



# Alma Mahler

## Turning spotlight on operatic life of a Vienna legend

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**T**here are big, messy lives that can be called operatic and then there was Alma Mahler's. After her first kiss with the artist Gustav Klimt as a teenager and her dreams of a career in composing, passionate love affairs with an array of early 20th-century artists came in quick succession.

She ended up marrying three of them, composer Gustav Mahler, writer Franz Werfel and Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius, and was a subject of endless fascination for most of the last 150 years. Now the charismatic diarist and muse is getting a fresh appraisal in an opera that will have its world premiere in her home town this month.

Alma, by the Israeli composer Ella Milch-Sheriff, at the Vienna Volksoper, spotlights Mahler's tragic experiences with motherhood after an unrelenting series of miscarriages and fatal child illnesses, as well as her thwarted creative identity, slippery relationship with the truth and unabashed eroticism.

The story unfolds backwards, beginning with Mahler as an embittered alcoholic in her 50s who is still grieving the loss of several children, lovers and her own musical potential. She is accompanied only by her surviving child, Anna, whom she had with Gustav - her first husband, whom she married in 1902. After Gustav's death in 1911, Mahler was married to Gropius for five years, during which time she began an affair with Werfel - later marrying him in 1929.

Anna is presented throughout as a 30-year-old woman, a kind of hyper-critical one-woman chorus. "Is there an artist you HAVEN'T slept with?" she wryly asks her mother after catching her once again in flagrante.

Milch-Sheriff said she saw Mahler's dead children, who haunt her on stage during the production, as both an enduring trauma she never overcame and a metaphor for her stillborn artistic ambitions, which she is seen on stage literally burying even as she skips her own babies' funerals.

Gustav Mahler, 19 years her senior and already the head of the Vienna Court Opera, wooed the talented young Alma Schindler but then gave her a fateful ultimatum when she tried to pursue her own composing in his shadow.

Milch-Sheriff said: "Of course, she is attracted to him and to his position and to his mind - maybe not so much to his body, but that's another story. And he is, of course, attracted to her. But he made a demand of her to give up her music. So this decision which she made, it changed her life. And for me, it was the beginning and the end of her life."

Milch-Sheriff, who is known in Israel and the German-speaking world for works including *The Banality of Love*, about the affair between the philosopher Hannah Arendt and her mentor Martin Heidegger, said she had her own experiences of being nearly eclipsed by her husband, the composer Noam Sheriff, who died in 2018.

"For me, as a woman composer of the 21st century, being married to a 20-years-older composer and conductor who was famous



▲ Alma with her daughters Maria and Anna, in Austria in 1906 and, far left, with her third husband, the writer Franz Werfel, whom she helped to escape Europe

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in Israel and outside of Israel - I was 28 he was 48 - I know this feeling of being paralysed by this great character and personality," she said. "But luckily enough my husband never demanded for me to give up my music."

While painting an empathetic portrait, Milch-Sheriff does not elide Alma's virulent anti-Jewish sentiments despite her love for Mahler and Werfel, both Jews. "[During] these times in Vienna, it was like eating wiener schnitzel to be antisemitic," said Milch-Sheriff, the daughter of two Holocaust survivors. "It was the general custom in Vienna."



▲ Composer Gustav Mahler, who demanded Alma give up her music

She noted, however, that Alma had also been instrumental in helping Werfel to escape Nazi-occupied Europe, years after both had expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler and helped his efforts to "revive German culture".

Annette Dasch, the soprano who plays Alma from middle age back to the first blush of womanhood, said grappling with such dialogue in the libretto by the Israeli author Ido Ricklin was tough.

"There are sentences like 'the Jews poisoned my life'," she said. "Especially for me as a German, I had real difficulty saying them, and it's only because it was written by an Israeli that I can do it."

Milch-Sheriff credits her fellow Israeli Omer Meir Wellber, the opera's conductor and a longtime collaborator, with ensuring that the show could premiere in Vienna, where she said it belonged.

Dasch and the Vienna-based director Ruth Brauer-Kvam said the current success of extremist forces in Germany and Austria, where the far-right FPÖ came first in a national election while they were rehearsing, formed a troubling backdrop to the show.

Brauer-Kvam said: "We're now in the 20s again and of course you cannot compare the two [decades] but there are parallels in the sense that everything is kind of falling apart with the wars and other

conflicts and people are feeling extremely insecure." Mahler's era - she was born in 1879 in Vienna and died in New York City in 1964, aged 85 - was "the most exciting, but also the scariest times".

For Milch-Sheriff, who describes herself as a peace activist and a political opponent of Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, it was the "crumbling" of Israeli society that shaped her writing about early 20th-century Europe.

During the 7 October 2023 attacks in Israel, she said, "I was in the middle of composing the opera and I couldn't work for two months, not even hear the sound of music. Everything seemed to me so meaningless."

All three women said they were clear-eyed about Mahler's many faults but also felt protective of her and her talents, noting the role her libido played in generating suspicion to this day.

Dasch said: "People still think that when a woman lives out her sexuality to the fullest that they have to insult her or place her in some box while it's been accepted for many great male artists for centuries."

"I can already imagine that the relatively explicit sex scenes in this opera will be a scandal and then I think: look, they've been putting on Don Giovanni for 300 years and no one is getting hot under the collar."



*I know this feeling of being paralysed by this great personality'*  
**Ella Milch-Sheriff**  
Composer