

Lecture Five

Alma and Vienna

Scope: In November of 1901, Mahler met Alma Schindler, a beautiful young woman who was also an aspiring composer. Within a few weeks, Alma was pregnant, and in March of the following year, the two were married. Mahler demanded that Alma give up her music, for which she never forgave him. A few years before Mahler met Alma, he had converted to Catholicism to secure a position at the Vienna Opera. His appointment as music director in 1897 created a firestorm in the press, but his debut was an almost magical triumph. He also instituted reforms at the opera, and his first few years there were phenomenally successful.

Outline

- I. Sometime during the spring of 1894, Mahler explained to his friend J. B. Forster what he would require from a wife, should he ever marry. His conditions: She should understand that he would want her company only at certain planned times, she must be well groomed, and she should not be upset if he showed no interest in her.
 - A. The great love of Mahler's life during the 1890s was the singer Anna von Mildenburg, a superb lyric soprano whom Mahler almost single-handedly turned into one of the great singers of her day. Their affair was the most passionate and powerful of Mahler's life.
 - B. Unfortunately, it is impossible to imagine a woman any less like Mahler's dream girl than the overly sensitive, possessive, hot-tempered, and demanding Anna von Mildenburg.
 - C. Their breakup, in 1897, was inevitable, but Mahler's relationship with Anna lit a fire in him that he could no longer ignore. He wanted to be in love, to marry, to settle down, and to have children. The woman he believed to be perfect for him came along just a few years later, Alma Schindler.
- II. On November 7, 1901, Mahler attended at dinner at the house of a well-known Viennese hostess. Sitting across from him was the young and strikingly beautiful Alma.
 - A. As he left that evening, Mahler invited his hostess, her sister, and Alma to attend the rehearsal of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* the following day at the opera house. Alma was twenty-three years old, eighteen years younger than Mahler. Despite her misgivings, she attended the opera rehearsal the next day.

- B. Mahler, the attraction might not have been love at first sight, but it was close. Alma was a native Viennese, the daughter and stepdaughter of famous painters.
1. Her father, Jakob Emil (whom she adored), was the most celebrated painter of landscapes in the Austrian Empire. Indeed, Alma's family members were central players in the rarefied intellectual and artistic atmosphere of Vienna's elite.
 2. Alma's father died when she was fourteen, and she was crushed. Her mother remarried four years later, to Karl Moll, another painter and one of the founders of the Viennese Secession movement. Alma, who did not get along with her mother, was appalled.
 3. Having lost her father at fourteen, Alma turned to a succession of older men for solace and mentorship. One after another, these men fell in love with her.
 4. At the age of sixteen, Alma began seriously studying music; by the time she met Mahler, she was an accomplished pianist and a composer of some promise.
- C. On November 27, just twenty days after they first met, Mahler showed up unexpectedly at Alma's house.
1. Before dinner, Gustav and Alma went for a walk, during which he suddenly blurted out some of his requirements for a wife and Alma replied that she understood.
 2. Within a matter of weeks, Alma was pregnant and, on March 9, 1902, the two were married.
- D. Both the couple and their relatives had misgivings about the marriage, but Alma and Gustav were in love.
- III. At first glance, Alma didn't think much of Mahler's music. And Mahler, for his part, was terrified that his bride-to-be wouldn't like or understand his music. But the big bone of contention between the two was not to be Mahler's music, but Alma's.
- A. About six weeks into their courtship, Alma, writing to Gustav while he was in Dresden, excused the letter's brevity because she had a composition lesson coming up and had work to do.
 - B. Mahler responded with a long, thoughtful, excruciatingly honest, and unbelievably selfish letter demanding that Alma renounce her musical ambitions.
 - C. Alma wept, and her friends and family told her not to give up her music, but Alma, twenty-three years old, vain and flirtatious, selfish, impulsive, conceited and capricious, was captivated by the depth, the spirit, the strength, and the purity she attributed to Gustav Mahler.
 - D. Alma outlived Mahler by fifty-three years, dying in Los Angeles in 1964. She never composed another note and never forgave Mahler for making her choose between him and her music.

- IV. By the time Gustav met Alma in 1901, he was one of the most powerful and important musicians in the world, living and working in Vienna as the music director of the Royal Vienna Opera.
- A. The fall of 1896 marked Mahler's fifth anniversary at Hamburg.
 1. In addition to his opera responsibilities, Mahler had conducted the Hamburg Symphony during the 1895–1896 season.
 2. He adored symphonic conducting, but management, at wits end with Mahler's artistic intransigence, not only denied his request to continue the symphonic conducting but also began assigning the operatic plums to other conductors.
 - B. Mahler began casting about for a new position and heard that Wilhelm Jahn, the director of the Vienna Opera, was losing his eyesight and would soon step down. The Vienna Opera was the most prestigious musical institution in Europe.
 - C. For Mahler, such a position would mean climbing to the top and ruling from the summit. He was only thirty-six years old in 1896, and this position would make his career.
 - D. The story of Mahler's application, audition, and ascension to the position is long and complicated: the following are the highlights.
 1. Fall 1896: Mahler's friend, Rosa Papier, advises him that for the time being, he should apply for a position as conductor in Vienna.
 2. Fall 1896: Mahler contacts everyone he knows who might help him overcome the countless obstacles he knew he would face, making numerous visits and writing hundreds of letters.
 3. January 1897: Mahler is informed that "under present circumstances, it is impossible to engage a Jew in Vienna" (de La Grange).
 4. January 1897: Mahler's nomination gains the support of Eduard Hanslick, Vienna's most influential music critic and a close friend of Johannes Brahms.
 5. February 23, 1897: Mahler converts to Catholicism.
 6. April 8, 1897: Mahler is appointed one of the four conductors of the Vienna Opera: just six months later, Mahler will be appointed music director, thereby deriving his authority from the emperor himself.
 7. The anti-Semitic Viennese press goes wild.
 - E. Despite the response in the press, the fact that the Emperor Franz Joseph and his advisors had placed a thirty-eight-year-old Bohemian Jew at the head of the single most important cultural institution in the empire reveals just how liberal the Habsburgs, and Franz Joseph in particular, had become.
 1. The Jewish middle class had become a backbone of late nineteenth-century Viennese society, and Jewish artists and thinkers were central players in Viennese intellectual life.

2. The Austrian Empire, with Vienna as its capital, had been in decline for a hundred years, eclipsed by the growing power of Prussia and, eventually, a united Germany. But Austria's decline was well concealed by Vienna's prosperity and brilliant culture.
 3. By the turn of the twentieth century, as the political problems facing the Austrian Empire became increasingly insoluble, "The dominant Viennese characteristics were a sort of pessimism, a hedonism, a love of spectacle, and an amused, blasé, and often morbid skepticism" (de La Grange).
 4. Gustav Mahler, himself a man of a thousand moods and faces, arrived into a conservative, liberal, Jewish-empowered, anti-Semitic, opera-crazed environment to take over the spring season of 1897.
- V. On May 11, 1897, Mahler made his Viennese debut with Wagner's *Lohengrin*.
- A. Every review, every reminiscence of the debut performance recalls Mahler's magical, almost mystical triumph, with the audience spontaneously applauding every time he used an unfamiliar tempo or did anything out of the ordinary.
 - B. Unfortunately, Mahler's responsibilities at the Vienna Opera, particularly after he assumed the position of music director on October 8, 1897, left him no time to compose. He was busy, and not just with conducting; the reforms he instituted at the opera were as uncompromising as his conducting style.
 1. He abolished the practice of "clagues," by which singers would buy up tickets and install ready-made cheering sections in the audience, whose job it was to applaud their benefactor and disrupt the other singers.
 2. He abolished the practice of allowing latecomers into a performance once it had begun, no matter how rich, aristocratic, and influential they were. The emperor himself backed Mahler on this.
 3. He also did away with the distribution of complimentary tickets, insisting that the critics buy their own.
 4. Mahler rankled everyone, but he delivered, quickly making the Vienna Opera and the Vienna Opera Orchestra (known as the Vienna Philharmonic during the off season) the best performing institutions in the Western world.
 - C. Despite the difficulties he encountered, Mahler's first few years in Vienna were phenomenally successful.
 1. For a time, he conducted both the opera and the Vienna Philharmonic concerts, the audiences adored him, and he became a genuine celebrity and something of a legend in his own time.
 2. It was this "legend" that Alma Schindler met in November 1901.

VI. The Mahler marriage experienced the discord of two very mismatched people. Unfortunately, the best documentation we have of the marriage and the last ten years of Mahler's life, from 1901–1911, are Alma's "diaries," which are deeply flawed.

- A. In her time, Alma was considered quite beautiful; Gustav was not particularly attractive. He twitched constantly; had an odd manner of walking; and was of less than middle height, slender, and weak in appearance, although he possessed exceptional strength. He also suffered from gastric upsets, migraine headaches, and hemorrhoids—physically, he was a mixed blessing.
- B. Alma should never even have considered marrying Mahler.
- C. Her resentment toward Mahler, which began with her renunciation of music, grew and festered with time.
- D. Mahler was a difficult older man, and he predeceased his wife by fifty-three years. After his death, Alma had time to get back at Gustav, to alter and destroy letters, and to paint herself as a martyr.
- E. Over the remaining three lectures, we will draw extensively from Alma's reminiscences, but in general, only from those passages that deal with external events and "third parties."
- F. Gustav Mahler was no peach, but neither was Alma Schindler. She was a talented, powerful woman who lived at a time when her power had to be filtered through the men in her life.
- G. Ultimately, as one biographer has said, "In spite of the sufferings and conflicts their union was to engender, Alma transformed and enriched Mahler's life and gave him a new incentive to live, to strive, and of course, to create" (de La Grange, Volume 2, 470).

Lecture Six

Family Life and Symphony No. 5

Scope: Mahler experienced the best years of his life from 1902 to 1907. He and Alma had started a family and built a summerhouse where Mahler could compose. His music was finally being accorded some respect. In 1902, he completed his Symphony No. 5, which is unlike any of his previous works. The Fifth, a superb example of the expressionist art movement, describes the progressive emotional states of the grieving process. Around this time, Mahler also befriended Arnold Schönberg, one of the most well-known expressionist composers of the early twentieth century. Although their musical languages differed, the two men ultimately developed a lasting relationship.

Outline

- I. The years from 1902 to 1907 were, for all their ups and downs, the best of Mahler's life.
 - A. He had a young, loving wife and the closest thing to domestic tranquility he would ever experience.
 - B. Alma had also managed to pay off the staggering debt that Mahler's brothers and sisters had accumulated for him.
 - C. By late 1902, Mahler had a family. On November 3, 1902, Alma gave birth to their first child, Maria, whom Gustav loved greatly. Their second child, Anna, was born on June 15, 1904.
 - D. The years 1902–1907 also saw the completion of Mahler's summerhouse in Maiernigg, on Lake Werther (Werthersee), a gorgeous spot that would be Mahler's home away from home for six years. He composed his fifth through eighth symphonies there, as well as the *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Deaths of Children*).
 - E. Perhaps most important, by 1902, Mahler's music, although still considered revolutionary, difficult, and problematic, was also being treated with a level of respect that must have given Mahler some feeling of vindication.
 1. For example, when Mahler conducted the premiere of his Third Symphony on June 9, 1902, he scored a rare triumph. The house was full with paying ticket-holders; the audience response was tremendous, and included celebrities such as Richard Strauss and Wilhelm Mengelberg, and the reviews were outstanding.
 2. Mahler's music was not out of the woods yet, but it was coming to be understood and respected.

II. Inspired by the triumphant premiere of his Third Symphony in June of 1902, Mahler and Alma hurried to their lake house at Maiernigg, where Mahler completed his Symphony No. 5 that summer.

A. In its expressive content, Mahler's Symphony No. 5 is unlike any of his previous works.

1. Mahler's Fifth seeks to describe the progressive emotional states of the grieving process. It is a psychodrama, a superb example of expressionism, a contemporary art movement that celebrated inner reality as the only reality. His first four symphonies, in contrast, are all narrative dramas in the style of nineteenth-century program music.

2. Mahler's Fifth is not influenced by the youthful, rustic, and naïve mood of the *Wunderhorn* poems or his own youthful poems, which formed the basis for his First Symphony.

3. Mahler composed his Fifth Symphony in full score, rather than in a short score that was later orchestrated. More than any other of his previous works, the Fifth was conceived whole, as an orchestral entity, from its inception.

B. Mahler's Fifth, again, is about our emotional progression—the conscious and unconscious emotional response to the death of someone close to us. The symphony consists of five movements bunched together to form three large parts.

1. Part one consists of movements 1 and 2. Movement 1, entitled *Trauermusik* (“Funeral March”), acts as a grand introduction to the stormy and agitated movement 2, where grief and rage are given full spleen.

2. Part two consists of movement 3. This long, dancing movement confirms that as long as we have rhythm, beat, and heartbeat, life will go on.

3. Part three consists of movements 4 and 5. Movement 4, the superb and famous *Adagietto*, is a lyric and magnificent meditation on the bittersweet reality of life. Finally, movement 5 is a giddy reaffirmation of life, which looks back on the emotional distance we have traveled in the earlier movements and looks forward to a triumphant conclusion, as if to say, “Live now and live well.”

C. Only Gustav Mahler would be willing to submerge himself in such thoughts of grief and pain during the best years of his life to express these feelings that the rest of us would rather avoid.

III. The first movement begins with a stark, funereal fanfare initiated by a solo trumpet. This emotionally uncluttered music represents the immediacy of death. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 1, opening fanfare.)

- A. This funereal fanfare is the binding formal element of the movement. It will return, in different forms, three times, each time representing the unambiguous, irrevocable presence of death.
- B. This opening fanfare is followed by a monotonous, almost numb funeral march. This music represents the necessary rituals surrounding death. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 1, funeral march, measures 34–103.)
1. The music is numb and quiet because we, as mourners, are numb and quiet; reality has not yet set in, nor has the grief process truly begun. During the rituals immediately following death, it is enough for us simply to remain upright and coherent.
 2. The plodding inevitability of this theme also acts as a metaphor for the plodding inevitability of death itself.
- C. However, in the presence of death, our hearts, and Mahler's music, will not remain calm for long. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 1, grieving theme, measures 155–185.)
1. The second section of the movement explodes from the first; it is labeled "wild," and we are introduced to the grieving theme, stark, violent, angular, despairing, and unrestrained music.
 2. This theme comes to represent the stabbing initial pain of grief, the revelation that this nightmarish ritual is real.
 3. As the movement continues, the funereal fanfare and funeral march, representing the "reality, the unsentimentality" of death, alternate with wildly emotional music of different types, as we, the living, undergo that extraordinary range of emotions that only death can force on us.
- D. About midway through the movement, we hear an attempt at quiet consolation. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 1, *Kindertotenlieder* quote, measures 295–316.)
1. For this exquisitely lyric and temporary moment of consolation, Mahler quotes a song he had just completed entitled *Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn* ("Now the sun will rise as brightly").
 2. The song's text is by the nineteenth-century German Romantic poet Friedrich Rückert, and it came from a collection entitled *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*).
 3. Can we think of any experience less consolable than the death of a child? Here in the Fifth Symphony, first movement, Mahler used the music he wrote to accompany the last line of the poem, "Hail to the joyous light of the world."
- E. By the end of the first movement, we have experienced the piercing pain of the grieving theme; the attempt at consolation offered by the *Kindertotenlieder* quote; and a third theme, the sorrow, or lamentation, theme, itself a throbbing, toned-down version of the grieving theme.

Always, these themes are surrounded by the funeral music; they convey internal responses to a terrible external reality.

- F. Mahler's Fifth is not about the trials and tribulations of a Romantic "hero," as his first symphony was; nor is it, like the second, about life and death and resurrection; about humankind, nature, and angels, like the third, or a child's view of heaven, like the fourth.
1. Unlike these, Mahler's fifth represents musical expressionism; it is very modern, very Viennese Secessionist, and very Freudian.
 2. Mahler might still be speaking in the tonal language of the nineteenth century, but the expressive content of his Symphony No. 5 is very much of the twentieth century.
- G. The second movement of Mahler's Fifth is even more remarkable than the first. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 2, introduction and "Storm" theme.)
1. We, as mourners, have had time to reflect on our loss, and we are filled with blinding, white-hot rage.
 2. We feel rage at the loss of someone we loved, at being left behind, at death and the certainty of our own mortality, and at the whole farce of life.
 3. Ultimately, however, the music simply collapses, its energy completely spent. How long can any of us maintain that ripping, tearing level of emotion before we are utterly spent?
- H. Near the end of this second movement, after emotional trials and tribulations, Mahler gives us a glimpse of joy, a triumphant hymn that promises us that "all things will pass." Perhaps, sometime in the future, we can transcend our pain and enter, emotionally and spiritually, a higher, more enlightened place. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 2, D major hymn, measures 464–519.)
- I. The third movement comprises the second large section of the symphony. In this extraordinary scherzo, Mahler reactivates the living soul within us by activating the body through dance. The dances contained in this movement run the gamut from a simple, rustic, life-affirming three-step (*Ländler*) to a melancholy Viennese waltz. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 3, opening.)
- J. The fourth movement is the famous *Adagietto*. The astonishing, otherworldly lyricism of this movement balances the ferocity of the second movement. It wistfully allows us to acknowledge our loss and remember the deceased without becoming hysterical. We have mastered our grief to the extent that we can remember the best without feeling our worst. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 4, opening.)

- K. The fifth and final movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 5 is a brilliant orchestral and compositional tour-de-force. (Musical selection: Mahler, Symphony No. 5, movement 5, opening.)
 - L. This movement, and the symphony, concludes with an extended version of the joyful, triumphant hymn first heard near the end of the second movement. This brilliant, D major music is no longer a "promise" of things to come but a promise fulfilled—life goes on and life is good if we choose to make it so. (Musical selection: Symphony No. 5, movement 5, conclusion, measures 711–end.)
 - M. The reviewers of Mahler's Symphony No. 5 didn't know what to make of it, so they panned it. We now see it as one of the genuine orchestral masterworks of the twentieth century.
- IV. I believe that Mahler's Fifth is, at heart, an expressionist work of art. When we think of early twentieth-century expressionist composers, however, we usually think of Arnold Schönberg and his students Alban Berg and Anton Webern.
- A. Arnold Schönberg was born in Vienna in 1874; he was fourteen years Mahler's junior. Like Mahler, he was Jewish, and like Mahler, Schönberg's alienation from his native culture allowed him to take expressive steps and make compositional innovations that a more comfortable and culturally vested composer would never have made.
 - B. What separates Mahler's expressionism from Schönberg's is that Mahler used the nineteenth-century musical language, whereas Schönberg largely dispensed with traditional musical language and, in many ways, created his own.
 - C. Alma introduced Mahler and Schönberg to each other; the two men had a stormy and, ultimately, most touching relationship.
 - 1. The young and messianic Arnold Schönberg had, at first, been convinced that Mahler was nothing but a composer who was obsolete in his own time.
 - 2. After hearing a performance of Mahler's Symphony No. 3, however, Schönberg deeply moved, changed his mind about Mahler.
 - 3. Mahler, for his part, protected Schönberg from disturbances caused by audiences who did not understand his music and lent him money when Schönberg was jobless and in dire financial need.
 - D. On Mahler's fiftieth birthday, Schönberg wrote him a letter of appreciation.
 - 1. The letter is significant, in part, because it speaks for the incredible number of contemporary composers whose music Mahler performed and championed throughout his career as a conductor.
 - 2. Incredibly, the letter also reveals Schönberg asking for forgiveness for his early misunderstanding of Mahler's work. At the time,

Schönberg himself was the unforgiving and unrepentant messiah of new music.

3. Schönberg's letter reached Mahler in New York City, where he was conducting the New York Philharmonic. How Mahler got to New York, and the circumstances surrounding his departure from Vienna, will occupy much of the next lecture.