Alma Mahler
Birth name: Alma Maria Schindler
Merried name: Alma Maria Mahler-Werfel

* 31 August 1879 in Vienna, Austria
† 11 December 1964 in New York, USA

Composer, Salonière, Muse

"An imposing figure in the strongest sense of the word, Alma Mahler-Werfel, widow of the great composer, wife to the great poet, connected to the glory of Austria either by marriage or some form of romantic involvement. Such women are a rarity in our times; this vitality and dynamism, this combination of artistic sensibility and social ambition come from a different, more glamorous era."

(Klaus Mann, 1949, from Der Wendepunkt, Reinbek 1984)

Profile

Muse to renowned artists, supporter of new music, publisher of Gustav Mahler’s letters, author of autobiographical works.

The tiresome problem of her name speaks volumes: Alma Schindler, Alma Schindler-Mahler, Alma Mahler, Alma Mahler-Werfel, Alma Gropius (which she never called herself personally), Alma Werfel? Or simply Alma? She appears under various names in encyclopaedias and publications, often as the composer Alma Schindler-Mahler, a name which she never officially took but which takes into account the situation: that she composed primarily as Alma Schindler before her marriage to Mahler, and then in 1910 – no longer Alma Mahler – first published songs. She herself went mostly by the name Alma Mahler, and following her marriage to Franz Werfel, Alma Mahler-Werfel.

Alma Mahler-Werfel gained certain and controversial notoriety primarily as the woman beside famous artists. She was married to Gustav Mahler, Walter Gropius and Franz Werfel, had relationships with Alexander von Zemlinsky and Oskar Kokoschka, and was rumoured to have had romantic liaisons with others. Alma Mahler-Werfel became the epitome of a muse - a distinctively limiting title that she initiated and promoted herself, but under which she also suffered. She undoubtedly knew how to inspire and motivate artists but possessed negative qualities as well: from troublesome and domineering ‘hang-on’ to refined seductress, to femme fatale personified.

Her influence on music and culture at the turn of the century was enormous. She promoted numerous artists (also financially) including Alban Berg and Arnold Schönberg, and her salon (in Vienna and later in the USA) was an established meeting place for many intellectuals and artists.

Her own creative contribution to this intense artistic life, however, remained small. Although she composed numerous songs, especially before 1901, and was considered to be highly talented, witty and musical. her creativity, even in the early years, stood in opposition to her own perception of herself as a woman in an artistic, bourgeois society. The young Alma Schindler could not shake self-doubt over her ability, as a woman, to be creatively active as a composer.

As such, the potential partnership of composing and marriage was a difficult question for her. Certainly by the time her younger sister Grete had married, she herself longed for marriage – not least to get away from the influence of her unloved mother. Her diaries tell of numerous marriage proposals, which the young Alma Schindler always considered according whether or not her potential husband would allow her enough room to compose.

The idea of marriage and composing coexisting fell away, however, upon meeting Gustav Mahler, who soon asked for her hand in marriage. In a letter, which later became famous, Gustav Mahler called upon his young bride to decide either to marry him and give up composing, or to dissolve the engagement and thereby retain her creative freedom. The letter was the determining factor in Alma Schindler’s decision to give up composing (at the time, for good): she chose to marry the considerably older court opera director. The contemporary image of femininity had won the upper hand, but doubt and the desire for her own creative output remained.

Gustav Mahler, for his part, showed no interest in his wife’s early compositions – at least until 1910, the year that threw the marriage into crisis. It was then that he opened her portfolio for the first time and recognised the truth behind her claims. He encouraged Alma Mahler to publish her songs, which she did, reluctantly.
The extent to which Alma Mahler-Werfel composed after the death of Gustav Mahler (1911) is not clear. Certainly, it must have been difficult for her to revitalise and build upon her composition studies, which had been completed 10 years prior. However there is now evidence that she made contact with her former composition teacher, Alexander Zemlinsky, in order to resume her studies with him.

Her comprehensive and decidedly formative self-portrayal and the image of ‘Alma the Muse’ evidenced in numerous autobiographical writings, makes it difficult to assess her actual work as a composer.

More on Profile

Cities an countries

Grew up in Vienna, later living in Venice and Berlin. Emigrated via Holland, France, Spain and Portugal to the USA, where she lived on the West Coast and in New York.

Biography

Alma Schindler grew up in the musical circles of Vienna. Following the early death of her beloved and highly respected father Emil Schindler (1892), her mother married a friend and student of Emil’s, Carl Moll. The relationship between mother and daughter remained strained, not least because of this marriage.

Alma Schindler’s significant musical talent was encouraged. She received piano as well as composition lessons and, from 1900, studied with the renowned composition teacher Alexander Zemlinsky. However, her marriage to Gustav Mahler soon brought an end to her ambitions as a composer. Mahler demanded that she give up her music and she languished under this ‘ban on composing’ until 1910. Whether or not she somehow circumvented this prohibition is not entirely clear.

The marriage to Mahler produced two daughters, Maria Anna and Anna Justine, although Maria Anna died at the age of four. In 1910 Alma Mahler started an affair with Walter Gropius, which threw Gustav Mahler into an existential crisis. Mahler tried to win his wife back and, in the course of the crisis, came to the realisation that his insistence on Alma Mahler abandoning her musical creativity had contributed to the conflict. Accordingly, he initiated the publication of some of her songs in the Universal Edition.

From 1912 to 1915 she was romantically involved with Oskar Kokoschka. She met Walter Gropius once again in 1915, married him, and their daughter Manon was born in 1916. She met Franz Werfel for the first time in 1917, whose poem Der Erkennende she had already set in 1915, and started an affair with him after just a few months. In 1918 a son Martin was born. Gropius tolerated the fact the child’s father was Werfel, but since the child was premature and weak, he died after just nine months.

The couple divorced in 1920. Alma Mahler and Franz Werfel married in 1929 and from then on she called herself Alma Mahler-Werfel. Her daughter, Manon, died of polio in 1935. After the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany, the Mahler-Werfels immigrated to the USA and settled in Los Angeles, where they made contact with other exiles. Franz Werfel died in 1945. In 1952 Alma Mahler-Werfel moved to New York, where she died in 1964.

In Vienna on 31 August 1879, Alma Maria Schindler came into the world: daughter to Viennese painter Emil Jakob Schindler and singer Anna Sofie (nee Bergen). Two years later her half-sister, Grete, was born. After the death of her father in 1892, the young Alma oriented herself to the numerous artists that she encountered within the large circle of acquaintances that surrounded her mother and Carl Moll, whom she had married in 1897. Her most important supporters included Max Burckhard, the director of the Wiener Burgtheater and a close friendship and even dalliance developed in 1898/99 with Gustav Klimt. The period also saw her first composition lessons with the blind organist Josef Labor. Although her parents’ household was devoted primarily to the visual arts, Alma Schindler immersed herself in the music of her time: she went to the opera and to concerts, played the piano, sang and began to compose. She was especially enthusiastic about the music dramas of Richard Wagner.

Around the turn of the century, she began to take composition lessons with Alexander Zemlinsky, who recognised her talent as a composer and encouraged her. The lessons continued even as their teacher-student relationship quickly developed into mutual feelings of love.
On 7 November 1901, Alma Schindler met the director of the court opera, Gustav Mahler, at a soirée held by Berta Zuckerkandl. Just a few days later, on 21 November, he asked for her hand in marriage. Before the wedding on the 9 March 1902, Gustav Mahler issued his fiancée with a lengthy letter, forcing her to make a choice: a future together with 'his' music, or a future with her music but 'without him'. Alma Schindler, who had hoped to continue composing as a married woman, was thrown into a deep crisis by the letter. At this time she had no appreciation for Mahler's music, which only made matters worse. Against the advice of her trusted friends, she agreed to the marriage and Gustav Mahler's conditions.

Their first daughter, Maria Anna, was born on 3 November 1902 and the second, Anna Justina, followed on 15 June 1904. Alma Mahler supported her husband by keeping everyday life as far away from him as possible, but also with her musical competence, preparing piano scores for many of his works.

1907 proved to be a fateful year for the Mahlers: Gustav Mahler dissolved his contract with Viennese court opera and, under pressure from anti-Semitism and changing cultural politics, accepted an offer from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. On 12 July 1907 their 4-year old daughter, Maria Anna, died. Gustav Mahler was diagnosed with a serious heart condition.

In the following years the Mahlers lived in New York during the winter and summered in Europe. It remains unclear to what extent Alma Mahler composed during this time, or if she simply helped her husband with his compositional work as documented. According to her diaries, she missed her own composition very much.

A second fateful year came in 1910: Alma Mahler fell in love with the architect Walter Gropius. Mahler found out about it and fell into a deep, existential, creative crisis. During this time Mahler familiarised himself with his wife's compositions and urged her to publish them (Fünf Lieder: Die stille Stadt, In meines Vaters Garten, Laue Sommernacht, Bei dir ist es traut, Ich wandle unter Blumen). Mahler died in 1911 and Alma returned to Vienna. She founded the Mahler-Stiftung (Mahler Foundation) from which the yearly interest was used to support a musician in need. The first recipient was Arnold Schönberg.

In 1912 she began a 3-year relationship with the painter Oskar Kokoschka. She met Walter Gropius again in Berlin in 1915 and they married on 18 August of the same year. 1915 also saw the publication of Vier Lieder (Licht der Nacht, Waldseltigkeit, Ansturm, and Erntelied). On 5 October 1916 a daughter, Manon Gropius, was born. Alma Gropius (a name she never called herself) met Frank Werfel for the first time in 1917 and began an affair. Their son, Martin Carl Johannes, was born on 2 August 1918 but passed away the following May. Alma and Walter Gropius divorced in 1920.

Alma Mahler edited a selection of Gustav Mahler’s letters in 1924 and published her collection of songs Fünf Gesänge (Hymne, Ekstase, Der Erkennende, Lobgesang, Hymne an die Nacht). Some of the songs in this cycle came from the time before her marriage to Gustav Mahler (Ekstase, Lobgesang), while the song Der Erkennende, set to a text by Franz Werfel, was composed in 1915. In 1925 Alma Mahler and Franz Werfel travelled to Berlin, where Alban Berg’s opera Wozzeck premiered on 14 December. Berg dedicated the work to Alma Mahler out of gratitude for her (also financial) support.

Following his departure from the Jewish religion, Franz Werfel married Alma Mahler on 8 July 1929 and they moved into the Villa der Hohen Warte in Vienna in 1931. In 1934 Manon Gropius fell ill to polio and died in Venice on 22 April 1935. Alban Berg dedicated his violin concerto to her: Dem Andenken eines Engels (in memory of an angel).


After several heart attacks, Franz Werfel died on 26 August 1945. Alma Mahler-Werfel’s stepfather, Carl Moll, committed suicide following the capitulation of the German Reich.

Alma Mahler-Werfel received American citizenship in 1946 and returned to Europe in an unsuccessful attempt to reclaim the property she had abandoned during her emigration. She moved to New York in 1952 and her autobiographies (And the bridge is love and Mein Leben) were published in 1960. Alma Mahler-Werfel died in New York on 3 May 1980.
More on Biography

Appreciation

Alma Mahler-Werfel composed mainly songs. This reflected not only her lyrical temperament, but also the aesthetic atmosphere at the turn of the century. Alban Berg, for example, even as an autodidact, also composed only songs initially.

She was encouraged on multiple occasions by her mentor Max Burckhard and her composition teacher Alexander Zemlinsky to venture into larger vocal forms (opera), which she did begin to do.

Piano works emerged from the composition lessons with both Josef Labor and Alexander Zemlinsky, as well as plans for further chamber music works.

Reception

The few songs that Alma Mahler-Werfel published stand next to a great and largely unidentifiable number of compositions (songs, piano music, etc.) that appear today to have been lost. As such, the reception is limited to a small portion of her compositional output.

The circumstances of Alma Mahler-Werfel’s life and especially her self-portrayal as ‘muse’ and ‘femme fatale’ are responsible for the fact that her work as a composer has remained in the shadow of her glamorous and even scandalous profile until today.

It is important to note that, at least when it comes to the aspect of her self-representation, the autobiographical writings of Alma Mahler should be considered critically.

Alma Mahler-Werfel has been recognised in music history mainly for her writings and not for her compositions. This corresponds to the powerful image that she created for herself as a companion to great artists such as Mahler, Kokoschka, the Bauhaus architect Gropius, and Werfel (amongst others), which have been readily taken on by music and cultural historians. As ‘muse’ and ‘femme fatale’ she embodied the prevailing idea of femininity at the turn of the century that society reserved for non-conformist women. Alma Mahler-Werfel sufficiently addressed this image, along with related notions of femininity in her autobiographical writings.

For a long time biographies of Alma Mahler adopted these images and failed to take into account the element of self-portrayal. Numerous publications adopted this self-portrayal, distributing it as historical fact (e.g. Monson 1983 and Giroud 1988, also Brusatti 1998). Only in recent times has the ambiguity of Alma Mahler’s self-portrayal been recognised and taken into account (see esp. Rode-Breymann 1999). The young Alma Mahler identified so strongly with the contemporary images of femininity so idealistically portrayed by Viennese artists at the turn of the century (e.g. Gustav Klimt), that identification turned to self-perception. A self-perception that made the idea of a woman as a creative composer unimaginable and which remained a defining force in Alma Mahler’s life. She took on whichever role bourgeois and/or artistic society defined for spirited and artistically gifted women: the role of the salonière, muse and source of inspiration for male composers. Alma Mahler-Werfel was exhaustingly understood in this role well into the twentieth century by Mahler scholars, Alma Mahler biographers, and theatrical and film productions alike.

Irrespective of her self-portrayal or that of others, Alma Mahler-Werfel remains one the most important figures in turn-of-the-century art and culture. Her salons, whether in Vienna or later in New York, were a meeting place for the avant-garde and intellectuals; she supported – certainly financially – a great number of artists, for whom she was both a source of inspiration and a point of friction.

She embodied the interweaving of the arts and intellectual thought – music, art, literature, philosophy, etc. Her résumé, in particular her self-conception and portrayal, provides a study of the model of women and femininity at the turn of the century (at least in Vienna); a model that she had deeply internalised, that she made her own and exploited but under which she also suffered. The task of identifying these aspects and representing them discriminately is credited to the nascent field of Alma Mahler Research (Rode-Breymann 1999, Seele 2001).
Through her emigration in 1938, Alma Mahler-Werfel lost her extensive collection of autographs, scores and other music. How much (especially of her own compositions) was lost and how much she herself destroyed is not yet clear. Accordingly the list of institutions that house letters, manuscripts and autograph scores from Alma Mahler-Werfel remains incomplete:

- Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania
- Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna
- Musiksammlung, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna

**Need for Research**

Since Alma Mahler biographies until the 1990s propagated and established mainly the self-conceived image of Alma Mahler (always with the approval of Gustav Mahler research), detailed insight in to the period of Alma Mahler’s (at that time Schinder’s) life when she principally composed was limited to the publication of the Tagebuch-Suiten.

Since then, the critical perspective taken on Alma Mahler’s autobiographical writings has sharpened and the approach of music and cultural history research has changed. Thanks mostly to the work of Susanne Rode-Breymann, there is a now a legitimate school of Alma Mahler research to speak of.

Nevertheless large gaps remain, especially when it comes to Alma Mahler as a composer. The manuscripts for many songs, musical-dramatic sketches, and piano and chamber compositions are missing, along with further correspondence.

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