be possible for you, from now on, to regard my music as yours? I prefer not to discuss "your" music in detail just now. . . In general, however — how do you picture the married life of a husband and wife who are both composers? Have you any idea how ridiculous and, in time, how degrading for both of us such a peculiarly competitive relationship would inevitably become? What will happen if, just when you're "in the mood," you're obliged to attend to the house or to something I might happen to need, since, as you wrote, you ought to relieve me of the menial details of life? Don't misunderstand me and start imagining that I hold the bourgeois view of the relationship between husband and wife, which regards the latter as a sort of plaything for her husband and, at the same time, as his housekeeper. . . But one thing is certain and that is that you must become "what I need" if we are to be happy together, i.e., my wife, not my colleague.⁵⁸

This kind of admonition was not uncommon for women composers to receive. Fanny Mendelssohn—who, like Alma, has been severely overshadowed by a male figure in her life, her brother Felix—received a similar letter from her father sums up the sentiment towards female composers well:

⁵⁸ Mahler, Gustav, 1860-1911, La Grange, Henry-Louis de, 1924-2017, Günther Weiss 1933-2007, Knud Martner, and Antony Beaumont. *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (2004): 85.

What you wrote to me in one of your earlier letters concerning your musical activities in relation to Felix, was as well thought out as expressed. Perhaps for him music will become a profession, while for you it will always remain but an ornament; never can and should it become the foundation of your existence and daily life; . . . you have proved by your joy in the acclaim which he has won for himself, that in his situation you would be able to earn the same for yourself. Remain fast in this conviction and conduct, they are feminine and only the feminine ornaments women.⁵⁹

Though this instance occurred nearly a century prior, Alma and Fanny's circumstances were similar: as they grew older, their creative pursuits were not nurtured, but nipped in the bud, so to speak, as to prepare them for a life of servitude in the spirit of *Kinder, Kirche, K rche*. Any composing done in girlhood was mere frivolity, and could never become a true career: "The uneasy transition from girlhood to womanhood has often meant a restriction of possibilities, a narrowing of experience by social convention."⁶⁰

Alma was shattered by Gustav's letter. Her mother encouraged her to break off the relationship with Mahler, having experienced giving up a musical career to marry Alma's father. However, after some thought and much internal conflict, Alma relented. She would submit to Gustav's demands with heartbreak and an "eternal thorn in her side",⁶¹ but also a desperate love and devotion for Gustav. Her feelings are well documented in her diaries: "I forced myself to sleep the night through. 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? Just forget all about it! I must admit that scarcely any music now interests me except his."⁶² Many years later, in 1940, Alma spoke on this incident again in her book, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*: "I buried my dream and perhaps it was for the best. It has been my privilege to give my creative gifts another life in

⁵⁹ Rothenberg, Sarah. "‘Thus Far, but No Farther’: Fanny Mendelssohn-Hensel's Unfinished Journey." *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 4 (1993): 689.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 691.

⁶¹ Monson, Karen. *Alma Mahler: Muse to Genius*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, (1983): 45.

⁶² Beaumont, *Diaries*: 462.

minds greater than my own. And yet the iron had entered my soul and the wound has never healed.”⁶³

In this quote, that Schopenhauerian idea of female aptitude appears again, in which a woman’s role is to serve as inspiration and assistance to the creative power of men, and that a woman’s creative achievements were not her own. Any artistic merit cannot be attributed to the woman, but the man on which she is dependent. If she has any creative achievements, her inspiration is from man and her works are for his benefits—she has no autonomy, no great mind of her own. She is confined to the role of *muse*. Alma adopted this role when she accepted Mahler’s terms of their engagement, but not without great inner turmoil.

On December 23, just over a month after their initial meeting, the pair was engaged. The sudden engagement came as a surprise to many. Mahler’s assistant, Bruno Walter, encapsulated the general perception of the union:

[Mahler’s] fiancée, Alma Schindler. . . is twenty-two years old, tall, slim, and dazzlingly good-looking, the most beautiful girl in Vienna; she comes from good family and is very rich. But we, his friends, are very concerned about this; he is forty-one years old, she twenty-two; she is accustomed to moving in high society, he is tied up with himself, fond of isolation; so there is good reason for misgivings. He himself feels very awkward and uneasy in his role as bridegroom, and when people congratulate him he gets annoyed. But they are said to be deeply in love.⁶⁴

There is the question of *why*? After all, Alma was a fiercely opinionated and independent young woman. Upon their first meeting, she interrogated Mahler about his programming choices and never hesitated to speak her mind. Though her diaries reveal insecurities and some internalized misogyny, even more prevalent is her intellect and ambitious spirit; she read philosophical texts, studied composition, reviewed performances, and she wanted to compose

⁶³ Mahler, Alma, 1879-1964 and Basil Creighton. *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*. Enlarged, revised ed. New York: Viking Press (1969): 23.

⁶⁴ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 94.

and premiere larger works. Alma was not shallow or unintelligent by any means. However, there were societal pressures at play: Alma was twenty-two years old, living at home, and supported by her mother and step-father. Her younger sister had already married and was living with her husband. In contrast, Alma was pursued romantically by many men but seemingly had no serious interest in any but Zemlinsky, who was abandoned when Mahler began his own pursuit.

Mahler was much older and well established. He was a celebrity in Vienna, if a controversial one, and a “musical titan.”⁶⁵ Though she was academically and socially intelligent, Alma was still a very young woman suddenly showered with attention from someone she highly respected. Nancy Newman writes on some of the ethics of the relationship between Gustav and Alma in her article, “#MeToo: The Art of Being Believed.”⁶⁶ Newman discusses long-held general perceptions of Alma’s life through the lens of modern feminism and discusses how the young Alma was groomed and gaslit by her older suitors. She explains how some existing biographies operate with antiquated ideals: for example, Antony’s Beaumont’s speculations that Alma gave up composing because of lack of skill.⁶⁷

In any case, Alma became pregnant with Gustav’s child shortly after the engagement, before their marriage. Because of her want of “legitimate” children, almost certainly influenced by her Catholic upbringing, Alma’s fate was effectively sealed: there was no backing out of the marriage. They were married privately in March of 1902. Very quickly, Alma’s role shifted from socialite to wife, and soon thereafter to mother. Not only was she married and therefore an extension of her husband, but she was married to Mahler—well-known, successful, controversial

⁶⁵ Newman, Nancy. “#AlmaToo: The Art of Being Believed.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 75, no. 1 (2022): 57.

⁶⁶ The title is a play on the title of Frances Giroud’s 1988 biography of Alma, “The Art of Being Love.”

⁶⁷ Newman, “#MeToo,” 58.

Mahler. Though she was not unknown in Vienna, she would forever become secondary to him and his legacy.

Marriage to Mahler

The marriage between Gustav and Alma was tumultuous, marked with quarrels, tragedies, and affairs. Upon arrival at their new home, Alma discovered that Mahler was deeply in debt—50,000 *Kronen* worth.⁶⁸ Until the marriage, Mahler's finances had been handled by his sister, Justine. Now, as Gustav's wife, Alma assumed the role, never having managed a household before. Alma was also having a hard time adjusting to lonely home life after so many years as a socialite: Mahler, busy as the director of Vienna's *Hofoper*, was not an attentive husband. Alma lamented that she'd been reduced to his housekeeper.⁶⁹

Alma greatly enjoyed attending rehearsals and performances and was still able to socialize with prominent figures in Vienna's music scene, but for the most part, their marriage was strained. Alma was pregnant and isolated at home, a sharp contrast to the vibrant social life she'd experienced before their marriage.

During the early years of our married life I felt very uncertain of myself and my relations with him. After I had conquered him by my audacity before I knew what I was about, all my self-assurance was undermined by the psychological effects of becoming pregnant before being married. From the moment of his spiritual triumph, too, he looked down on me and did not recover his love of me until I had broken his tyranny. Sometimes he played the part of a schoolmaster, relentlessly strict and unjust. He soured my enjoyment of life and made it an abomination. . . I know today he was afraid of my youth and beauty. He wanted to make them safe for himself by simply taking from me any atom of life in which he himself played no part. I was a young thing he had desired and whose education he now took in hand.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 100.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷⁰ Mahler, *G.M. Memories and Letters*, 43.

Mahler dedicated his fifth symphony to Alma, composed a love song, *Liebst du um Schönheit*, for her,⁷¹ and wrote a theme in her honor into his sixth symphony.⁷² In November of 1902, Alma gave birth to Maria Anna Mahler, yet the marriage did not improve. It was, on paper, the perfect arrangement for a woman: she was married to a musical genius and had bore him a child. Alma, however, continued to struggle to adjust to her role as wife, mother, and muse. Ann Oakley's quote comes to mind again: "Her marriage is not the same thing as his marriage. . ."⁷³

In 1902, Alma wrote plainly about her suffering:

Gustav lives his life. And I have to live his, too ... I cannot occupy myself only with my child! Now I'm learning Greek ... to fill my empty hours. But what has become of my goal, my magnificent goal! My bitterness is intense! I am constantly choking with tears! No one understands this. Everyone thinks I am happy, and yet one thing is missing, the one thing which is more important to me than all the rest.⁷⁴

Alma expressed her love for Gustav often, but lamented her position in equal measure. When he composed, he ordered absolute quiet in the house—Alma could not sing or play the piano until he was finished. Once again, and quite literally, her music was sacrificed for his own. She was still able to attend the opera and socialize, play the piano when he permitted it, and copy music for him. Her musical life still existed, but was totally under Mahler's control.⁷⁵ Their second child, Anna Justinia Mahler, nicknamed Gucki, was born in June of 1904. The same summer, Mahler began his work on *Kindertotenlieder*—a set of songs set to Friedrich Rückert's texts written after the loss of his own two children.

Over the next few years, Gustav found himself under increasing professional pressure. In 1907, he was pushed to resign from his position at the *Hofoper*. In the summer of that year, he was offered a four-year contract at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Though their financial

⁷¹ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 105.

⁷² Giroud, Françoise. *Alma Mahler; Or, the Art of being Loved*. New York: Oxford University Press (1991): 56.

⁷³ Oakley, *Forgotten Wives*, 2.

⁷⁴ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 107.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

future was secured by the offer, Gustav and Alma would suffer a personal tragedy soon after: the death of their daughter, Maria. She and Anna both caught Scarlet fever, and though Anna recovered, Maria (nicknamed Putzi) did not. She was five years old.

During their mourning, Gustav, who had suffered poor health for years, was formally diagnosed with a heart condition and was forbidden from any strenuous activity. During this tumultuous period, Alma and Gustav drifted further apart. They grieved privately, and Gustav was not sympathetic to Alma's suffering—he blamed her, at least somewhat, for Maria's death.⁷⁶ While she was in treatment for a series of “nervous attacks,” Mahler wrote to his wife: “You are still young — somehow, you've simply got to get over this. Heavens, what would I give to rid myself of all my maladies, and you can't even keep it up for a fortnight. . . now be a good girl and avoid the high life, even if you're feeling better. You've got to get well for America.”⁷⁷

In December of 1907, the two and their daughter departed for New York, seen off by a mass of people that included Zemlinsky, Schoenberg, and Klimt.⁷⁸ The following years were spent traveling between New York and Europe. Mahler conducted works in Munich, Hamburg, Paris, and a number of other cities, often leaving Alma waiting in Vienna.

In 1910, Alma suffered more mental health crises and went to a spa in Tobelbad for six weeks of treatment, accompanied by Anna and her nurse.⁷⁹ While there, she met architect Walter Gropius, who was twenty-seven, creative, and, perhaps most crucially, attentive. Though Mahler wrote every day, Alma failed to write back:⁸⁰ she and Gropius became romantically involved, and Alma's mental state improved dramatically. When Alma's mother joined her at Tobelbad, she became aware of the affair but made no move to stop it—in fact, she became accomplice to

⁷⁶ Giroud, *The Art of Being Loved*, 68.

⁷⁷ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 127.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

it. After all, Anna Moll had given up her own musical career to marry Alma's father, and she was part of a number of affairs during their marriage. It is likely that Alma's mother was very sympathetic to her daughter's situation.

The affair was discovered when Gropius addressed a love letter intended for Alma to Gustav. Whether this was erroneous or intentional remains unclear.⁸¹ This led to a confrontation between Gustav and Alma that allowed her to air grievances since the beginning of their nine year marriage. This had a surprising effect: she felt her love for him renewed and was sure that she could not leave him. When Gustav presented her with a choice between him or Gropius, she realized once again the depth of love she had for her husband, despite their trials. She ended her physical involvement with Gropius and rededicated herself to Gustav—but continued to correspond with Gropius. Though she had chosen Gustav, he was “shaken” by the affair.⁸² He lamented Alma's infidelity, spending his days weeping and working on his tenth symphony. Gustav even consulted the famed Sigmund Freud during this period, which seemed to have an effect on his behavior. According to Alma: “Mahler was no longer so inattentive. On the contrary, he watched now with burning impatience to see that people treated me with due respect and friendliness.”⁸³

In August of 1910, Alma returned home to the sound of her own music being played.

Alma recounts the experience in *And the Bridge is Love*:

I was hearing my songs! My poor, forgotten lieder, the creatures I had lugged around on all our trips, to all our summer places, in a folder that served as their coffin. I still mourned for my music; it embarrassed me to hear it sung and played all of a sudden. I walked in, slightly annoyed, but Mahler was so full of joy that I said nothing. “What have I done!” he cried. “These songs are good. They're splendid! I want you to go over them,

⁸¹ Ibid., 150.

⁸² Mahler, *And the Bridge is Love*, 53.

⁸³ Giroud, *The Art of Being Loved*, 90.

and then we'll have them published. I'm not going to rest until you start working again. My God, was I blind?" And he played them over and over.⁸⁴

Gustav encouraged Alma to revisit the songs, lifting his ten year ban on her composition. She was thrilled, and their relationship was renewed.⁸⁵ "Gustav began to understand that in preventing his wife from composing, he was inflicting a grievous wound on her and on their relationship. He retrieved her songs and played them. . . He insisted that she polish the songs and prepare them for publication."⁸⁶ With Gustav's help, a set of Alma's songs, *Fünf Lieder*, would be published in 1911.

Unfortunately, Gustav's health continued to decline, and their marriage was cut short by Gustav's premature death in May of 1911. She suffered tremendously in the wake of it, both mentally and physically, and was forbidden by doctors to attend the funeral lest it worsen her health. Henry-Louis de la Grange speculated that Alma's infidelity had caused Mahler's untimely death,⁸⁷ perhaps forgetting or ignoring that Mahler had suffered with poor health for much of his adult life. Somewhat more graciously, Françoise Giroud suggests: "Penicillin would probably have saved him. But if it is true that one can die of love, then yes, that is what he died of."⁸⁸

Alma would go on to live a long, full life, marrying twice more. In 1915, she married Walter Gropius, though their union was short, ending in just five years later in 1920. In 1929, she married poet Franz Werfel. With the rise of the Nazi party in Austria, Werfel was removed from the Prussian Academy of the Arts in 1933, and many of his books were burned by the party in

⁸⁴ Mahler, *And the Bridge is Love*, 54.

⁸⁵ Depending on the biographer, this period of marital bliss is viewed quite differently. Cate Haste tends to focus on Alma's perspectives and offers no personal opinion. Her biography, published in 2019, is perhaps more sympathetic, but overall unbiased. Françoise Giroud's 1988 biography is less forgiving. The writing is more inflammatory. This period of time in Gustav and Alma's marriage is covered in a chapter titled "Ruthless Queen and Obedient Servant": "In her account of this episode, Alma added, 'At that time we were very united.' That is to say, since she had won the upper hand, she was in the best of moods" (Giroud, 91).

⁸⁶ Follet, Diane. "Redeeming Alma: The Songs of Alma Mahler." *College Music Symposium* 44 (2004): 29.

⁸⁷ Newman, #AlmaToo, 45.

⁸⁸ Giroud, *The Art of Being Loved*, 95.

the same year.⁸⁹ Alma and Franz were eventually forced to flee for their lives in 1938, traveling and hiding in Europe for two years before finally landing in the United States in 1940 where they would remain for the rest of their lives.⁹⁰ She died in 1964 at the age of 85.

Perceptions and “The Alma Problem”

In 1965, a year after Alma’s death, satirist and musician Tom Lehrer released a comedic recap of her life and relationships in a ballad simply titled, “Alma.”

Her lovers were many and varied
From the day she began her beguine.
There were three famous ones whom she married,
And God knows how many between...⁹¹

As good-natured as this ballad may have been, it encapsulates the long-standing popular view of Alma Mahler as a femme fatale with a long list of lovers and husbands. Alma is most often remembered primarily for her relationships, and it seems that more attention is paid to her love life than her music. Scholars have been quick to point to her supposed powers of seduction: In discussions of her associations with Gustav Klimt, the predatory nature of his pursuit is all too often forgotten. A 2020 article on Carl Moll mentions Alma and Klimt, describing the two as having shared a “fervid round of flirtation and ardent letter-writing, along with a couple of memorable kisses.”⁹² The article makes no mention of their age difference or Klimt’s friendship to Alma’s stepfather. In a 2020 article in *The Telegraph*, Fiona MacCarthy says of Klimt and

⁸⁹ “Franz Werfel | Holocaust Encyclopedia,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC), accessed April 15, 2023, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/franz-werfel>.

⁹⁰ Newman, “#MeToo,” 39.

⁹¹ Lehrer, Tom. “Alma.” Track 4 on *That Was the Year That Was*. Reprise / Warner Bros. Records, 1965.

⁹² Geddes, John. August 13, 2020. “The Long, Dark Past behind the National Gallery’s Latest Acquisition.” *Macleans.ca*, May 12, 2021. <https://www.macleans.ca/culture/arts/the-long-dark-past-behind-the-national-gallery-s-latest-acquisition/>.

Alma's involvement that "even as a teenager she exerted a magnetic effect on men."⁹³ Again, Alma was seventeen and Klimt, a friend of Carl Moll, was thirty five, but in most of the writings on Alma's life, Klimt is simply another man she seduced, another name on her long list of lovers. She is afforded no innocence, even in her youth.

In any study of Alma or Gustav Mahler, one is likely to come across "The Alma Problem," a term referencing Alma's alterations of letters and documents and inconsistencies in her recounts of events. As Cate Haste puts it in her biography of Alma, "she has been routinely accused of massaging the facts to serve her own legacy."⁹⁴ The proposed motive for these alterations and inconsistency is always a flaw in Alma's character. Newman names Antony Beaumont and Henry-Louis de la Grange as the "key figures" in the formulation of "The Alma Problem."⁹⁵ Indeed, Beaumont discredits Alma's version of events in his book on Mahler's letters and La Grange reads "between the lines" of Alma's memoirs to formulate attacks on her character that seem to be based in patriarchal stereotypes.⁹⁶ La Grange's loyalties clearly lie with Gustav, and he has no qualms with besmirching Alma while praising her husband. Newman's "#AlmaToo" article examines La Grange's unforgiving portrayals of Alma: "An analysis of La Grange's discourse across forty years shows Gustav's virility to be consistently pitched against Alma's failed femininity. His clarity, strength, and health are repeatedly contrasted with her rebellion against the expectations relating to womanhood. Alma's struggles with contemporary restraints are viewed not empathetically, but as character flaws leading her to being unfaithful."⁹⁷

⁹³ Fiona MacCarthy, "The Ultimate Femme Fatale: Alma Mahler, the Muse Who Seduced Vienna," *The Telegraph* (Telegraph Media Group, March 3, 2019), <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/ultimate-femme-fatale-alma-mahler-muse-seduced-vienna/>.

⁹⁴ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, (PAGE NUMBER)

⁹⁵ Newman, "#AlmaToo," 41".

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

Those who perpetuate this idea of The Alma Problem tend to rely on slim evidence and assumptions in order to attack Alma’s character. In a biography of Gustav, Stuard Feder discusses Alma’s relationships after Gustav’s death at some length, claiming that many were sexual in nature despite a lack of evidence.⁹⁸ Similarly, Dame Sarah Connolly cites an “affair” between Alma and Schoenberg, but provides no source. In my research, it seems that Alma and Schoenberg were acquainted through Zemlinsky and continued to correspond in letters for many years. I have found no evidence of a sexual relationship between the two. Further, there exists a Wikipedia page dedicated to The Alma Problem that lists examples of Alma’s unreliability, but several rely on strenuous evidence at best. For example, one of the points reads as follows: “Alma claims that Mahler intensely disliked Richard Strauss's opera 'Feuersnot', that he 'had a horror of the work', and avoided conducting it. In fact, Feuersnot is the only Strauss opera that Mahler is known to have conducted.”⁹⁹ The page cites a 1984 publication of correspondence between Gustav and Strauss. Of course, it may be possible that Gustav confided to his wife that he disliked the work and did not want to conduct it, but took the job anyway. This idea, of course, does not fit the narrative of Alma’s career of lying about Mahler for seemingly no reason, so it has not been considered.

Putting aside the validity of these claims against Alma’s character: Why has Alma Mahler so often been judged on the basis of her character before her artistic accomplishments? After all, male composers are rarely, if ever, subject to the same treatment. Neman calls the frequent judgments on Alma’s character *ad feminam*—“to the woman.”¹⁰⁰ It is true: it seems that the trend in academic study of Alma Mahler for many years has been to discredit and belittle her. In his 1991 biography of her, Françoise Giroud writes with little respect for Alma as a person:

⁹⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁹⁹ “Alma Problem.” Wikipedia. Wikimedia Foundation, April 4, 2023. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alma_Problem.

¹⁰⁰ Newman, “#AlmaToo,” 41.

“With or without her, her men would have made a lasting impression on the world: Mahler’s cathedrals of sound, Gropius’s tubular steel constructions, Werfel’s novels, Kokoschka’s unruly paintings. She, without them, would have been nothing. They left behind what they had created, the only traces she left were of herself on them, scars branded deep into their flesh.”¹⁰¹

Giroud also calls Alma a “ruthless queen” and a “man-hungry beauty” and a “lioness tormented by illusions of fame.”¹⁰² Though he concedes that she was musically talented, there is little talk of her music in the book. Of Mahler’s eventual support of her composing, Giroud frames Alma’s relief as a satisfaction in having “won the upper hand.”¹⁰³ In a 2010 article, mezzo-soprano Dame Sarah Connolly is similarly harsh, opening the article by calling Alma a “monster.” Connolly goes on to say, “Pathological cruelty, antisemitism, vanity and a sense that the world owed Alma Maria Schindler something in token for her brilliance and beauty were some of the traits her admirers and enemies alike recognised in Alma, traits also shared by her hero, Richard Wagner.”¹⁰⁴

Connolly, like other critics of Alma’s character, references her antisemitism. Indeed, Alma made antisemitic remarks throughout her life, especially in the early diaries. It comes as little surprise considering the cultural climate Alma was raised in, as well as her step-father’s political views—Moll, Alma’s young half-sister, Maria, and Maria’s husband, Richard Erbersteller were all early supporters of the Nazi party, but after fleeing Europe with Werfel in 1940 Alma had nearly no contact with them.¹⁰⁵ It is true that Alma held antisemitic beliefs, but it is also true that she married two Jewish men, even fleeing her home in Europe with Werfel after

¹⁰¹ Giroud, *The Art of Being Loved*, 3.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ Connolly, Sarah. “The Alma Problem.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, December 2, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2010/dec/02/alma-schindler-problem-gustav-mahler>.

¹⁰⁵ Haste, *Passionate Spirit*, 362. When Alma wrote to inquire about the state of her home in Vienna, she was informed that Carl, Maria, and Richard committed suicide together in 1945 as the Red Army marched on Vienna.

the annexation of Austria. Alma's real feelings on the matter are complex and hard to cleanly categorize as antisemitic or not. Cate Haste apply describes it:

Although Alma was never politically engaged — indeed there is hardly a mention of politics in her diaries up to 1902 —and even though a great number of her associates were Jewish, she too was tainted by the prejudices of the age, and prone to startling and tasteless anti-Semitic asides in her diaries. Her comments are not consistent, she had no coherent view and no political platform; often they reflect class prejudice as much as racial prejudice. ... Alma's anti-Semitic prejudices would remain a taint throughout her life.¹⁰⁶

In recent years, with growing interest in academic studies of feminism in music, scholars have begun to take Alma's accounts more seriously. The validity of the so-called Alma Problem has been called into question and examined more critically. The late Susan M. Filler, who discovered and published two of Alma's lieder in 2000, published a biography of Alma in 2015 that called the Alma Problem into question.¹⁰⁷ Nancy Newman's recent article, “#AlmaToo: The Art of Being Believed,” has done an extensive and critical study of the existing perceptions of Alma through the lens of modern feminism. The academic value of Newman's work cannot be overstated: not only has she challenged the way Alma has been presented in academic writings, but she has called into question the manner in which all women are presented in musicological research.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 34-35.

¹⁰⁷ Newman, “#AlmaToo,” 47.

III. Alma the Composer

Surviving Works

Alma Mahler's surviving body of work is small. She left everything behind in 1938 when she fled with Werfel and she would not return until a visit in 1947. Upon return, she found Vienna nothing like the cultured, beautiful she had grown up in. Every bit of her life before fleeing was reduced to ash:

My house on the Hohe Warte was uninhabitable—the roof gone, the top floor collapsed, the interior in ashes, heating plant, water, and electricity ruined, the marble paneling torn out, used for officers' bathrooms in the neighboring villas. . . The manuscripts of my songs, the joy and grief of many years, had fed the flames that consumed the wretched house.¹⁰⁸

Until 2000, there existed only fourteen published lieder divided into three sets: *Fünf Lieder* published in 1911, *Vier Lieder* published in 1915, and *Fünf Gesänge* published in 1924. In 2000, Susan M. Filler published another two lieder (via Hildegard Publishing Company) based on manuscripts with initially murky origins.¹⁰⁹ These two lieder bore Alma's maiden name, Schindler, suggesting they were written before her 1902 marriage to Mahler. The first song, *Leise weht ein erstes Blühhn*, sets a text by Rainer Maria Rilke, a poet whose text Alma had set in *Fünf Lieder*. This text, like most of those selected by Alma, features themes of nature and beauty. The authorship of the text of the second song, *Meine Nächte*, was initially unknown, but was later discovered by Deborah Calland and Barry Millington to be a poem by Leo Greiner.

These pieces are some of the most extensive in her body of work, the first consisting of six pages and the second consisting of seven. More often, Alma tends to write short pieces, with many (such as *Laue Sommernacht* of *Fünf Lieder* and *Licht in er Nacht* of *Vier Lieder*) having durations as short as two or three pages.

¹⁰⁸ Mahler, *And the Bridge is Love*, 299.

¹⁰⁹ According to Filler's foreword in the *Two Lieder* score, the manuscripts were in the possession of Jack Diether, a Mahler scholar, but there is no information regarding their origin and Diether has since passed away.

One other piece has been published posthumously, and quite recently: *Einsamer Gang* published by The Wagner Journal in 2018. Deborah Calland and Barry Millington, the two behind the publishing of *Einsamer Gang*, found the manuscript along with the two lieder published by Susan Filler in 2000. Calland and Millington, however, sourced these manuscripts from the Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts at the University of Pennsylvania among the Mahler-Werfel papers housed there. Susan Filler had seemingly been unaware of this collection and had only Jack Diether's manuscripts of the first two lieder of the set at her disposal.¹¹⁰ These three songs, *Leise weht ein erstes Blühen*, *Meine Nächte*, and *Einsamer Gang* were put together by Carl Moll for possible publication, but they would only ever become printers' proofs.¹¹¹ Though only seventeen lieder survive, Alma's body of work was once much larger as evidenced by her diaries, which mention at least seventy three songs both named and unnamed, along with some piano and chamber pieces.¹¹²

Texts

Each of the seventeen surviving songs are set to German texts by German authors, with the exception of two Austrian authors, Rainer Rilke and Franz Werfel. The majority of authors were modern selections, active during Alma's lifetime, though she sets three texts by Romantic and post-Romantic authors Heinrich Heine and Novalis.¹¹³

There is a clear trend in the themes of Alma's selected texts. Most feature love, longing, and intimacy as a central theme, and many feature nature and its beauty. Even pieces without nature as a central theme often mention natural elements in passing: trees, flowers, forests.

¹¹⁰ Calland, Deborah, and Barry Millington. 2018. "Lonely Walk: An Unpublished Song by Alma Schindler-Mahler." *The Wagner Journal* 12 (3): 28.

¹¹¹ Calland, *Einsamer Gang*, 29.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 29.

¹¹³ Novalis was the pen name for Friedrich Leopold.

Another recurring element is nighttime or darkness. There is also the recurrence of darkness, evening or nighttime, and dreams or dreaming. In *Fünf Lieder*, three of the songs mention darkness or evening, and the remaining two mention dreaming or a dream-like state. All but the first, *Die Stille Stadt*, feature love and longing as central themes.

Richard Dehmel's texts are used most often; in fact, four of the seventeen surviving works include settings of his poetry. This comes as little surprise, as Dehmel was also a favorite of Zemlinsky, who in 1898 published a collection of four piano pieces based on Dehmel's texts.

Another recurring theme in Alma's music, and one found everywhere in *fin-de-siècle* and *Jugendstil* aesthetics, was eroticism. From Klimt's salacious paintings to Strauss's *Salomé*, eroticism had Vienna's musicians and artists and musicians in its grip. As ever, Alma was on the cutting edge of composition and did not shy away from the sexual in her music. In fact, according to Marcia Citron, *Ansturm of Vier Lieder* "could well be one of the earliest works by a woman set to a text on sexual desire and release."¹¹⁴

Compositional Style

Though she wrote much of her music in her late teens and early twenties, Alma established a distinct style during her studies. She had a clear preference for vocal music and aspired to eventually write an opera, though that would never come to fruition. Her songs tend to be short, and the piano part is often lush and chromatic while the vocal line is usually less complex. This is not to say that the vocal line is devoid of chromaticism — in fact, the opposite is true. However, Alma writes quite considerably for voice, likely because of her own

¹¹⁴ Citron, Marcia J. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. Cambridge [England]; New York: Cambridge University Press (1993): 223.

experience as a casual singer.¹¹⁵ The voice is always supported well by the piano and never subject to extreme registration or even disjunct lines. Every interval is written with the purpose of forward motion.

Alma's own pianistic skill is clear in the music. She was a master at the keyboard, often playing at social gatherings and tackling reductions of Wagner scores. Chords are often dense and quickly moving, with striking chromatic moments often only afforded only a brief moment before moving on to the next. Clear, rhythmically stable bass motion is common, with the left hand often providing a slower foundation for faster upper voices (Ex. 1). The piano is also often given large rolling chords, especially in faster or more intense sections of music (Ex. 2). Indeed, rolled chords can be found in every piece in *Fünf Lieder*, *Vier Lieder*, and *Fünf Gesänge*.



The image shows a musical score for the song "In meines Vaters Garten". It consists of three staves: a vocal line at the top, a right-hand piano accompaniment in the middle, and a left-hand piano accompaniment at the bottom. The vocal line begins with the word "Traum!" followed by "schlie - fen un - ter dem Ap - - fel -". The tempo/mood marking "zart" is placed above the first measure of the vocal line. The piano accompaniment features a steady, rhythmic bass line in the left hand and more complex, often chromatic, textures in the right hand.

Ex. 1: Bass motion in *In meines Vaters Garten*.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ It is clear in the diaries that Alma's preferred instrument was the piano, but she was a mezzo-soprano and sang occasionally at gatherings.

¹¹⁶ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

The image shows a musical score for the song "Licht in der Nacht" by Alma Mahler. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in G minor (one flat) and features the lyrics "einst Je - su Christ, - des Herrn - ausdrucksvoll". The piano part is characterized by chromaticism and rolled chords, with markings "steigernd" and "sf".

Ex. 2: Chromaticism and rolled chords in *Licht in der Nacht*.¹¹⁷

In both the vocal and piano parts, stepwise ascending or descending motion is common, usually featuring at least some chromaticism (Ex. 3). Alma does not shy away from chromatic harmony, and though each of her pieces feature a key signature, the music often wanders after an initial statement of the tonic triad. Passing or neighboring motion is often harmonized with chromatic, non-functional chords, surely a habit picked up from her idol, Wagner. Indeed, her love of Wagner was likely a major contributor to Alma's skill at the piano and ear for chromatic harmony.

In all of the lieder, there are no extended introductions. The voice enters quickly, never having to wait more than two full measures. In some instances (such as in *Ich wandle unter Blumen* and *In meines Vaters Garten*), the voice enters immediately, and in *Hymne an die Nacht*, it makes its entrance before the piano.

¹¹⁷ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

Ex. 3: Chromaticism in stepwise ascending and descending lines in piano, as well as the ascending vocal line in *Laue Sommernacht* (C#-D-D#-E-F#); chromatic passing harmony in the piano.¹¹⁸

Analysis: Fünf Lieder

During a crisis in their marriage, Gustav lifted his ban on Alma’s composing. For fear of losing his wife, he pulled out some of her lieder—composed years before, likely during her studies with Zemlinsky—and encouraged her to revisit them. With his help, the pieces were published in 1910 by Universal Edition. The lieder are written for mezzo-soprano and piano. Her skill at the keyboard is apparent in the writing—these pieces are dramatic, often urgent, and marked with chromatic arpeggiated chords. Follet calls Mahler’s harmonic language “chromatic, dramatic, and erotic,” with “an exquisite sensitivity to the poetry on display at all times.”¹¹⁹ The pieces are reminiscent of Zemlinsky’s *fin-de-siècle* chromaticism.

All of the lieder are set to strophic texts, with the exception of *Laue Sommernacht*. There is no apparent relation between the key areas of each piece

¹¹⁸ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

¹¹⁹ Follet, Diane. “Redeeming Alma: The Songs of Alma Mahler.” *College Music Symposium* 44 (2004): 29.

I. Die Stille Stadt	Richard Dehmel	D minor / D major
II. In meines Vaters Garten	Otto Erich Hartleben	Ab Major
III. Laue Sommernacht	Gustav Falke	A Major
IV. Bei dir is est traut	Rainer Maria Rilke	D Major
V. Ich wandle unter Blumen	Heinrich Heine	C Major

Fig. 8: The five lieder, the author of each text, and the general key areas.

1. Die Stille Stadt

The set begins with *Die Stille Stadt*. The text is by Richard Dehmel—a favorite of Zemlinsky—and describes a sleepy town that has nearly disappeared in an oppressive fog:

Die Stille Stadt

Liegt eine Stadt im Tale,
ein blasser Tag vergeht.
es wird nicht lange dauern mehr,
bis weder Mond noch Sterne
nur Nacht am Himmel steht.

Von allen Bergen drücken
nebel auf die Stadt,
es dringt kein Dach, nicht Hof noch Haus,
kein Laut aus ihrem Rauch heraus,
kaum Türme noch und Brücken.

Doch als dem Wanderer graute,
da ging ein Lichtlein auf im Grund
und durch den Rauch und Nebel
begann ein leiser Lobgesang
aus Kindermund.

The Silent City

A town lies in the valley,
A pale day is fading;
it will not be long
before neither moon nor stars
But night alone will deck the skies

From every mountain presses
fog on the town;
no roof, neither yard nor house,
no sound can penetrate the smoke,
Scarcely towers and bridges left.

But as fear seized the traveler,
a light appeared in the land;
and through the smoke and fog
came a faint song of praise
From a child's mouth.¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Translation © Richard Stokes, author of: *The Book of Lieder* (Faber); *The Complete Songs of Hugo Wolf* (Faber); *A French Song Companion* (Oxford University Press); *The Spanish Song Companion* (Scarecrow Press); *The Penguin Book of English Song* (Penguin Classics); and *J.S. Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (Scarecrow Press). Provided via Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk). While this translation is based on Stokes' version on the Oxford Lieder website, I have made some changes to present a more literal version of the text.

Die Stille Stadt begins with a measure rife with chromaticism, and we have no real sense of the key until a statement of the tonic chord at the beginning of measure two, where the voice makes its first entrance. The music begins with a D major chord on the downbeat that moves quickly through an F half-diminished seventh chord. The first measure is marked *andante* and *pianissimo*, a *ritardando* appearing halfway through the bar and a fermata placed above the double bar line at the end of the measure.

This opening measure's tonal and temporal ambiguity may represent the fog that has fallen on this valley town. Similarly, the beginning of each new line up until "von allen Bergen drücken. . ." is set to a descending melody in the voice—perhaps representing the descent of the fog onto the town. This descending vocal line is the primary theme, returning time and time again in the vocal line with some variation each time (see Ex. 4).

The image shows a musical score for the opening of 'Die Stille Stadt'. It consists of two staves: a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 4/4 time and begins with a fermata over the first measure, which is marked 'Andante'. The tempo then changes to 'Träumerisch (poco andante)'. The lyrics are 'Liegt ei - ne Stadt im Ta - le, ein'. The piano accompaniment starts with a *pp* dynamic and a *rit.* marking. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

Ex. 4: Opening vocal melody and first statement of descending theme in *Die Stille Stadt*.¹²¹

About halfway through the piece, in the pickup to measure 18, the tempo changes with the marking *sehr drängend*—very urgent. The rhythm changes from steady eighth, quarter, and half notes to pairs of dotted eighths and sixteenths on nearly each beat as the text states, “es dringt kein Dach noch Hofnoch Haus, kein Laut ans ihrem Rauch heraus, kaum Türme nach und Brücken.” The fog has fallen onto the town, and the singer has abandoned steady descending

¹²¹ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

melodic lines for a quick chromatic ascent as if the narrator is terrified and hopeless in the darkness.

Almost as quickly as the panic begins, however, it ends: the passage beginning in measure 22 is marked *Wieder zurückkehrend zu Tempo I*—returning again to tempo 1. The mystery is not lost—while the traveler enters the scene, *pianississimo* ascending sextuplets rise up in the left hand of the piano while clustered chords are struck on each eighth note in the right hand. The melody returns to its steady pattern while, in the piano, quick grace notes begin to decorate the right hand’s melody: F# flashing for only a second before F-natural takes over, faintly suggesting modal mixture and perhaps foreshadowing the arrival of the *Lichtlein*—little light—in the final stanza.¹²² In the final measures, the piano recalls the tonally ambiguous opening material from measure 1, but boasts what seems to be an enharmonically spelled augmented V chord with an added ninth (spelled A-Db-F-G-B — respelled as A-C#-E#-G-B) Before cadencing with a D major chord (see Ex. 5).

The image shows a musical score for the final measures of a piece. It consists of two staves: a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The vocal line is mostly silent, with a few notes in the final measure. The piano accompaniment starts with a tempo marking of 'Tempo I.' and a dynamic of 'mp'. It features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The tempo changes to 'Sehr langsam' and 'morendo' in the final measures. The dynamic is marked 'rit.' in the final measure. The score ends with a double bar line.

Ex. 5: Final measures of *Die Stille Stadt*.¹²³

¹²² Click, “Art Song,” 50.

¹²³ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

2. In Meines Vaters Garten

In meines Vaters Garten is the longest of the five lieder, appearing to be in a modified strophic form that reflects the poem's eight stanzas. The eight-stanza poem by Otto Hartleben (the only usage of Hartleben's work in the surviving songs) is quite a bit longer than the other texts, and in turn, this is one of Alma's longest pieces at a full nine pages. The text begins with a fond narration—perhaps a nod to Mahler's nostalgia for her own deceased father—of a garden and its apple tree, followed by an exclamation: "*Süsser Traum*" ("Sweet dream"), a recurring theme.

The second stanza describes three princesses sleeping under the apple tree, and the following stanzas focus on each daughter in turn: The youngest, who doesn't awake, is afforded one stanza. The second daughter, afforded three stanzas, hears drums and laments her lover's departure to war. This section, lasting from measure 56 to measure 88, is the most tumultuous, riddled with harmonic complexities and variations of familiar themes. It is marked "*ohne Pedal*", taking on the quality of military music.¹²⁴ The third daughter, in one stanza, also speaks of her beloved. The final stanza repeats the first almost exactly, with only one discrepancy: The "*schattender Apfelbaum*" of the first stanza is now a "*sonniger Apfelbaum*"—from a shady apple tree to a brighter, sunnier apple tree.

The first, second, and final stanzas are set in A-flat major, and each daughter exists in her own key area: the first in E major, the second in A major and then D minor, and the third in C major / A minor. These are the key signatures given, however, the language in all sections is often highly chromatic, sometimes obscuring tonal centrality. There are two recurring themes of note: the "*blühe, meine Herz, blüh' auf*" theme that first appears in the third complete measure, and the "*süßer Traum*" theme, which is always marked "*Gehalten*"—"held". The "*süßer Traum*" theme first appears in the ninth measure (see Ex. 6).

¹²⁴ Click, Sarah D., "Art Song by Turn-of-the-Century Female Composers." *University of North Texas*. (1993): 51.

Allegro Mit freiem Vortrag

In mei - nes Va - ters Gar - ten blü - he, mein Herz, blüh'

auf - in mei - nes Va - ters Gar - ten stand ein schat - ten - der

Ex. 6: Opening measures; the first appearance of *blühe mein Herz* theme in mm. 3-4.¹²⁵

The “*blühe*” theme is an exclamation embedded in each stanza, occurring eight times in the work with varying pitch material—either as a descending arpeggiation or a melodic ascent, usually the former, and is usually a measure and a half in length. In its first and second appearances, it descends the span of an octave through an arpeggiation of the tonic chord, Ab Major. When it appears in m. 40 in E major, it descends through the tonic chord in the first half of the measure but features a G-natural in the second half while the piano accompanies with a German augmented sixth chord. It lands on B dominant seventh chord with a 4-3 suspension (E to D# in measure 41) (see Ex. 7).

¹²⁵ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

Ex. 7: *Blühe, mein Herz* in mm 40-41.¹²⁶

When the *blühe* theme makes its next appearance in measure 62 (see Ex. 8), it begins with neighboring motion from F# down to E and then back—accompanied by what appears to be a B minor ninth chord—before leaping up to a C#. The melody quickly touches the B below on the final eighth-note beat of the bar and skips up a fourth to an E in measure 63, where it is accompanied by a I chord in A major. This is followed by what seems to be another German augmented sixth chord, this time in the diminished third inversion and spread over the latter half of the bar.

Ex. 8: *Blühe, mein Herz* in mm. 62-63.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

¹²⁷ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

When the next *blühe* theme appears in measure 71, it has returned to the arpeggiating motion from the beginning with some variation—it spans an F# major chord in first inversion. The F major / D minor key signature persists, so this chord seems to relate to the C# dominant seventh chord struck on the next beat. The downbeat of the following bar is a resolution to a dense F major chord. There is a dissonant E-flat—perhaps to provide some phrygian motion in relation to D minor—in the piano’s left hand that moves quickly down through D and D-flat to land on C on the next beat.

In meines Vaters Garten is the longest in this set and one of the longest surviving works, as Alma’s lieder tend to average at two to three pages in length. It is also one of the more harmonically adventurous. Alma expertly navigates many key areas and explores chromatic, Wagnerian harmonies in each. Despite the complexity of the music, there is never any lack of cohesion or beauty. The melody floats over the thunderous piano textures, the lyrical motion and dissonant harmonies mingling to create a glimpse into Alma’s potential as an operatic composer.

3. Laue Sommernacht

Laue Sommernacht arrives in the middle of *Fünf Lieder*, rich with tension and release. The piece is quite brief—only two pages—but is one of the more intense movements of the set. It drives forward and pulls back, the singer’s melody rushed and climbing chromatically before bursting into a grand climax and pulling back to start over again.

Like so many of the poems Alma chose to set, this text (by German poet Gustav Falke) is romantic, intense, and intimate.

Laue Sommernacht

Laue Sommernacht: am Himmel
Stand kein Stern, im weiten Walde
Suchten wir uns tief im Dunkel,
Und wir fanden uns.

Fanden uns im weiten Walde
In der Nacht, der sternenlosen,
Hielten staunend uns im Arme
In der dunklen Nacht.

War nicht unser ganzes Leben
So ein Tappen, so ein Suchen?
Da: In seine Finsternisse,
Liebe, fiel dein Licht.

Warm Summer Night

Warm (mild) summer night: in the sky
There were no stars, in the wide forest
We searched for each other in the dark
And we found each other.

Found each other in the wide wood
In the night, the starless (night),
Held us, amazed, embraced
In the dark night.

Was not our entire life
Such a blunder (groping), such a search?
There: In its darkness,
Love, fell your light.¹²⁸

Laue Sommernacht is in A major, though it often wanders harmonically. It is marked at the beginning with *Etwas drängend*: “somewhat urgent” (see Ex. 9). The piano plays alone in the first two bars, the first measure marked *stringendo*, the second marked *ritardando*. This quick push and pull prepares us for the temporal flexing rampant in this piece. As is so typical of Alma’s writing, the downbeat establishes A major with a quick statement of the tonic triad before quickly moving along to other, more interesting harmonies. While the outer voices wander through chromaticism, their arrival at the dominant at the end of the second measure is suggested by the sustained E in the tenor. The melody in the right hand sits low, dipping below the treble clef staff and never rising above the second line. It spins out pairs of notes that fall and rise in pairs—A to G# followed by a leap up a fifth to D to D#, then Bb to A followed by E to F#, which breaks the half-step pattern before returning to it with C# to B#. Finally, the melody leaps up to G#. The motion is breath-like—an intense exhale-inhale on the way from tonic to

¹²⁸ Translation © Richard Stokes, author of: *The Book of Lieder* (Faber); *The Complete Songs of Hugo Wolf* (Faber); *A French Song Companion* (Oxford University Press); *The Spanish Song Companion* (Scarecrow Press); *The Penguin Book of English Song* (Penguin Classics); and *J.S. Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (Scarecrow Press). Provided via Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk). Again, I have made some adjustments to this translation.

dominant, all rushed forward, driven by passion. The breathing lands on the second half of the measure, suspended: The quarter note F# on the third beat of measure 2 comes at the end of the *ritardando*, taking its time to relish in the dissonance and build the anticipation of the resolution that finally, gratefully comes on the final beat. A satisfying ending to the motion, yes, but it leaves the listener wanting more.

All the while, the bass rises steadily under the unsteady soprano. It begins diatonically, with the tonic triad on the first beat and leading up through a dominant seventh chord in second inversion on the second beat, but the music quickly strays from A major with a C natural that suggests modal mixture. Paired with the D# and Bb on the same beat, the result is a highly chromatic passing motion towards I6 on the fourth beat of the measure. The Bb in the soprano resolves down to the A and the D# seems to have a delayed resolution to E. The pairing of the C (*me*) natural and D# (*fi*) on beat three may also hint at a sort of incomplete German augmented sixth chord, a common find in these lieder.

From here, into the second measure, the bass continues its chromatic ascent towards V. The downbeat of measure two sounds a IV chord in root position with the sustained E acting as a suspended second over the bass. On the second beat, we are pulled through a surprising G# major chord preceding the dramatic landing on V⁷ with an accented F# suspension that decays as it resolves to E.

Though short, this fragment exemplifies several aspects of Alma's style: chromatic ascension, chromatic passing harmonies, flexible tempi, and above all, rich color and drama.



Ex. 9: Opening bars of *Laue Sommernacht*.¹²⁹

The voice enters in the third measure, marked *Sehr frei im Vortrag*: “very free in performance.” The voice rises chromatically from C# to D#, each syllable lasting only an eighth note until an ascending leap to F# is sustained with a dotted quarter note marked with a fermata. This fermata is marked with an asterisk with a note that clarifies with the phrase “Alle Halte nur kurz!” — “All stops only briefly!”

This melodic pattern appears immediately again, transposed up a perfect fourth now: Chromatically ascending eighth notes followed by a minor third leap to a pitch sustained by a fermata. While the first statement in measure 3 landed on a I6 chord, the second statement ends with an inverted applied dominant: V 4/3 of V. This dominant chord doesn’t resolve as expected—the D# falls to D-natural in a G major chord on the downbeat of the fifth measure. The F# in the bass continues its rising motion: G and then G#.

The melody here remains mostly diatonic to A major (see Ex. 10). and though the harmony is anything but, the piano is marked *nachgeben*: give way. The melody rises and falls, perhaps vaguely suggesting V-I motion: It peaks on E (“*Walde*”) and lands in measure 6 on A (“*uns*”). This is followed by another paired melodic idea: “*tief im Dunkel*” outlining a B minor

¹²⁹ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

triad and “und wir fanden uns” following the same shape, but dipping down to an F natural to outline a B diminished triad.

Ex. 10: Measures 6-7 of *Laue Sommernacht*.¹³⁰

The peak of each phrase on D is suspended in time, the first (“*Dunkel*”) marked with a fermata, the second (“*fanden uns*”) marked with a ritardando. This recalls the similar motion found in the opening lines: The end of each thought landing high and being held in time. Measure 7 could possibly be considered an arrival at the dominant seventh with the E in the bass and the D in voice, but the G#’s arrival is delayed by an F and A suspended in the right hand. Not considering the E in the bass, the right hand falls through seventh chords: a B half-diminished seventh chord followed by an A half-diminished seventh and then a G# fully diminished seventh on the final beat, which leads us back to the tonic at last.

Measure 8 recalls melodic material from the voice’s first entrance while the piano recalls measure 1 in the sustained E in the tenor and the ascent from A in the bass. This time, the melody doesn’t float up to the F# from D# (as in measure 3: “*Sommernacht*”) but continues a stepwise ascent: D#-E-F# and then a short fall to F natural on “*Nacht*” which seems to fill in the gap between E and F. After *Nacht* in measure 9, the melody leaps up a tritone to B at the start of

¹³⁰ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

the next thought: “*Der Sternenlosen*” specifies that the night in question was starless, pitch black. The B falls down a perfect fifth to E, down again to D#, and finally slides back up to A.

Laue Sommernacht ends with a thickly voiced E dominant seventh harmony. F# is suspended in octaves in the right hand of the piano, marked with a fermata, before resolving to E, which also bears a fermata. The piece churns ever forward, often rushed, and upon arriving at the finale, the listener is robbed of resolution. The 9-8 suspension above the final harmony gives the effect of a breath, a longing that will never be relieved.

4. Bei dir ist es traut

Bei dir ist es traut is another two-page piece, but that is where its similarity to *Laue Sommernacht* ends—the mood is much more subdued and not so urgent. The text is a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke, an Austrian poet whose text Alma used in another piece published posthumously, *Leise weht ein erstes Blühen*. *Bei dir ist es traut* is, like so many of Alma’s selected texts, is about love and intimacy.

Bei dir ist es traut:
Zage Uhren schlagen
wie aus weiten Tagen.
Komm mir ein Liebes sagen -
aber nur nicht laut.

I feel warm and close with you:
clocks strike hesitantly,
Like they did in distant days.
Say something loving to me -
But not aloud.

Ein Tor geht irgendwo
draussen im Blüentrieben.
Der Abend horcht an den Scheiben.
Lass uns leise bleiben:
Keiner weiss uns so.

A gate opens somewhere
Out in the burgeoning.
Evening listens at the window-panes.
Let us stay quiet,
No one knows us thus.¹³¹

¹³¹ Translation © Richard Stokes, author of: *The Book of Lieder* (Faber); *The Complete Songs of Hugo Wolf* (Faber); *A French Song Companion* (Oxford University Press); *The Spanish Song Companion* (Scarecrow Press); *The Penguin Book of English Song* (Penguin Classics); and *J.S. Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (Scarecrow Press). Provided via Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk).

The opening measure is marked *Nicht langsam*—not slow—but there is little of the urgency that drove *Laue Sommernacht* forward (see Ex. 11). Like the rest of the *Fünf Lieder* with the notable exception of *In meines Vaters Garten*, *Bei dir ist traut* is in 4/4 time. From the start, the piano establishes a rhythmic motive that it will retain for the first half of the piece: quarter, two eighths, quarter, two eighths. The downbeats of the first five measures are accented, the treble part maintaining the pitch A, each decorated with a grace note upper neighbor. The left hand establishes a pattern consisting of an alternation of quarter and eighth notes as the bass line descends slowly from D to C# to C natural to B.

The image shows the opening measures of the song "Bei dir ist traut" from the cycle "Fünf Lieder". The score is in 4/4 time and marked "Nicht langsam". It consists of three systems. The first system shows the vocal line starting with a whole note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5. The piano accompaniment begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The right hand plays a melodic line starting on A4, with grace notes on G#4 and A4. The left hand plays a bass line starting on D4, with a pattern of quarter and eighth notes. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "Bei dir ist es traut," and the piano accompaniment. The third system shows the vocal line ending with a whole note G4 and the piano accompaniment.

Ex. 11: Opening measures of *Bei dir ist traut*.¹³²

This rhythmic pattern continues, usually stated in the inner voices of the piano. The vocal melody is broad, rhythmically simple, and mostly diatonic. Though this is one of the simpler pieces in *Fünf Lieder*, it is no less sophisticated. The music is gentle and soft, the grace notes playful. The narrator speaks privately to their lover, comfortable in their presence. The ending offers some resolution but leaves room for longing, as is typical with Alma's finales. In the penultimate measures, A is sustained in the bass but never makes the expected jump to tonic. Instead, the right hand climbs in stepwise motion up from A3 to D5, and the tonic is finally heard in second inversion with no bass support.

¹³² Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

V. Ich wandle unter Blumen

The final piece in this set, *Ich wandle unter Blumen*, is also the shortest, consisting of only fifteen measures on a single page. Still, this single page boasts no less than five tempi markings. The text is from Heinrich Heine's 1844 book *Neue Gedicht* ("New Poems").

Ich wandle unter Blumen
Und blühe selber mit;
Ich wandle wie im Traume,
Und schwanke bei jedem Schritt.

I walk among flowers
And bloom with them;
I walk as in a dream,
And sway with every step.

O, halt mich fest, Geliebte!
Vor Liebestrunkenheit
Fall ich dir sonst zu Füßen,
Und der Garten ist voller Leut!

Oh, hold me fast, beloved!
Before, love-drunk,
I fall at your feet,
And the garden is full of people!¹³³

This little poem might have appealed to a young Alma because of its reflection of her own social life: Her diary is rife with recaps of evenings spent drinking at parties and walking home with an admirer. Alma mentions this piece by name on January 6, 1899: "In five minutes, I've just composed a little song, 'Ich wandle unter Blumen'. I don't know if it's any good. All I know is that it's full of passion. The whole thing is one chromatic run! It's crazy – it will probably give Labor a pretty nasty turn."¹³⁴

The opening is marked with *Träument*: Dreaming (see Ex. 12). There are no accidentals in the key signatures, and the first beat seems to announce C major. The voice enters on G before the piano joins with a C in the bass and the rest of the tonic triad spelled out in tenor and alto. The piano sits low for the entirety of this piece, the treble clef left entirely empty with the

¹³³ Translation © Richard Stokes, author of: *The Book of Lieder* (Faber); *The Complete Songs of Hugo Wolf* (Faber); *A French Song Companion* (Oxford University Press); *The Spanish Song Companion* (Scarecrow Press); *The Penguin Book of English Song* (Penguin Classics); and *J.S. Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (Scarecrow Press). Provided via Oxford Lieder (www.oxfordlieder.co.uk).

¹³⁴ Beaumont, *Diaries*, 85.

exception of the final six measures, and even there, it doesn't breach the second line until the very end.

In the two first measures, the piano moves between the tonic C major triad and a neighboring D# diminished 7, changing harmony on every beat. The pitch C2 is struck low in the bass, and the tenor and alto voices sound the remainder of the chord in a pair of intervals: Each two beats bears a linear intervallic pattern of 6-5-4-4 between tenor and alto. The voice sustains a static contour, staying on G all the while, mostly limited to steady quarter note rhythms.

In the third measure, the voice begins its chromatic ascent to Ab while the piano continues a similar pattern with a harmony that might be considered an incomplete augmented sixth (spelled Ab-C-Gb with Gb acting as F#) chord, but is more of a passing motion to the Db chord that occurs in the next measure. In measure 4, the bass rises from Db to Ab while the alto and tenor outline Db major, Ab major, and Db major again. The voice remains on Ab, not rising again until measure 5, where it passes to A natural. Here, the piano seems to take the material from measures 3 and 4 and transpose it up one half step. Measure 7 is marked *Langsam*: slow. The voice moves now between B and A while the piano adopts a whole-tone feeling, octave Gs struck in the left hand and pairs of G-B and F-A played back and forth in the right. Measure 8 is marked *ritardando*, putting a gentle, dream-like end to this first section. The first stanza of the poem has been set, and quite effectively.

The image shows a musical score for the song "Ich wandle unter Blumen" by Alma Mahler. It is divided into two systems. The first system is marked "Träumend" and the second "Langsam rit.". The vocal line is in the upper staff and the piano accompaniment is in the lower staff. The lyrics are: "Ich wand - le un - ter Blu - men und blü - he sel - ber mit, ich wand - le wie im Trau - me und schwan - ke bei je - dem Schritt."

Ex. 12: Opening eight measures of *Ich wandle unter Blumen*.¹³⁵

Measure 9 is marked *Plötzlich sehr schnell*: Suddenly very fast. Just as at the opening, the voice enters first, steady rhythms abandoned for frantic eighths, dotted eighths, and sixteenths. The piano's only new contribution to this bar is a quickly struck C diminished chord (in first inversion) on the third beat, marked *sf*. Again, the voice is drawn upward, chromatically rising from B to F over the course of measures 9, 10, and 11. From F, the voice drops down to B \flat , but quickly, staying there for only half a beat before leaping up to G5 in measure 12, which in turn leaps *down* the octave to G4. Here we see another example of text painting: "*fall' ich dir sonst zu Füßen*"—otherwise I fall at your feet—starts on E5 and lands dramatically on G4, perhaps illustrating the narrator's potential collapse at the feet of her beloved.

¹³⁵ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

Comparative Analysis

Walter Frisch describes a dichotomy between German musical inspiration in the latter half of the nineteenth century: there were those “radiating intense warmth and light” of Wagner, and there were the followers of Brahms, “shrouded in a cold, dense mist.”¹³⁶ In his study of the early works of Arnold Schoenberg, Frisch focuses in on the “Brahms fog,” that “penetrated the heart of Austro-German music”¹³⁷ around the turn of the century. The essential Brahmsian genres were piano works, chamber music, and, of course, lieder. Zemlinsky, too, was subject to Brahms’s influence and even met with him on several occasions.¹³⁸ Alma’s music seems to exist more in the “light” of Wagner’s influence with its daring chromaticism and thick piano textures, but even she was touched by this “Brahms fog,” perhaps most apparently in her broad, smooth vocal lines.

Because of her education from Zemlinsky and life-long friendship to Schoenberg, it is not unlikely that there exists some crossover between their music. It may be assumed by some that, because of her age and relative inexperience, Alma was less capable or complex than her contemporaries, but just a brief analysis of her surviving pieces reveals music that is harmonically interesting, dramatically effective, and above all, beautiful.

Alma’s music has been analyzed in comparison to Zemlinsky’s in the past, namely by Sally Macarthur in her 2001 book, *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*. The second chapter, titled, “The Power of Sound, the Power of Sex: Alma Schindler-Mahler’s *Ansturm*,” discusses Vienna’s views on women and sexuality before delving into a thorough analysis of both Alma and Zemlinsky’s settings of the same Richard Dehmel poem, “*Ansturm*.” The title means “assault” or

¹³⁶ Frisch, *The Early Works*, 4.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

“onslaught,” but proves some difficulty in translation: “Margit Franklin-Speath says that the word Ansturm is not used very often in the German language in the late 20th century and that it is difficult to translate. What seems to be implied by the word in relation to the poem, however, is a sense of turbulence in relation to passion.”¹³⁹ Alma’s setting does not lack in passion, given the repeated use of unresolved dominant seventh chords and the unsettled, open ending.

Alma’s setting of Ansturm bears the familiar temporal flexibility found in the rest of her lieder. The time signature changes often, established in cut time but peppered with isolated measures of 2/4 and 3/4 before transitioning entirely to 4/4 for the final eight measures. The piece has no key signature and opens with an A half-diminished seventh chord in first inversion. There is no real sense of modality, but the centricity of A throughout the piece suggests a strenuous connection to A minor or A major. The first musical climax comes early, at the end of the first stanza: “*Ans Licht! Ans Licht!*” (to light, to light!). Later in the piece, there is a secondary, less powerful climax on the text, “*jäh über deinen Frieden strandet*” (suddenly washes over your peace).

In Zemlinsky’s setting of the poem, there is only one musical climax and it is somewhat delayed, which is more typical of Romantic and early Modern lied.¹⁴⁰ It occurs on the same text as Alma’s second: “*jäh über deinen Frieden strandet*.” Both Alma and Zemlinsky utilize a wide range of dynamics, and both mix modes. The vocal melody in Zemlinsky’s setting is broad and lyrical (see Ex. 13), whereas Alma’s vocal line has more of a conversational quality.¹⁴¹ Because of the faster, more irregular rhythms in the vocal part and the whole note accompaniment in the

¹³⁹ Macarthur, *Feminist Aesthetics*, 79.

¹⁴⁰ Scott, Rachel E., “Taking Her at Her Work: Reconsidering the Legacy of Alma Mahler.” *Faculty and Staff Publications – Milner Library* (2021): 155.

¹⁴¹ Scott, Rachel E., “Taking Her at Her Work,” 146.

piano, the opening of Alma's setting resembles a recitative, reminding us again of her operatic inspiration (see Ex. 14).

Zemlinsky's setting is darker than Alma's: the piano part creates rhythmic turbulence from the beginning with steady syncopation. The piano starts quite low, both hands playing in the bass clef. The voice, on the other hand, is set quite high, starting on the top of the treble clef. His repeated usage of Eb gives the piece a dark, phrygian quality. The first measure is marked *Leidenschaftlich bewegt*—passionately moved—and the dynamic is mezzo piano with a crescendo starting on the vocal line's entrance (see Ex. 13). In contrast, Alma's setting is marked *In Heftiger Bewegung*—in violent motion—at the beginning, and the piano is marked with a sforzando. Staying true to her tendencies to keep meter and rhythm flexible, the first measure is also marked rubato.

Leidenschaftlich bewegt

O zür - ne nicht, wenn mein Be -

mp *cresc.*

Ex. 13: Opening three measures of Zemlinsky's *Ansturm*.¹⁴²

¹⁴² Reprinted by kind permission of Hal Leonard Europe BV (Italy)

In heftiger Bewegung. Rubato

Gesang
 O zür - ne nicht, wenn mein Be - geh - ren dun - kel aus sei - nen Grenzen
 bricht, soll es uns sel - ber nicht ver - zeh - ren,

Piano
 sfz
 sfz
 sfz

Ex. 14: Opening seven measures of Alma's *Ansturm*.¹⁴³

Clearly, Zemlinsky and Alma shared an affinity for chromatic harmonic language. Being several years Alma's senior and more of a Brahms follower, one might surmise that Zemlinsky's lieder tends to maintain characteristics of the late Romantic style while forging ahead into Modernism. Alma, on the other hand, is more Wagnerian and quite often more harmonically adventurous than her teacher. Her diaries make it clear that she enjoyed and was challenged by her lessons with Zemlinsky, and the intent of this paper is not to compare their compositional styles for the sake of arguing that one may be better than the other. It can be argued, however, that Alma's lieder are just as deserving of attention in academic and performance settings as Zemlinsky's and even Schoenberg's. She clearly writes skillfully in the passionate, chromatic harmonic language that was so characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle*.

¹⁴³ Alma Mahler "Sämtliche Lieder" (c) Reproduced by kind permission of Universal Edition AG, Wien /UE 18016

Conclusions

Alma Mahler may be remembered primarily as the wife of Gustav Mahler, but she was a skilled and innovative composer in her own right. Though the turn of the century saw the genesis of feminist movements that would later revolutionize the world, Alma came into adulthood with patriarchal expectations placed upon her. Fortunately, Alma was born into a privileged and artistic family that not only exposed her to the fine arts from a young age, but could also afford to have her tutored at home when a more formal education was not an option. This early training in music and exposure to the arts would spark a passion for composing that would remain for the rest of her life. As she came of age, she composed with serious intent and aspiration for musical greatness despite societal restrictions placed on women. Marrying Gustav Mahler would put a stop to her composing, but her love for music would remain. Despite the small number of surviving pieces, it is clear from what remains and from Alma's diaries that she was a skilled and prolific composer.

Because of her societal disadvantages as a woman and perhaps also because of her small oeuvre, Alma's works have not been afforded the same attention and respect as those of her contemporaries. Often she is remembered first as the wife of the great Gustav Mahler. Further, academia has often been unkind to Alma, and she has often been presented as cruel, promiscuous, and dishonest. Fortunately, in recent years, there has been a cultural shift that has empowered academics to challenge old ideals and begin to take Alma's writings seriously. Critical examination of her life and writings shows that she was not the malicious, difficult wife to a creative genius, but a young woman rushed into a severely unbalanced and tumultuous marriage. Analysis of her music, too, shows that she was a capable and passionate composer.

Her music displays her love of Wagner and opera and the harmonic language boasts daring chromaticism. She had the qualities of a promising early Modernist composer, and if she had been born a man, or perhaps if Gustav had nurtured her composing instead of banning it entirely, it is likely she would have been quite a successful composer. From her treatment of harmony, it is easy to believe that she might have been quite innovative. Perhaps her works could have continued to develop and even explore the later emancipation of dissonance alongside the likes of Schoenberg. In any case, the surviving works are sensitive, complex, and worthy of study and performance. Alma Mahler, like so many composers from underrepresented groups, has often been reduced to her role as a wife and an artistic muse. The goal of this thesis is to challenge some of the existing perceptions of Alma and present evidence of her compositional abilities that demonstrate how she is deserving of recognition and remembrance in her own right.

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