

The World of Yesterday *The Life and Loves of Alma Mahler*

Ensemble for the Romantic Century

Thursday, 13 March 2003, 8:00 PM
The Kosciuszko Foundation
15 East 65 Street, New York

Text by Eve Wolf, based on Alma Mahler's diaries and memoirs.

Igor Begelman, clarinet
Ronald Feldman, cello
Mary Nessinger, mezzo-soprano
Eve Wolf, piano

Peggy Penn, narrator

Donald T. Sanders, stage director

Ms. Eve Wolf's dress was designed by Conte Fabio Zingaro Lazzarotto

Ensemble for the Romantic Century would like to extend special thanks to Dr. Jonathan Lampert for his sponsorship of this concert

PROGRAM

ALMA MAHLER	<i>Die stille Stadt</i>
RICHARD STRAUSS	<i>Ständchen</i> , op. 17, no. 2 <i>Zueignung</i> , op. 10, no. 1
JOHANN STRAUß	Wiener Blut, op. 354
JOHANNES BRAHMS	<i>Gestillte Sehnsucht</i> , op. 91, no. 1
RICHARD WAGNER	<i>Isoldens Liebestod</i> (trans. Franz Liszt)

INTERMISSION

ALEXANDER ZEMLINSKY	<i>Klagen ist der Mond gekommen</i> , op. 6, no. 2
GUSTAV MAHLER	<i>Phantasie</i>
ALEXANDER ZEMLINSKY	Trio for clarinet, cello and piano, op. 3 - Allegro ma non troppo - Andante - Allegro
GUSTAV MAHLER	<i>Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen</i>

PROGRAM NOTES

When Alma Mahler (1879-1964) married the architect Walter Gropius in 1915, after a tempestuous affair with the expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka, Gropius's mother wrote to him:

You have obviously found a real treasure, and a rare and fine human being with rich inner resources has become yours... even if many of her ideas, habits and views are foreign and strange to me. Her being very spoiled in every way worries me often... in many ways I much admire her because she is intelligent and overwhelming... I never saw anyone of such a manifold nature (quoted Reginald Isaacs, *Gropius: An Illustrated Biography of the Creator of the Bauhaus*, 1991).

Alma's "manifold nature" touched many lives in Vienna in the early years of the 20th century. Born Alma Schindler, the daughter of the prominent painter Emil Jakob Schindler, she was raised in the sheltered environment of the Viennese bourgeoisie and was exposed from an early age to the artistic intelligentsia of the city. Endowed with an elusive beauty that was at once mysterious and commonplace, she soon recognized her seductive powers and even took advantage of a hearing deficiency that forced her to lean very close to her interlocutors, thus watching the movements of their lips with the soft, contemplative gaze of her famously beautiful eyes. Throughout her life, she married the composer Gustav Mahler, the architect Walter Gropius, and the playwright and novelist Franz Werfel, in addition to having high-profile affairs with the painters Oskar Kokoschka and Gustav Klimt, the composers Alexander Zemlinsky, Franz Schreker and Hans Pfitzner, and a Catholic priest called Hollnsteiner, whom she initiated into sex. She had two children by Mahler, one of which was conceived before they were married; one by Gropius; and one by Werfel, conceived while she was still married to Gropius. Her daughter with Gropius, whom she named Manon after the character of Manon Lescaut in Puccini's opera, died at 17 years of age, and it was to her that Alban Berg wrote his famous Violin Concerto, which he entitled "To the Memory of an Angel". Of all her children, only Mahler's second daughter, Anna, survived into adulthood.

Shortly before dying, Manon reportedly told her mother: "Mami, you'll get over it just as you get over everything." Then, probably in an attempt to tame the harshness of her statement, she amended it to "just as everyone gets over everything." As for Anna, in a statement to Alma's biographer Karen Monson, she remarked that her "mother Alma was a legend, and legends are hard to destroy." Alma Mahler cultivated the legend that was to become herself from an early age and with a clearness of purpose that would not sway before any adverse circumstance. It is virtually impossible to offer an accurate assessment of her views and values, because the surviving materials—her diaries and later memoirs—are infused by the dictates of her myth-making personality. Her reaction to the outbreak of the First World War was symptomatic: "I sometimes imagine that *I* have caused this whole upheaval, in order to experience some kind of awakening or reconciliation—and that might also mean death." In one of her first letters to Gustav Mahler, she wrote so forcefully about *being* a personality, that the composer was at once alarmed and concerned. He responded with one of the most famous letters documenting their relationship:

A human being can only acquire the sort of personality you mean after a long experience of struggle and suffering and thanks to an inherent and powerfully developed disposition... you couldn't possibly already be the sort of person who's found a rational ground for her existence within herself and who, in all circumstances, maintains and develops her own individual and immutable nature and preserves it from all that's alien and negative, for everything in you is as yet unformed, unspoken and undeveloped. Although you are an adorable, infinitely adorable and enchanting young girl with an upright soul and a richly talented, frank and already self-assured person, you are still not a personality... 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 (quoted in *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, 1968).

The last sentence summarizes the nature of Alma's marriage to Gustav Mahler, which took place in 1902. Later, while regretting that her ambitions as a composer had been curtailed by Mahler's uncompromising personality, she made a comment about Pfitzner that would probably be more appropriate to Mahler himself: "in persons of great significance I recognize the right to absolute selfishness." Furthermore, once her husbands died and her love affairs had faded away, she took refuge in Mahler's enduring fame as a token of social recognition and respect. She continued to tend to her status as the widow of the great Gustav Mahler up to her own death in New York in 1964. The poet Tom Lehrer celebrated her in a poem which includes the following strophe:

*Alma, tell us,
How can they help being jealous?
Ducks always envy the swans
Who get Gustav and Walter—you never did falter—
With Gustav and Walter and Franz*

The environment in which Alma Mahler sang her swan song was one of the most exciting periods in the history of Western culture. A confluence of social, political, and intellectual factors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries turned Vienna into a fertile ground for some of the most innovative artistic movements of the modern age. The city fostered the aesthetics of *Art Nouveau* and the visual fantasies of Gustav Klimt, the psychologically tormented art of Egon Schiele, the streamlined architecture of Adolf Loos and Otto Wagner, the sexually charged plays of Arthur Schnitzler, the atonal music of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein, and the groundbreaking psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud. Viennese culture flourished in the many cafes where intellectuals, critics, artists, musicians, writers, and political personalities met to discuss the pressing issues of the times, and the city seemed to live in a state of continuous awareness about the possibilities of artistic creation. Because much of the intellectual and artistic life of the city centered around Jewish artists, anti-Semitism was an ever-present factor in social relations. Alma's views mirrored those of other members of her social circle, all of whom were caught in endless speculation about the nature of race, the contrast between Aryan "brightness" (to which Alma refers when commenting about her heritage in one of her diary entries) and Jewish "darkness". These juxtapositions were commonplace in Vienna at the time, and when Alma married Franz Werfel in 1929 the prospects for the Jews of Central Europe were already gloomy. In the past, anti-Semitic feelings did not prevent her from falling in love with her mentor Alexander Zemlinsky, nor marrying Gustav Mahler himself (who was Jewish but converted to Catholicism). It is difficult to evaluate the specificity of her views on the Jewish question because many of her recorded thoughts are hopelessly vague, like this diary entry:

Most Jewish melodies begin with a dissonance, such as the Wedding March from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Barcarolle from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann*. That's because they have not yet found their Messiah and thus they still strive toward the ultimate promise! We start with the C-major chord, as in the Prelude to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, face up to the conflicts and end in Christ, who was and is...! Is he real?

The ambivalence that was such a defining feature of Viennese culture in the early 20th century was reflected in all its artistic products. In music, the coexistence of the most advanced experiments with the unremitting tradition of the bourgeois waltz was a case in point, and many have looked back at that world, immediately before the outbreak of the First World War, as a mindless waltzing toward the

abyss. In a city that embraced the *joie de vivre* expressed by Johann Strauß's waltzes as well as the probing psychoanalytic theories of Freud, it is easy to understand the coexistence of conflicting states of mind, of which the works in tonight's program offer a glimpse.

THE SONGS

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the tradition of the German *Lied* as crystallized in the songs of Schubert, Schumann, and Brahms underwent profound transformations. While the *Lied* with piano accompaniment continued to provide the standard for the genre, experiments in blending the intimacy of song with the luxuriant sonorities of the orchestra were carried out by **Gustav Mahler** (1860-1911) and **Richard Strauss** (1864-1949), both of whom orchestrated some of their *Lieder* originally written for voice and piano. Both songs by Strauss included in this program (*Ständchen* and *Zueignung*) exist in versions for voice and piano, and for voice and orchestra. *Ständchen*, which undoubtedly works better in its voice and piano version, belongs to a rare type of song in Strauss's output. In its coquettish mood, enhanced by a piano texture of great sparkle, it can be related to the portrayal of some of Strauss's operatic characters, such as Zerbinetta in *Ariadne auf Naxos*. In the context of his songs, however, Strauss often preferred texts that treated love in a more serious and philosophical nature, to which he could bring his considerable powers of musical commentary and expression—it should not be forgotten that Strauss was a consummate master of depicting visual sensations in music. *Zueignung*, composed when Strauss was 18, was the first song he published. It comprises three related strophes, each one ending with the same vow of gratitude to the beloved. The song has all the hallmarks of Strauss's vocal style, including luscious melodies, colorful harmonization, and an unerring feeling for vocal declamation. *Zueignung* was later orchestrated by Robert Hegel.

Mahler took the texts for *Phantasie* and for a companion song entitled *Serenade* from L. Braunfels's adaptation of the first play based on the character of Don Juan, written by the Spanish dramatist Tirso de Molina in the 17th century. *Phantasie* has a simple, captivating melody that expresses the sadness of the fisher maiden in her inability to feel the pangs of love, even though her net is symbolically full of hearts. Metaphors of an altogether different kind pervade the magnificent song *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* (the manuscript of which is kept at the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York), as it expresses a resignation from worldly affairs in favor of a life of devotion to one's art. This song could be a musical self-portrait of Mahler himself. Alma often complained about his strict work methods, his adherence to a tyrannical schedule of composition, and his uncompromising devotion to his art, which led him to withdraw within himself. This song concludes the group of five *Lieder* based on the poetry of Friedrich Rückert, a poet who brought out in Mahler the gloomiest strains of his personality and his most melancholic views of life. The collection was composed in 1901-1902, thus coinciding with Mahler's courtship and marriage to Alma. It is not a song cycle in the traditional meaning of the term, because there is no narrative thread connecting all the songs. *Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen* as often been singled out as Mahler's greatest song, although such judgements are always tinted by subjectivity. In its breadth and emotional scope, however, it matches the poignant *Adagietto* of the Fifth Symphony, a unique example of the term "adagietto" as a movement heading in the entire symphonic repertory. The *Adagietto* was made even more famous by its use in Visconti's movie *Death in Venice* where the central character, Gustav von Aschenbach, is modeled on Mahler himself (incidentally, Thomas Mann's novel was completed the year Mahler died).

Songs constitute the entire surviving output of **Alma Mahler** herself, and all of them were composed early in her career, before she gave up composition altogether at the insistence of Gustav Mahler. She was helped in her efforts by her mentor Alexander Zemlinsky, with whom she began to study piano and composition in 1900. The relationship between Alma and Zemlinsky soon developed into a strong physical passion that was never consummated, and her ambivalent feelings towards him (a conflict of physical attraction and repulsion due to his ugliness) was to haunt him for the rest of his life. Zemlinsky helped her polish a group of five early songs, which included *Die stille Stadt*, based on a poem by Richard Dehmel (1863-1920). Composed in 1900-1901, the song is roughly contemporaneous with Gustav Mahler's five songs based on Friedrich Rückert's poems (and of which *Ich bin der Welt...* is included in tonight's program). Alma's choice of a poem by Richard Dehmel may also have been motivated by Zemlinsky's own regard for this poet, some of whose poems Zemlinsky himself set to music. *Die stille Stadt* offers a glimpse of the kind of lyrical treatment that Alma Mahler brought to her songs—in the words of a reviewer, she “caressed” while Gustav Mahler “shattered”. It is widely known that she did not have much regard for Mahler's music, and although she often insisted on the “truth of the future” as it would bring recognition to his works, she often made derogatory comments about his music.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) was one of the greatest masters of the German *Lied*, and the 2 *Gesänge* op. 91 are unquestionably one of the highest accomplishments in the history of the genre. They were written originally for alto, viola, and piano, and are the only ones among Brahms's *Lieder* to feature another instrument in addition to the piano. Composed 20 years apart (the first in the set was actually the second to be composed, in 1884, while the second was composed in 1863-64), they were published together in 1884. They are expansive, elaborate settings, in a scale far broader than his earlier songs. In character, they can only be compared with the *Vier ernste Gesänge*, op. 121, based on biblical texts and composed one year before Brahms's death. These songs were written for the singer Amalie Joachim and her husband, at the time of their marriage in 1863. Brahms had completed *Gestillte Sehnsucht* and an early version of the second song (*Geistliches Wiegenlied*), but was dissatisfied with it. Then, on the occasion of the birth of the couple's first son, he returned to it and prepared a new version, which was known among a wider circle of friends as early as 1878. In both songs, the viola adds significantly to the texture, creating another layer of descriptive imagery. *Gestillte Sehnsucht* may refer to the appeasement of longing that comes with marriage, a notion that can be heard in tonight's program in relation to Alma Mahler's search for such fulfillment.

THE INSTRUMENTAL WORKS

The four instrumental works in the program represent three important categories of music making in the 19th and early 20th centuries: salon pieces of a lighter character, intended for domestic performance or connected with dance; transcriptions for piano of orchestral and other large-scale works, also for domestic music making; and multi-movement chamber works based on formal models inherited from the Classical period.

The waltzes of **Johann Strauß** (1825-1899) represent a kind of salon music that became extremely fashionable in Vienna in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and which came to symbolize the famous Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*—a feeling of well-being coupled with a strict code of social politeness and deference, like a socially orchestrated waltz. This type of music, cathartic in its capacity to distract one's mind from life's more pressing questions, helped the Viennese in their increasing alienation from the impending catastrophe that would come as the culmination of the decay of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Indeed, as the Viennese flocked to the ballrooms and salons, inebriated by the glitter of affluence as they waltzed life's problems away, the social and political structure of the Empire was crumbling. By the early 20th century, the coexistence of two worlds—the impeccable bourgeois surface and the almost irrational undercurrent of sexual and psychological neuroses—was a *fait accompli*. The character of Strauß's *Wiener Blut* (one of his most famous waltzes) contrasts markedly with the other pieces in the program. Like his other waltzes, it has the same festive character as the ball scene in his opera *Die Fledermaus*, in which several guests arrive to partake of a few hours of blissful entertainment. **Fritz Kreisler** (1875-1962), an American violinist and composer who settled in Vienna, was another denizen of the Viennese salon scene. His *Liebesleid* (Love's Pain) exemplifies another type of salon music, infused by an element of sentimentality and melodrama, which was also removed from the more disturbing expressions of the psyche, and thus comfortably accepted in the Viennese bourgeois circles.

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) wrote 350 piano compositions that represent, in varying degrees, transcriptions or paraphrases of pieces by other composers. These transcriptions offered Liszt many opportunities to experiment with the utmost possibilities of the piano as a concert instrument, while also fulfilling a didactic purpose by allowing the public to become acquainted with a variety of orchestral and operatic works. Liszt was a fervent admirer of the works and aesthetic ideas of Richard Wagner (1813-1883). Together, they headed the so-called New German School in defense of program music, against the classicism embraced by Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) and his followers. Liszt paid homage to Wagner on many occasions, either through original works such *R.W.-Venezia*, written shortly after Wagner's death in Venice, and through transcriptions of Wagner's operas. One of the most famous is *Isoldens Liebestod*, based on the Prelude to Act I of *Tristan und Isolde*, and Isolde's final aria known as "Isolde's Transfiguration". Incidentally, Alma Mahler was fond of singing this very same aria to her lovers, which she did in a transport of ecstatic grief. The piano transcription was completed in 1867 and revised in 1874. Being a master colorist and orchestrator, Liszt endeavors to achieve the most varied shades in pianistic sound, while at the same time expanding the transcription through a completely idiomatic writing characterized by his trademark virtuosity.

Alexander Zemlinsky (1871-1942) was one of the most influential composers and teachers of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. He was a highly prolific composer, covering a variety of genres and cultivating a style that blended late Romanticism with some incipient experiments in dissonant harmony. His most famous disciple was undoubtedly Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951), who became responsible for the greatest revolution in music

theory and composition in the 20th century—the development of dodecaphonism. Zemlinsky's stature as a composer has grown incessantly in the last decades. He was a consummate craftsman and a first rate concert pianist, which may explain the rich and demanding piano texture in his *Trio for clarinet, cello and piano*, op. 3 . Composed in 1895-96, the work is modeled on Brahms's trio for the same instrumental combination, composed in 1891. In fact, Zemlinsky's *Trio* won a composition prize at a competition where Brahms himself was one of the jurors, and who arranged for the publication of Zemlinsky's work by the firm Simrock in 1897. The opening "Allegro" is written in the classical sonata form, the structure of which is enriched by complex harmonic progressions and bold ventures into remote keys. The central "Andante", a movement of great lyrical intensity and expressive power, takes advantage of the registers of the cello and the clarinet to create the impression of an operatic duet between the two instruments. It is in this movement that Brahms's influence can be heard more clearly. A suggestion of cyclic form is given by the recurrence of the main theme from the first movement, which makes an appearance at the end of the final "Allegro". This movement suggests the classical rondo form, with a clearly stated refrain that takes an important role in the coda. Zemlinsky's *Trio* is one of his most accomplished compositions, and a seminal work in the chamber music repertory of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. In the 1920's, he made a statement that could be taken as a motto for his entire creative life: "A great artist, who possesses everything needed to express the essentials, must respect the boundaries of beauty even if he extends them much further than ever before." The beauty of his *Trio* is a practical demonstration of this axiom.

James Melo
Musicologist in Residence