Alma Rosé

Merried name: Alma Maria van Leeuwen Boomkamp-Rosé

* 3 November 1906 in Wien,
† 5 April 1944 in Konzentrationslager Auschwitz,

Alma Rosé died in the night between April 4th and 5th, 1944. Sources vary, however Richard Newman (with Karen Kirtley, Alma Rosé. Wien 1906 – Auschwitz 1944, p. 382) records it as before dawn on April 5th.

Violinist, Conductor

“Alma was a great artist. From the moment she picked up her violin, one was enchanted. She taught me many things, but above all, I will be forever grateful to her that I could sometimes manage to forget that I was in hell, thanks to the concentration that she demanded, so that music became our only master. For nothing mattered to Alma except the music, which demanded the respect of everyone, even the SS.”

Hélène Scheps, cited from “Váša Příhoda, Arnold und Alma Rosé” by Wolfgang Wendel (Meister des Bogens, p. 11).

Profile

Alma Rosé came from a family that held a prominent position within Viennese musical life. Having learned the violin from her father, Arnold Rosé, as well as from Otakar Ševčík, Alma gave her concert debut in Vienna in 1926. With the founding of the “Wiener Walzermädels”, a women’s orchestra for upscale salon music which she directed, Alma trod a new and independent path from 1932 until the occupation of Austria by German troops in 1938 brought her career to an end. As a Jewish woman, Alma first fled the threat of Nazi persecution by traveling with her father to London and then, in 1939, moved to the Netherlands, where she gave private, illegal concerts with many renowned musicians. In 1943, she was deported to Auschwitz and was appointed the leader of the women’s orchestra there. According to survivors, she saved the lives of many musicians.

Cities an countries

Alma Rosé lived in Vienna, the town of her birth, until her marriage to Váša Příhoda, after which she lived in Záříby, a town along the Elbe to the Northeast of Prague, from 1930 until 1934. She returned to Vienna upon separating from her husband. She led concert tours through Poland and France as well as to Berlin, Copenhagen and Stockholm, amongst others. In March 1939, she immigrated to London but, in November of the same year, accepted an engagement in the Netherlands, where she finally ended up living in Utrecht. A failed attempt to flee to Switzerland in December 1942 led to her arrest in France. From the Drancy internment camp, she was transported to Auschwitz in July 1943.

Biography

Alma Rosé was born on November 3rd, 1906. Her father, Arnold Rosé (born Arnold Rosenblum in Jassy, Romania, October 24th 1863; died London, August 25th 1946) was the concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic from 1881 and was married to Justine Mahler (December 15th, 1868 - August 22nd, 1938), the sister of Gustav Mahler, with whom she had a close relationship. Both Arnold and Justine descended from Jewish families but had been baptised into the Christian faith (Arnold Protestant and Justine Catholic), according to Richard Newman (with Karen Kirtley, Alma Rosé. Wien 1906 – Auschwitz 1944, p. 29). Arnold’s brother, Eduard Rosé (born Jassy, March 29th, 1859; died in the Theresienstadt concentration camp, January 24th, 1943) was a cellist and married to another sister of Gustav Mahler’s, Emma Mahler. In honour of Gustav’s wife, Alma Mahler, the Rosés baptised their daughter with the names Alma Maria. Through their prominent standing in Viennese musical circles, the Rosé family had contact with many renowned musicians. According to Richard Newman (with Karen Kirtley, Alma Rosé. Wien 1906 – Auschwitz 1944, p. 52), Alma Rosé kept an autograph book starting in 1916 (currently privately owned, although copies exist in the Gustav Mahler/Alfred Rosé Collection at the University of Western Ontario), which holds entries from the conductor Felix Weingartner, Arnold Schönberg, the violinist and Alma Rosé’s childhood friend, Erica Morini (1904-1995), Richard Strauss, Bruno Walter and Leo Slezak.

From the age of six, Alma Rosé took violin lessons from her father and likely studied at the Vienna Music Academy from 1921 under Otakar Ševčík (1852-1934). Her first public concert took place at the Kurhaus in Bad Ischl on June 29th, 1922, where she performed with her father and her brother, Alfred (December 11th, 1902 - 1995), a conductor, pianist and composer. Her actual debut came
on December 16th, 1926 in the Großer Musikvereinsaal in Vienna. The program included Ludwig van Beethoven’s Romance in F Major, the Double Concerto in D minor by Johann Sebastian Bach, where her father played the second solo part, and Peter I. Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto in D Major.

In 1927, Alma Rosé met the Czech violinist, Váša Příhoda (1900-1960), whom she married in 1930. The couple lived in Záryby, a town on the Elbe near Prague, and undertook joint concert tours to Poland, France, Italy and Germany. At that time Alma was already playing a 1757 Guadagnini violin that she had inherited from her father.

In 1932, before separating from her husband, Alma Rosé set out in a new artistic direction and founded a chamber orchestra in Vienna, the “Wiener Walzermädeln”, made up entirely of women. The “Walzermädeln” followed in the tradition of popular women’s dance bands that had come about, especially since the end of the 18th century, in dance halls and coffee houses, but also played more sophisticated repertoire (such as orchestral music of Franz Schubert and Anton Dvořák) alongside waltzes and popular operetta numbers.

The size of the orchestra varied, as seen in illustrations that show from nine to fourteen members (Robert Newman with Karen Kirtley, Alma Rosé. Wien 1906 – Auschwitz 1944). The core ensemble seems to have included two pianos, harp, cello and violins, and, at a later stage, viola, double bass and a singer. As concertmistress, Alma Rosé led the orchestra on violin. According to an interview with Robert Newman in 1986, Karoline Rostal, a member of the ensemble until her marriage to violinist Max Rostal, remembers that Alma Rosé demanded the highest perfection possible of her ensemble (Robert Newman with Karen Kirtley, Alma Rosé. Wien 1906 – Auschwitz 1944, p. 83), which also applied to the costumes selected and the carefully planned choreography of the performances. Concert tours took the orchestra to France, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Hungary and (then) Czechoslovakia.

Following the breakup of her marriage to Příhoda in 1935 and the official divorce that followed in October 1936, Alma Rosé settled in Vienna. The occupation of Austria by German troops led to a direct ban on performing for the Jewish musician and the “Walzermädeln” were disbanded by the Reich’s Chamber of Culture (“Reichskulturkammer”). Arnold Rosé was dismissed from the Vienna Philharmonic with no pension entitlements. It was only thanks to a collection for Arnold Rosé initiated by Carl Flesch (1873-1944) that Alma and her father – her mother had died in August of 1938 – were able to find the necessary finances to escape to London, where they arrived via separate routes in March and May of 1939 respectively. Alma’s brother, Alfred, had already immigrated with his wife to the USA in September 1938.

In London, the financial situation for Alma Rosé and her father remained dire, since asylum seekers were not permitted to perform publicly. Arnold Rosé was able to organise just a few concerts with his re-established Rosé-Quartett, in which Alma played second violin. Thus when she was offered an engagement in Amsterdam, she flew to the Netherlands on November 26th 1939. Trusting falsely in the neutrality of the Dutch, she allowed her 5-month permit allowing her to remain outside of Britain expire, and played concerts for Radio Hilversum, among others, and made small concert tours around the country. By the time Germany invaded the Netherlands, her return to England was no longer possible and from January 1941 she earned her living by participating in numerous illegal concerts that were held in private homes in opposition to official cultural policy. Alma’s chamber music partners included the composer and pianist Johan Wagenaar, Rutger Schoute, Paul Frenkel, James H. Simon, Johannes Röntgen and the Hungarian composer and pianist Geza Frid. In addition, she played in an amateur string quartet with the doctor Leonard Berend Willem Jongkees, his father Willem Jongkees and the physicist J. Jaap Groen. Her efforts to immigrate to the USA fell victim to quota regulations and a plan to flee to Cuba fell through. In March 1942, Alma entered into a sham marriage with non-Jewish Constant August from Leeuwen Boomkamp, which saved her from an initial arrest. She tried to escape in August 1942, but was arrested in France and taken to Drancy internment camp near Paris. From there, Alma was deported to Auschwitz on July 18th 1943.

Upon her arrival, she was initially intended for medical experiments, however once they realised who she was, she was assigned to the women’s orchestra in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp as the new conductor. The orchestra had been founded in April 1943 by the camp supervisor Maria Mandel and had thus far been lead by the Pole Sofia Czajkowska. The orchestra’s duties were similar to those of the men’s music bands: to play as the prisoners
were taken to work and again upon their return, the beat of the music marking the tempo for the prisoners’ march. In addition, the orchestra had to play at roll call and give concerts for the camp guards.

With the benefit of her experience leading the “Walzermädeln”, Alma Rosé was able to improve the standard of the ensemble within a short period of time. She wrote arrangements especially for the assorted ensemble and had copyists write out the parts for the individual instruments. In October 1943 the orchestra comprised violins, guitars, mandolins, some wind instruments, two accordions, a cello and a double bass. The repertoire was made up of over 200 pieces, along with marches, operetta numbers and arrangements of operatic arias and classical pieces by Mozart and Brahms.

Together, the rehearsals and concerts often lasted up to twelve hours a day. Convinced that a good performance protected her musicians from death in the gas chambers, Alma Rosé (as far as we know from witnesses) led the ensemble with great severity, and probably without unnecessary harshness. In her book “Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz” Fania Fénelon, who was a singing member of the orchestra, described Alma as bossy, a sentiment unanimously contradicted by other survivors such as the cellist Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Helena Dunicz-Niwinska and Violette Jacquet (see Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz by Gabriele Knapp, p. 167). They described Alma as a charismatic personality who was treated even by the SS with respect. She procured small benefits for her musicians: differing from the rest of the camp, the “Musikblock” had a furnace and an individual bed for each woman, which was a rare privilege considering the permanent overcrowding in the women’s camp. The musicians were allowed to use the washrooms regularly and change their clothes more often. Alma took Jewish women into the orchestra preferentially, often saving their lives as a result. In the intense orchestral work, she gave these women an essential grain of human dignity amidst the daily horror. While the whole system in the concentration camps was aimed at isolating the prisoners, the musicians formed a community. In an interview, Hélène Scheps stressed that she would always be grateful to Alma Rosé that “I could sometimes manage to forget that I was in hell, thanks to the concentration that she demanded, so that music became our only master” (cited from Váša Příhoda, Arnold und Alma Rosé by Wolfgang Wendel, in Meister des Bogens, p. 11). Sometimes Alma would play concerts just for her fellow prisoners.

Alma Rosé died on April 5th, 1944. The exact circumstances of her death are not clear, as the witness statements contradict each other to a certain extent. It is likely that she succumbed to the effects of food poisoning.

Appreciation

Alma Rosé proved her conducting talent early on as the musical director of the “Walzermädeln.” As a charismatic leader of the women’s orchestra in Auschwitz, she inspired her musicians to perform to the best of their abilities, earned the respect of the camp guards and supervisors and, as survivors are convinced, saved the lives of many musicians.

From today’s perspective, Alma Rosé’s talent as a violinist is difficult to assess. Her father’s career, along with that of her famous husband, overshadowed her own career for a long time. Reviews from the time are reserved and owing to the early and violent end to her career, only one recording is known; one which she shares with her father, playing J. S. Bach’s double concerto.

In the supplementary book to this recording, Wolfgang Wendel surmises: “We are in all likelihood talking about a violinist for whom musicality, sense of responsibility to the music, discipline and above average technical potential existed in a happy balance” (cited from Váša Příhoda, Arnold und Alma Rosé by Wolfgang Wendel, in Meister des Bogens, p. 24).

More on Appreciation

As a violinist, Alma Rosé remained in the shadow of her father and of her famous husband for a long time. The reviews from the early days of her career are mostly very subdued, even if Alma is not directly compared to her father or Příhoda. In the “Signale für die musikalische Welt”, Vol. 88, No. 45 (1930), the reviewer commented on a concert in Berlin: “She is a good musician who knows what she wants, with a fresh and energetic attack, but there is still something intellectually and spiritually lacking in her playing. Despite indisputable talent as a violinist, her technical skills are not yet amongst the best.”

Alma was accorded more success with the “Walzermädeln” and came to maturity in the Netherlands, thanks to her intense dedication to chamber music. Her wish to de-
vote herself entirely to chamber music after the war was not fulfilled, and the tragedy of her fate was that the high-point of her artistic development coincided with the deepest misery of her imprisonment in the concentration camp. In Auschwitz she often played solo concerts for the camp guards, but also for her fellow inmates. Helena Dunicz-Niwinska, a survivor from the women’s orchestra in Auschwitz, describes Alma as a “great artist and violinist”: “the times that she performed solo pieces seemed to us like moments of crossing over into a another world” (Wolfgang Wendel, CD booklet p. 8). Alma’s experience as director of the “Walzermädeln” benefited her greatly in preparing necessary arrangements for the orchestra in Auschwitz. She is described as strict and unrelenting but also fair in rehearsals. With her charismatic personality, she was able to significantly improve the standard of the orchestra and win the respect of the SS. The music gave Alma a certain security, which she passed on to her musicians. “It’s almost impossible to comprehend what Alma meant to the orchestra” (Silvia Wagenberg, cited from Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz, Musikalische Zwangsarbeit und ihre Bewältigung (1996) by Gabriele Knapp, p. 85).

Reception

Upon her arrival in Auschwitz Alma Rosé was recognised as the violinist and as the daughter of Arnold Rosé. This shows that she had attained a certain amount of fame in Central Europe by this time, even though her solo career and contemporary reception had been prematurely brought to an end by Nazi persecution. After her death, however, she was almost completely forgotten. She is not named in Riemann’s music encyclopaedia of 1951 and “Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart” (Allgemeine Enzyklopädie der Musik edited by Friedrich Blume, vol. 11, Bärenreiter: Kassel 1963) records her as the daughter of Arnold Rosé with no mention of her exile and her death in the concentration camp.

It was only with Fania Fénelon’s book “Das Mädchenorchester in Auschwitz”, which appeared originally in French in 1976, that interest in Alma Rosé was stirred up. The book, which was translated into German in 1980/81 and has since seen many new editions, was the inspiration for the film “Playing for Time” (screenplay by Arthur Miller) with Vanessa Redgrave in the role of Fania Fénelon and Jane Alexander as Alma Rosé. Fania Fénelon’s nautical representation, including a very negative portrayal of Alma Rosé, sparked a series of further publications in which Alma’s image was corrected. Gabriele Knapp undertook a thorough review based on interviews with many witnesses in her dissertation: “Das Frauenorchester in Auschwitz. Musikalische Zwangsarbeit und ihre Bewältigung” (Verlag von Bockel: Hamburg 1996).

For his elementary biography, Richard Newman evaluated the estate of Alma’s brother, Alfred Rosé, and conducted many interviews with witnesses (Richard Newman, Alma Rosé: Vienna to Auschwitz, 2000 with German translation 2003, Amadeus Press: Portland OR). As part of a CD edition series on Váša Příhoda in 1998, Wolfgang Wendel presented the recording of Bach’s double concerto along with a detailed booklet. In 1999, Michael Daëron made a documentary film about the women’s orchestra in Auschwitz: “La Chaconne d’Auschwitz”, which won numerous awards and was also broadcast on German television in October 2000.

On September 16th 2006 the opera “Das Frauenorchester von Auschwitz” premiered at the Theater Kreffeld/Mönchengladbach. The libretto is based on Fania Fénelon’s book, but includes suggestions from Anita Lasker-Wallfisch and Gabriele Knapp.

Repertoire

From the surviving concert announcements and reviews, it is apparent that during her solo career up until about 1932, Alma Rosé played the usual repertoire of the time, including the great violin concertos by Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky, and virtuosic pieces by Sarasate and Wieniawski. Johann Sebastian Bach’s D minor concerto for two violins appears in concert programmes again and again (together with Arnold Rosé or Váša Příhoda). With her “Walzermädeln” she mostly played waltzes and popular operetta numbers, but also orchestral music by Franz Schubert and Antonín Dvořák. A permanent item on the programme was an arrangement by Příhoda from Richard Strauss’ “Rosenkavalier”. For the house concerts during her time in the Netherlands she worked with classical chamber music, including Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata and violin sonatas by Brahms, Ravel and Franck. In Auschwitz she expressed her desire to devote herself entirely to chamber music in the event of her liberation.

Research

Starting with Fania Fénelon, several surviving members of the women’s orchestra have published their memoirs in recent times. On the academic side, these accounts ha-
ve been supplemented especially by the publications of Gabriele Knapp so that Alma Rosé’s time in Auschwitz is relatively well documented. The most extensive information about Alma’s life before 1942 comes from Richard Newman, who has analysed above all the documents in the Gustav Mahler/Alfred Rosé Collection at the University of Western Ontario and interviewed many witnesses. Additional documents are located in the Tellegen-Archiv at the NIOD (Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie) Amsterdam.

Need for Research

A review of further sources regarding her concert activity between 1926 and 1942 would be greatly beneficial for a more precise assessment of Alma Rosé, the violinist. A more detailed study of the reception history of the “Walzermädels” is hampered by the fact that reports in music publications are usually limited to high culture. There are possibly remaining documents relating to Alma Rosé’s private concerts in the Tellegen-Archiv in the ROD Amsterdam. Only a rudimentary assessment of Alma Rosé as a violinist is possible based on the single surviving recording of her playing.

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