

Circe and Muse No Longer: A New Opera Reconsiders Alma Mahler

“Alma,” premiering this week at the Vienna Volksoper, views its often-vilified protagonist through a feminist lens: as a thwarted composer and mother.



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Reporting from Vienna

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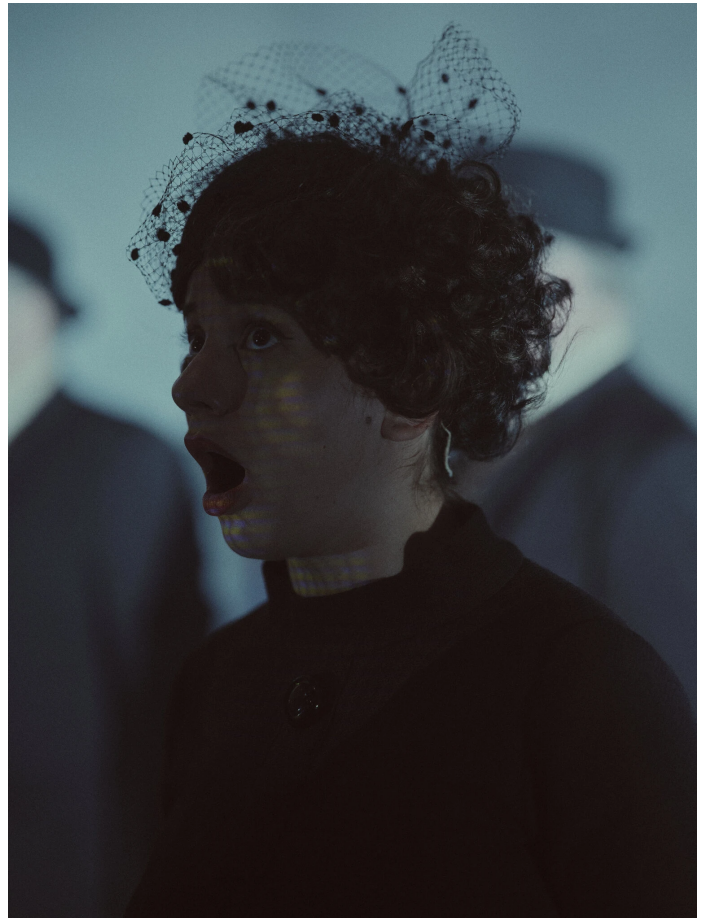
At the end of 1901, the budding composer Alma Schindler received a 20-page letter from Gustav Mahler laying out the expected terms of their future life together.

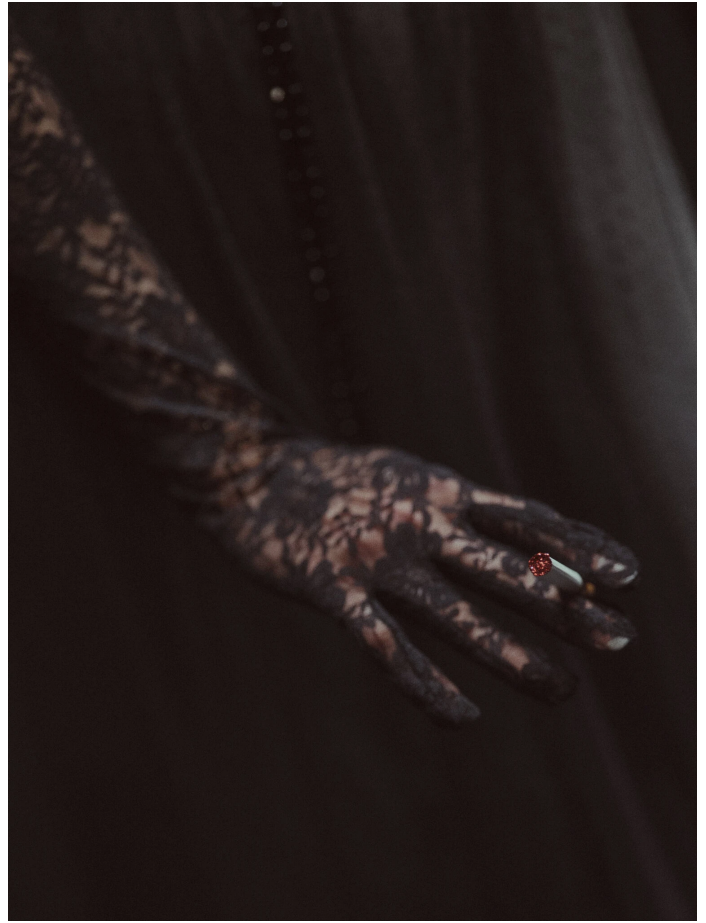
She was 22 years old; he was nearly two decades older, an established composer and the director of the Vienna Court Opera. She had to stop writing music, he wrote, because “if we are to be happy together, you will have to be my wife, not my colleague.” Later he added: “You must surrender yourself to me unconditionally, make every detail of your future life dependent on my needs.”

Soon after, the couple wed. Looking back years later, she wrote of the incident: “The iron had entered my soul and the wound was never healed.”

Ella Milch-Sheriff’s opera “Alma,” which premieres on Saturday at the Vienna Volksoper, positions this decision as a turning point in the life of Alma Mahler-Werfel. She outlived Mahler by more than 50 years and came to be associated — as a lover, a supporter, an object of obsession or an inspiration — with some of the best-known artists of the 20th century, including Walter Gropius, Franz Werfel, Arnold Schoenberg and Oskar Kokoschka.

“When she gave up her composing, she, in a way, killed her own soul,” Milch-Sheriff said in an interview at the Volksoper. “After that, she didn’t feel she deserved to have children because she’d already killed her own children, which were her future creations that were never born.”





“Alma” unfurls in reverse chronology, with acts focusing on Mahler-Werfel’s lost children. Lisa Edi for The New York Times

The opera opens in 1935 with the funeral of Manon, Mahler-Werfel’s daughter with the architect Walter Gropius, who died at 18 from complications related to polio. Mahler-Werfel isn’t there. Instead, in a haunting, emotionally pitched scene, she hides at home, smoking a cigarette in a bathtub, drunk and bitter, refusing the entreaties of her remaining child, Anna, to attend the burial.

From there, “Alma” travels backward in time, with the next three acts focusing on Mahler-Werfel’s other children: Martin, who died as an infant; an unnamed, unborn child whom Mahler-Werfel aborted; and Maria, her first daughter, who died of diphtheria when she was 5.

In the final act, a young, unmarried Alma Schindler burns her musical compositions, a sacrifice for the sake of an all-encompassing muse-artist relationship with Mahler that she hopes will subsume and “purify” her.

“Whoever I talk to about Alma’s compositions, usually men, they say: ‘It’s not very good what she composed, come on. It’s not a problem to give *that* up,’” said Ruth Brauer-Kvam, the director of “Alma.” “I really believe that the thing that separates us from animals is that we do art. That makes us very empathetic and human, and I really believe that no matter how talented you are, if you have the urge to create something and this urge is being shut down, then something in you dies.”



Ruth Brauer-Kvam, the director of "Alma." Lisa Edi for The New York Times

Milch-Sheriff, an Israeli composer who established herself with works like "The Banality of Love," about the romance between Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt, said she had been fascinated with Mahler-Werfel's story for years and felt a personal connection with it: When Milch-Sheriff was 28, she married Noam Sheriff, who was 20 years older than her and a well-established composer and conductor in Israel.

"It was not easy for me — not because he didn't let me express myself but because I was paralyzed to be beside such a personality," Milch-Sheriff said. "I sang more and I composed less, or almost not at all, until I couldn't hold it in anymore."

When she began composing again, she said, "the troubles" started.

"He supported and admired my talent and my musical ability, but on the other hand it was hard for him to handle my success," she said. Eventually, she left him, and only later, when she returned, did she finally feel like his equal.



Ella Milch-Sheriff, the opera's composer. Lisa Edi for The New York Times

The soprano Annette Dasch, who plays Alma in Milch-Sheriff's opera, said that "Alma" is an opportunity to hear entirely new music.

"I think opera is dead if we only play the old stuff," she said. "Ella's music is very approachable and very sensual. I really do hope people get the hang of being more curious about having new experiences in this old dinosaur of a genre."

Though the loss of four children is a clear tragedy, tracing Mahler-Werfel's life through her motherhood is an unexpected choice. For the most part, biographers have positioned her as an accessory — an enchanting muse at best and a soulless monster at worst — to the men she dated or married.

Mahler-Werfel was deeply complicated, even problematic. She secretly edited letters Mahler wrote to her when she published them after his death, and she was vocally antisemitic, making offensive remarks about Jewish people throughout her life, despite being married to Mahler, who was Jewish, and later, Werfel, with whom she fled Austria after the Anschluss in 1938.

Still, many who documented her life went far beyond criticizing her obvious flaws.

“She wasn’t an angel, but they attacked her for her sexuality, for not being a good wife, for not being a good woman,” said Mary Sharratt, the author of “Ecstasy,” a historical novel about Mahler-Werfel.

Among descriptors that journalists and biographers have applied to Mahler-Werfel are “hysterical,” “an utterly domineering and sex-crazed Circe” and a “permanent nymphomaniac.” Henry-Louis de La Grange, who wrote a four-volume biography of Gustav Mahler, seemed to have a bone to pick with her, writing that “her ambition, her highest aim, was to seduce, to fascinate, and even to enslave. To this end, she used all her feminine resources, and she nearly always attained her goal.”

Haide Tenner, who edited a book of Mahler-Werfel’s decades-long correspondence with the composer Arnold Schoenberg, pointed out that older biographies didn’t even reckon with the fact that Mahler-Werfel lost four children.

“Nobody tried to understand what that means for a woman,” she said. “This was certainly a catastrophe in her life. I think it formed her character, too.”

Recent scholarship has recast Mahler-Werfel through a feminist lens. Nancy Newman, an associate professor at the University of Albany, deconstructed the distrustful, hypercritical way historians and biographers have approached Mahler-Werfel by pointing out various instances of her being groomed, gaslit and denied active consent. Mahler-Werfel’s unconventional style was controversial in her time, and it has “proved no less challenging” in much later eras, Newman has written.





Brauer-Kvam said that "Alma" has allowed the opera's creative team to explore the nuances of a female character. Lisa Edi for The New York Times

Born in Vienna in the late 19th century, Mahler-Werfel grew up worshipping two things: her father, the painter Emil Schindler, and music. Although women were barred from music and art academies, Mahler-Werfel desperately wanted to become a composer; one of her dreams was to write an opera. Still, according to "Passionate Spirit," a 2019 biography by Cate Haste, Mahler-Werfel internalized prevailing sexist beliefs and believed her gender to be a weakness and an obstacle to artistic success.

Mahler-Werfel's father died when she was a teenager. She felt abandoned by her mother, Anna, who soon married the painter Carl Moll, one of the founders of the Secession (and later a Nazi supporter), with whom she had likely had an affair while Mahler-Werfel's father was alive.

Music provided a respite, and Mahler-Werfel studied under several private teachers, including the composer Alexander von Zemlinsky, with whom she had a romantic relationship. When Mahler began courting her, she was awed by his genius and maturity, and rapidly fell in love.

Late into Alma and Gustav's marriage, she had an affair with Gropius, and a desperate Mahler recanted on his earlier demands on her time. He encouraged her to compose, which she did, restoring her spirits somewhat after the death of their daughter Maria. Seventeen of Mahler-Werfel's songs have survived.

In society, Mahler-Werfel was a star. The names of her friends and lovers read like a primer in 20th-century art and music history: Her first kiss was with the painter Gustav Klimt and she was close with Berta Zuckerkandl-Szeps, a writer known for her Viennese salons. She had a turbulent affair with an obsessed Kokoschka, who commissioned a life-size sex doll of Mahler-Werfel after she left him. After painting the doll, hiring a maid to dress it and taking it out to the opera, he beheaded it in his garden after a farewell party. (The doll makes an appearance in the opera.)

With such a rich subject, said Brauer-Kvam, the "Alma" director, the opera has allowed the team to explore the many nuances of a female character.

"Usually when you work with opera," she said, "you have to deal with these women who are in a box — the young lover, the whore, the one who's betrayed — and here we have an opera that we can celebrate women and how completely different we are."