



**Gustav and Alma Mahler – their relationship and its
influence on Gustav's compositions**

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Abstraction:

While writing this essay, my plan was to examine what songs were quoted in Gustav Mahler's symphonies, and how their lyrics might relate to present domestic events or if they showed signs of being inspired by his wife Alma. (I'll explain why I wanted to specifically examine his compositions from the time they were married and onwards in Chapter 1.) This plan, however, largely failed for the reason that his style changed after the Fourth Symphony was finished – shortly before they married – which brought with it that songs no longer played a large part of most of his symphonies composed since then. (Symphony 8 and *Das Lied von der Erde* being obvious exceptions.)

As a result, there wasn't much for me to base this essay on with regards to my original plan. Instead I started looking at what part of Gustav's output is attributed to the couple's life in general, and found a bit more. On the whole, though, I found that he didn't seem to let everyday concerns leave a mark on his compositions – besides unconfirmed rumours about the Eighth Symphony and the adagietto from the Fifth, there is really nothing of note related to Alma before the sketches for the Tenth Symphony.

I also found it relevant to relate some anecdotes regarding his manner as a conductor. It seems as if there was little that separated Gustav Mahler the husband from Gustav Mahler the conductor.

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1. Introduction

During this essay, I will refer to Gustav Mahler as Gustav, and Alma Schindler/Mahler as Alma. For the literature, *Cambridge Companion* refers to The Cambridge Companion to Mahler, *Memories* to Alma's Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters, *Family letters* to The Mahler family letters, *Diaries* to Alma Mahler-Werfel, Diaries 1898-1902, and *la Grange* to Henry-Louis de la Grange's four-volume Mahler-biography.

The idea for this essay has its beginning in a recording of Gustav's 10th symphony. In the included booklet I read how he was, at one point during the course of its composition, dismayed to learn of his wife having an affair. It supposedly made him, among other things, tear parts of the manuscript to pieces, as well as scribbling anguished commentary in places.

Later I hear that when the couple's older child died, Gustav went out into the countryside to compose instead of spending time with his wife. That, along with reading in a concert program about the Mahlers' superstition (particularly Alma's apprehension about Kindertotenlieder), made me curious as to just what their relationship could have been like, and if traces of it can be seen in Gustav's compositions. Particularly in his choice of songs to quote in the symphonies – translations have their own appended section.

2. Chronology at a glance

First things first: let's establish where everything fits in. Gustav Mahler was born 1860, and met Alma Schindler at a late-November party in 1901¹. (This wasn't actually their first encounter; this was merely the first time they met and had an actual face-to-face conversation. See a brief retelling of the November party in Chapter 5.)

He was one of the most celebrated conductors of his time, though not always by the orchestras he conducted. An indication of his professional character can be found both

1 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. xv-xxiii

in de la Grange's biography (vol. 2) and the essay *Mahler as conductor in the opera house and concert hall* in the *Companion*. He wasn't afraid of using different tempi than custom held, defending his choices by suggesting the composers would've really wanted their works performed this way, and made so high demands of his orchestras that some musicians threatened to bring sticks to the next rehearsal to give Gustav a sound beating (not known to have actually taken place)². These demands may have followed into his home – I'll elaborate on this later. My chief argument for this interpretation is the circumstances under which he forbade Alma from composing. See chapter 4.2.

1901 was both a productive and an eventful year in Gustav's life. He composed several songs, started work on his fifth symphony, resigned from a concert orchestra (then focusing on opera) and courted Alma. When Gustav announced their engagement to his friends, things apparently didn't turn out too well. Alma demanded that Gustav cut all ties to these long-time friends. Precisely why she made this demand is not known with certainty³.

After they were married, Alma tells of frequent travelling on Gustav's part except for the summer vacation, where they'd spend most of the summer at their cottage in Maiernigg – Gustav mostly worked on his compositions then, though he also found time for long walks and swimming in the nearby lake. This life went on nearly until the very end, though his later heart-diagnosis curbed the couple's outdoors activities⁴. Symphonies 5-8 were composed at Maiernigg before the diagnosis, and before their elder daughter's death.

Gustav was known as one of history's great revisors – and not only of his own works. The biggest revision to his own works appears to have been the removal of a whole movement from the first symphony (*Blumine*, first conceived as the second movement

2 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 165-177

3 Herta Blaukopf (ed.), „Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss Correspondence 1888-1911“, translated by Edmund Jephcott, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 129

4 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, translated by Basil Creighton, edited by Donald Mitchell, John Murray Ltd., London, 1968, p. 142

out of five)⁵. The revisions to the sixth symphony for its 1907 performance seems to be a story all on its own, though, and both superstition and practical reasons have been cited. I'll look into it in more detail in Chapter 3.4.

Symphonies 7 and 8 followed, fairly smoothly. While there seems to be a legend in circulation that the gigantic 8th symphony was composed in a matter of weeks, that's probably an embellishment that got out of hand – reports are that it was composed relatively quickly, though, for a work of such scale. After the death of the Mahlers' older daughter, *Das Lied von der Erde* and the ninth symphony followed, and were the last pieces Gustav completed before his death.

Alma's affair with Walter Gropius appears to have taken place entirely during 1910. There aren't many detailed reports on the subject, though, and Alma's account is likely biased. She does, however, lay it out in a way that's easier to grasp. She first met Gropius while she was convalescing away from Gustav – they went for walks together, and found the company pleasant. Later he sent Alma a letter, for some reason addressed to Gustav, to Maiernigg. While Gustav was upset, they had some frank words about it. Skipping to the end, they stayed together, and Gustav was pacified at first. Then Gropius came for a visit, and this is what eventually led to Gustav's seeking out Sigmund Freud for marital counselling⁶. Later that year, an infection Gustav had caught reached his bloodstream⁷, which is what actually killed him.

3. WORKS

My goal with this section is to look into the works that might be influenced by Alma, as well as the songs that were quoted. This excludes symphonies 1-4, and also symphony 7, as I found no clear evidence that she was a source of inspiration for it.

3.1 Rückert-lieder

Gustav composed these songs 1901-1902, based on poems by Friedrich Rückert, the

5 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 84

6 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, pp. 172-175

7 Ibid, p. 198

same poet that wrote the poems the Kindertotenlieder were based on. *Liebst du um Schönheit* (the second song) is a personal message from Gustav to Alma, describing (and dismissing) three particular causes for a marital crisis that was developing – Gustav's age (**19 years** her senior!), appearance, and immaterialism^{8,9}. This song was composed in 1902, the very same year they married and had their first child. It was never orchestrated by Gustav himself. On the recording I listened to the song had been transcribed for voice and orchestra by Max Puttmann, for the purpose of publication. See Appendix A for translations.

3.2 Kindertotenlieder

Gustav began composing this cycle before he met Alma, in 1901, and completed it in 1904. The songs are based on poems by Friedrich Rückert, with the death of children as subject-matter; see Appendix A for translations.

I originally hoped to examine how the songs differ from each other depending on their having been composed before or after Alma, but they are just too different to begin with; and with the uncertainty regarding their order of composition¹⁰, any such analysis appears doomed from the start.

3.3 Symphony 5

This five-movement symphony, composed 1901-1902, started its life on the drawing-board as a conventional four-movement symphony, before Gustav and Alma met. The fourth movement, adagietto, is known to be a love-letter of sorts from Gustav to Alma.

The symphony as a whole has been closely linked to the content of Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. While references to other works and artforms aren't new to music in Gustav's days, or music history as a whole, the *Cambridge Companion* points out some conspicuous correlations between *Zarathustra* and the 5th symphony – such as the finales to both the symphony and parts 1-3 of the poem being written in rondo-

8 Henry-Louis de la Grange, „Gustav Mahler; Vienna: The years of challenge, 1897-1904“, p. 111

9 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 43

10 <http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/works/mahler/kindertotenlieder/>, second paragraph

form and the poem's refrain being "For I love you, O eternity!"¹¹. Skipping ahead momentarily, one point in the eighth symphony refers to an 'eternal feminine' helping us transcend the mundane. The depth of these correlations took me by some surprise: I can only come to the conclusion that Gustav had great expectations of his audience, both intellectually and of their reading habits.

3.4 Symphony 6

Composed 1903-04, during which Gustav was often at play with his daughter¹² – a very happy period of his life – it is known as the 'Tragic', due to Gustav reversing the order of the subjects in the recapitulation in both the first and the last movement. (This is called a tragic sonata-form.) Revisions include the number of hammerblows and the order of the inner movements – the most famous, as well as the most debated ones, in all of Mahler's symphonies.

When listening to them side by side, it should be immediately apparent how the first movement derives its beginning from the Wunderhorn-song *Revelge*. That song is a macabre story of a soldier marching along on a battlefield, never allowed to stop even to help his wounded fellow soldiers. The Andante-movement contains a melody in the violins that has a phrase-ending very similar to the first Kindertotenlied (*Nun will die Sonn so hell aufgeh'n*), where it accompanies the words „Hail to the whole world's gladdening light!“.

As it was rehearsed for its première in Essen, 27/5 1906, Gustav had a panic-attack¹³. Something that might have been significant for his interpretation of the symphony is his mother. She also had a heart-condition¹⁴ – likely inherited by Gustav – which ended up killing her. Gustav was very fond of her, but Alma reports that he was often angry when he noticed her listening at the door when he was practising on the piano. He deeply regretted this later¹⁵. Besides this, there are plenty of tragedies in Gustav's

11 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, pp. 118-119

12 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 60

13 Jeremy Barham, „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 120

14 Sixten Nordström, „Drömmaren som lyckades“, *Opus*, vol. 5, no. 27, April-May 2010, p. 28

15 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 8

past that might have sprung to mind – siblings dying in infancy, one sickly brother dying young, one committing suicide; out of fourteen children, only six lived past their teens¹⁶. (Alois, one of his brothers, was estranged before Alma entered Gustav's life¹⁷. *Family letters* has a timeline that reveals he had a longer life than Gustav.) His sister Leopoldine possibly died from a brain tumour in her mid-20s¹⁸, his brother Otto committed suicide¹⁹, and another, much loved, brother Ernst died in childhood²⁰.

3.5 Symphony 8

This symphony was composed in 1906, and appears to have less to do with the couple than with Gustav's view of the world and the divine. The legend has it he found the whole symphony humming in his mind, and felt he only had to write it down – and he orchestrated it for massive performing forces. (The magazine *Opus* puts the required forces for its USA-première at 1068²¹.) The texts he based this symphony on, a medieval hymn praising the Creator Spirit and the final scene of Goethe's *Faust*, can be briefly summarized as reverence, or love, for a higher power, eventually resulting in purification of the soul through love²². According to *Memories*, Gustav once offered to dedicate it to Alma, but she advised against it²³.

Gustav considered this his most significant work²⁴. There is, however, no direct reference to Alma remaining in the published score, though indirectly the story is much more intricate. The hymn serving as a base for the first part of the symphony is an old Catholic chant, used during the pentecost – the most popular time of year to get married in Sweden, at least, religious or secular. The exact significance of the 'eternal feminine' (ewige weibliche) is also something to consider. The symphony puts it in a context of transcendence, the eternal feminine lifting one up – scored, in my opinion, in a reverential way – before the grand close.

16 <http://www.mahler.cz/en/gm/family-of-gustav-mahler>

17 Stephen McClatchie, „The Mahler family letters“, Oxford University Press, New York, 2006, p. 236

18 Ibid, p. 4

19 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. xix

20 Sixten Nordström, „Drömmaren som lyckades“, *Opus*, vol. 5, no. 27, p. 29

21 Johan Malmberg, „Sfäreernas musik“, *Opus*, vol. 5, no. 27, April-May 2010, p. 44

22 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p.132

23 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 178

24 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 128

3.6 Das Lied von der Erde

The period after finishing his eighth symphony was a particularly heavy one for the Mahlers. In 1907, Gustav first resigned from the Vienna Hofoper around Easter. Later that summer (July 5th²⁵), their older daughter died of diphtheria and scarlet fever, and Gustav was soon afterwards diagnosed with his heart-condition^{26,27}. The exact dating of the diagnosis doesn't seem entirely clear. While Alma suggests that Gustav first jokingly had the doctor examine him after their daughter's death, a letter from him, dated March 30th 1907, mentions being diagnosed with a slight valvular defect²⁸. It doesn't seem as if the first diagnose was very serious, in other words. A later letter mentions a Doctor Kovacs, who he went to for a second opinion²⁹. I suppose this is where he got the grimmer opinion. The change in Gustav's compositional style is more radical than the change after the fourth symphony.

Gustav likely started work on Das Lied already in 1907³⁰, though it wasn't finished until 1909. The choice of texts is of interest – he doesn't seem to have been the type to pick poems and setting them to music without reason, and his description of this piece (his actual ninth symphony – not numbered to try to evade the fate shared by many romantic composers never living to compose their tenth symphony) as his „most personal“³¹ should point to him taking an extra careful consideration. And what are these texts about? Drinking, sorrow, unfulfilled yearning, saying farewell, resting places. This within three years of the celebration of love and the divine that was his eighth. See Appendix A for translations.

Curious features include each refrain in the first movement being transposed a semitone higher for each recurrence, in the fifth at bars 23 and 43 a gesture that is quite like a spot in his third/fourth symphonies, and the text at bar 54 appears to refer to the first love-letter Gustav sent to Alma (a poem with the refrain “It came

25 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 290

26 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 135

27 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 122

28 Ibid, p. 289

29 Ibid, p. 291

30 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 136

31 Ibid, p. 128

overnight”).

The sixth and last movement, *Der Abschied*, is the longest by far – nearly as long as the rest of *Das Lied* put together. In the end, the word 'ewig' is repeated seven times. This is believed to either recall the idea of eternal recurrence from Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, or portraying a mantra. There is also very little rhythmic clarity – several instances of two against three, quintuplets, quadruplets against three, rubato...

3.7 Symphony 9

The symphony numbered as the 9th was composed 1909-1910. Gustav's own description:

The work itself is a satisfactory addition to my little family. In it something is said that I have had on the tip of my tongue for some time – perhaps to be ranked beside the fourth. (But quite different.)³²

Besides a small phrase from the first Kindertotenlied (*Nun will...*) nine bars after rehearsal-figure 12, and one more fragment from the same song in the piccolo-flute some 25 bars after figure 16, there was in the manuscript an instruction in the violin-part in the final movement that is a quote from one of the Kindertotenlieder – „Im Sonnenschein! Der Tag ist schön auf jenen Höh'n!“ (*Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur ausgegangen*, final line). This song is about the bereft parent being in denial – presumably, the cue only appeared in the manuscript, but the specific spot is at bar 163 in the fourth movement³³.

3.8 Symphony 10

While the unfinished 10th symphony (composition started in 1910) doesn't seem to derive anything from the songs, the manuscript itself is more interesting. Also, when Gustav discovered his wife's having an affair, he was so upset that he didn't work on the tenth for a week.

Something I found quite curious is the inclusion of the 'Bruckner-rhythm' – see bar

32 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 143

33 Ibid, p. 149

55; almost as if straight from the first movement of Bruckner's fourth symphony; the older composer's breakthrough-work. Gustav attended lectures given by him while studying at the Vienna conservatory, but their relationship was more like friends rather than teacher and pupil³⁴. This is the only time I've noticed Gustav use that signature rhythm. My guess is that this got into the sketches in relation to negotiations with a new publisher for Gustav's first symphonies, Universal Edition. The original terms included giving up a set amount of royalties before he'd profit from it, a point which was nearly reached by now, but he was then asked to give up the same amount of royalties again – in favour of a campaign to promote Bruckner's music³⁵. Gustav held him in such a high regard he agreed to give up, by Alma's estimation, 15 years worth of profit.

The more I study this symphony, the more merit I find for the idea that Gustav was reminiscing, possibly nostalgic about his past, possibly melancholy about his lost youth. There is another particular moment in the first movement that stands out. At bar 194 there comes, seemingly out of nowhere, a passage like a cry of complete despair put to music. This is followed by a dissonant chord where an A is tied over in the trumpets in between restating this chord that gets increasingly dissonant as instruments are added for each restatement (starts at bar 203). Gustav described it to Alma with a few short lines of poetry revealing his uncertainty following her infidelity, claiming that this was what he had put to music. There should then be little doubt that the trumpets' A refers to Alma.

This is where the manuscript gets interesting: at three occurrences of one particular motive, he marked in exclamations that potentially relate to his on-going crisis. The markings are: „Death! *Verk!*“ ('*Verk*' is likely an abbreviation of a word meaning 'announcement'), „Have mercy! Oh God! Oh God! Why have you forsaken me?“ and „Your will be done!“. Whether the last biblical quote refers either to the Christian God or Alma is unclear. The motive in question is likely a reference to Alma's composition *Erntelied*, a song about desire for love. Around this time, the summer of 1910, Gustav

34 Donald Mitchell, „Gustav Mahler: The Early Years“, pp. 65-66

35 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 176

changed his attitude to Alma composing. This makes it more credible that the theme is indeed from Alma's song, and that the ambiguity about whether it is God's will or Alma's that should come to pass is normal for Gustav, leaning towards Alma and possibly alluding to her choice, between him and Gropius, being absolutely free. One should keep in mind that Gustav had doubts in the beginning about whether it was right that he should have a wife so much younger³⁶.

Towards the end of the fourth movement, the second Scherzo, the instrumentation gets thinner and thinner until only percussion remains. The final forte stroke is believed to be inspired by a funeral procession Gustav witnessed in New York in 1908. His comments: „You alone know what is meant / Oh / ... / Live well, my lyre! / ...“³⁷. He often referred to Alma as his Lyre (*Saitenspiel*), a term which hails from Nietzsche, who in turned used it to refer to his insanity.

4. Letters

4.1. To Strauss

Looking through the correspondence between Gustav and Richard Strauss, I came across something I'd never seen before: Gustav would sometimes express himself using notated excerpts from arias. In an undated letter, Gustav finishes his letter with a part of Leonore's aria from the first act of Beethoven's opera *Fidelio*, if inexactly quoted. It is preceded by „I say, and I always will:“, and the text from the excerpt is translated as 'far as it is, love shall attain it' – which is not written in the letter, meaning that Strauss was expected to be familiar with this aria³⁸. Among the preserved letters, Gustav never seems to give exact musical quotes.

Another thing missing in the preserved letters between the two is Alma. Though Strauss evidently heard about his engagement (and congratulates him in a letter dated to the vicinity of 5/1 1902³⁹), and repeatedly sends his regard to the young wife (as

36 Henry-Louis de la Grange, „Gustav Mahler; Vienna: The years of challenge, 1897-1904“, p. 441-442

37 Jeremy Barham (ed.), „The Cambridge Companion to Gustav Mahler“, p. 158

38 Herta Blaukopf (ed.), „Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss Correspondence 1888-1911“, p. 41

39 Ibid, pp. 63-65

well as from his own wife in turn), the first mention of Alma I spotted from Gustav's side is dated to early 1903⁴⁰ – nearly a full year after the marriage. For much of this time, they mainly discuss plans for staging Strauss' opera *Feuersnot*, and the challenges of performing Gustav's third symphony.

4.2. To Alma

The letters from Gustav to Alma mainly reveal more of the same – if more intimate, and with more puns. Musical terms turn up from time to time, though there are more philosophical allusions and complaints about interpretations of his symphonies. He also encouraged Alma not to hold to diplomacy in their exchanges⁴¹ – see next chapter, end of second paragraph, for a likely explanation.

I notice Alma didn't publish the letters where Gustav demanded that she gave up composition, nor were her letters to him published in the same volume, which would have made it a more coherent reading. In de la Grange's biography, however, it turns out that Gustav's reaction was provoked by Alma mentioning still taking lessons in composition with Alexander von Zemlinsky, who was her main romantic interest around the time she met Gustav – her diaries from this period are full of references to indecision concerning which of the two she should choose. His lengthy response goes through what makes a personality and touches on the arrogance of pseudo-intellectuals choosing their conversational company to avoid uncomfortable opposition (putting Alma's other known romantic interests in the same group) before coming to the paragraph where he asks Alma to consider what their life might be like if both were active as composers. This is rather mild, compared to the rest of the letter, and Gustav acknowledges that he's asking for a huge concession on Alma's part, but the demand is absolutely clear – he composes, she provides the companionship, or he can't see their marriage working out in practice. And still – all he asks in response is the truth⁴². He didn't see Alma as his subject, to be controlled and guided into any prescribed gender-role, but certainly gave voice to set ideas about how a marriage is supposed to work,

40 Herta Blaukopf (ed.), „Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss Correspondence 1888-1911“, p. 72

41 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 211

42 Henry-Louis de la Grange, „Gustav Mahler; Vienna: The years of challenge, 1897-1904“, pp. 448-452 (!)

leaving no room for negotiation. This puts me in mind of the reports on how strict he was with his orchestras; in a way, he could have been instructing Alma on how to make good chamber-music in the symphony of marriage.

4.3. To Family

Gustav wrote to his family frequently during his travels, being very keen to hear from Alma, and how things were progressing once their children were born. He also sometimes criticized Alma when she was late to reply. The same can be seen in Gustav's letters to his family – blunt, to the point of being quite insensitive, if the translation is accurate; but his high demands on the people and orchestras in his life clearly shine through. Another thing that comes in the clear is a certain difference between how Alma describes Gustav's relationship to his sister Justine and their actual correspondence. Apparently, it was Justine who encouraged Gustav to marry Alma and convinced him that his age didn't matter⁴³.

5. Speculation

So, here's what we have: A famous conductor in his early 40s, unmarried and childless, troubled by haemorrhoids (Gustav's quoted as saying he thought he was about to die – in a letter to Richard Strauss, Gustav writes that he lost 2,5 litres of blood⁴⁴), a surge of compositional activities including setting music to poems about the death of children. In the summer of 1900 he meets Alma while riding his bike, shortly after she sent him a postcard⁴⁵. They meet again in November 1901, and they're married within 8 months with a daughter born shortly after.

Alma appears to have been quite head-strong, not chastely keeping her opinions to herself. Alma wrote that there were publicly known scandals between Gustav „and every young woman who aspired to sing in the opera“ (such as Anna von Mildeburg in 1895 – though she later discovered most were only rumours⁴⁶), as well as „thor-

43 Stephen McClatchie, „The Mahler family letters“, pp. 364-367

44 Herta Blaukopf (ed.), „Gustav Mahler/Richard Strauss Correspondence 1888-1911“, p. 51

45 Alma Mahler-Werfel, „Diaries 1898-1902“, selected and transcribed by Antony Beaumont, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 2000, p. 163

46 Ibid, p. 458

oughly disliking“ his first symphony. In *Memories* she frequently mentions appreciating his work as a conductor in her diaries, but claims little interest in the person. An entry in her *Diaries* might contradict this: On August 2nd 1900, she was promised to be taken to meet Gustav the following winter – her comment, after saying she'd definitely go: „You have to take your opportunities as they arise.“⁴⁷ The November-party (November 7, 1901⁴⁸), is where things started to warm up between the two. Later she mentions some friends of Gustav's she clearly didn't take well to⁴⁹; it's not clear if these are the same friends Alma wanted to separate him from when their engagement was announced or another group, but it seems to be close enough in time to be the case. Her testimony is written in a way that doesn't leave much need for further interpretation, but there is something about an encounter with them, at another party, I want to point out in particular: When asked what she thought of Gustav's music, this is how she answered: „I know very little of it, but what I do know I don't like.“ Gustav laughed⁵⁰. The story comes out a little differently in her *Diaries*, but amounts to the same thing⁵¹.

But now something I don't understand, in the light of the independence Alma maintains she had: In the letter referred to at the end of Chapter 4.2, Mahler forbade her from composing. Alma was understandably saddened by this, but calmly accepted this the very next day; the wedding would still take place⁵². If Alma was the free, self-assertive woman she makes herself look like, why didn't she break up? The very next day, then, she read the letter in a different light, decided to interpret it differently, and all was well⁵³. They were married, on March 9th 1902⁵⁴. Her *Diaries* are full of little inconsistencies like that – her adoration swinging back and forth between Alexander von Zemlinsky and Gustav Mahler, Gustav Klimt, Felix Muhr... Indecision, passionate about one admirer one day and occasionally incredulous about yesterday's preference

47 Alma Mahler-Werfel, „Diaries 1898-1902“, p. 308

48 Ibid, p. 442

49 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 25

50 Ibid, p. 25-26

51 Alma Mahler-Werfel, „Diaries 1898-1902“, p. 467

52 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, p. 22-23

53 Alma Mahler-Werfel, „Diaries 1898-1902“, p. 462

54 Stephen McClatchie, „The Mahler family letters“, p. 369

the next... de la Grange interpreted Alma's acceptance of giving up composing as her not just admiring Gustav's position of power, but also developing affection for what she saw as weaknesses of the body⁵⁵ – e.g. his age and his small physical frame.

Alma was a little annoyed by Gustav's set working-routines. She writes about how she felt their marriage wasn't working as well as she felt it should, and in what sounds like a state of depression (in modern parlance – the translation left a lot to be desired) went to the sanatorium where she met Gropius. During her discussion with Gustav once he learned of Gropius feelings for Alma, she claims to have brought up how fenced in she'd felt for the past years, describing her sacrifices as well as the mutual obligations in a marriage – no doubt Gustav's long working hours and the demands he made so he could work at full capacity only added to her frustration.

6. Conclusion

While I was writing this, I found out that Alma had doctored some parts of her *Memories and Letters* to give a picture of herself and Gustav which isn't true – the introduction to *Family letters* describes this briefly. I have tried to take a critical stance to what I read and to avoid some of the known inaccuracies, but I can't be sure I dodged all of them. Having been made aware of this, I remembered a paragraph in *Memories* describing how Gustav took great interest in various cures he heard of on his travels – yet even in the letters published in the same book, only a very few – two, as far as I can remember – refer to any health-concerns besides going to hospitals and get-well-wishes, and those two letters refer to bread and butter, respectively. Nevertheless, there seems to have been genuine affection between them – though more from Gustav than from Alma, if their correspondence as published by Alma is any indication. While Alma often writes about being concerned for Gustav's health, *Family letters* would suggest that the real situation was mainly the other way around – Gustav's letters to Justine the years directly following the marriage often mention Alma having some kind of trouble (blamed on her liver) or feeling miserable, while Gustav is up and about except for the times he develops a migraine. He also seems to completely

55 Henry-Louis de la Grange, „Gustav Mahler; Vienna: The years of challenge, 1897-1904“, p. 455

stop criticizing people for being slow to reply around this time. Justine would still be reproached for not telling him exactly what state of health she was in at a given time.

And what, then, of Alma's significance to Gustav's work? It appears not to be very extensive: Besides the 'love-letter' (the Fifth symphony's adagietto), and the song *Liebst du um Schönheit*, it seems only the eighth and tenth symphony bear any direct trace of the couple's life. While it's often said that the second subject in the sixth symphony's first movement was an effort to describe Alma, I feel it doesn't quite add up in light of the rest of Gustav's creations. All I've read (and heard) says that he'd use effects, fragments of themes and phrases and iterations for any allusion made. Using an entire theme to allude to one single thing/person just seems so base, somehow – a token gesture that I feel isn't consistent with Gustav's apparent attitude to traditions and established performance practices. Even in the sketches for the tenth symphony Alma is only directly alluded to by an effect – a long drawn-out A in the trumpets. The exact significance of the allusions will of course be a matter of personal interpretation, but, as told in the *Cambridge Companion*, Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* appears to be more often alluded to than Alma.

The eighth symphony isn't easy to declare as influenced by Alma or not. The alleged dedication to her isn't present in the printed orchestral score, and I haven't seen the piano-reduction. The 'eternal feminine' that is referenced in the end is something I've otherwise only seen in letters in Alma's *Memories* that put Richard Strauss and his wife in a bad light – a suspected instance of doctoring. All the same, there might really be something to Alma's claim of its dedication to her – though the choice of text might still have its roots in ideas too general in scope to ascribe to Alma alone.

The more I read about Alma, the more she seemed like an early type of tomboy. There's drinking, flirting (both with people she has a romantic interest in and others), elbowing, fabrication and bragging – only no climbing trees and running around skinning her knees. Here is another quote from her *Diaries*:

... amidst eight débutantes! I felt myself *far* superior, made a few really good quips – some of which shocked the demure, well-brought-up young ladies to the core – and amused myself by observing them. What these

girls all find interesting! Unbelievable!⁵⁶

All told, judging by the condemnation I've read in response to her infidelities and manipulation of *Memories*, I started to think that she was of a more modern cut than people first expected – what we'd call a sexual liberal today.

There is one more thing I'd like to discuss: Alma is often described as beautiful. Today, I get the impression sexy women are sometimes treated with some suspicion, questioning both their motives (as well as those of their partners) and intelligence. If Gustav's friends treated Alma with this suspicion, it would make sense that she'd be upset enough to demand their ties to be severed. Events described in Alma's *Memories*⁵⁷ seem to confirm this theory, while de la Grange claims the suspicion was mutual – that Alma pointedly ignored most of the others and only spoke up in order to be rude⁵⁸. Her *Diaries* also contain an interesting entry dated 8/11 1901 recording a conversation Gustav had with Max Burckhard:

... I thought she was just a doll. But then I realized that she's also very perceptive. Maybe my first impression was because one doesn't normally expect such a good-looking girl to take anything seriously.⁵⁹

APPENDIX

A: Translations

Translations by Deryck Cooke (except where otherwise noted):

LIEDER EINES FAHRENDEN GESELLEN	my gloomy little room, and weep, weep for my love, for my dear love!
1 – Wenn mein Schatz Hochzeit macht	Little blue flower! Little blue flower! Do not wither, do not wither! Sweet little bird! Sweet little bird! You sing in the green field. Ah, how beautiful the world is! Tirra lirra!
When my love becomes a bride, becomes a happy bride, that will be a bitter day for me! I'll go into my little room,	

56 Alma Mahler-Werfel, „Diaries 1898-1902“, p. 458

57 Alma Mahler, „Gustav Mahler: Memories and letters“, pp. 25-32

58 Henry-Louis de la Grange, „Gustav Mahler; Vienna: The years of challenge, 1897-1904“, p. 462-3

59 Alma Mahler-Werfel, „Diaries 1898-1902“, p. 444

Do not sing, do not bloom!
Spring is done,
all singing is over.
At evening, when I go to sleep,
I'll think of my sorrow,
only of my sorrow.

2 – Ging heut' morgen übers Feld

As I walked this morning through the field
the dew still hung upon the grass;
the merry finch called out to me,
“Hey, you there!
Good day to you!
Isn't this a splendid world?
Tweet, tweet!
Fine and bright!
O how I love the world!”
And the bluebell in the field
told of good cheer
with its bell, ting-a-ling,
ting-a-ling,
as it rang its morning greeting:
“Isn't this a splendid world?
Ding, ding!
Beauteous thing!
O how I love the world!
Hurrah!”
And in the sunshine
all the world began to glow;
all things took on colour and sound
in the sunshine!
Flower and bird, things great and small.
“Good day, good day!”
Isn't this a splendid world?
Hey, you there!
“Lovely world!”
Will my happiness now flower too?
No, no!
Well I know
that it can never bloom!

3 – Ich hab' ein glühend Messer

I have a gleaming knife in my breast.
Woe is me, woe is me! It cuts so deep
into every joy and pleasure,
so deep, so deep!
Ah, what a cruel guest to harbour!

It never grants me peace,
never grants me rest,
neither by day nor by night when I would
sleep.

Woe is me, woe is me!
When I look into the heavens
I see her two eyes of blue there.
Woe is me, woe is me!
When I go into the golden fields,
from afar I see her fair hair blowing in the
breeze.
Woe is me, woe is me!
When I start up from my dreams
and hear the peal of her silvery laughter,
woe is me, woe is me!
I would that I lay upon my sable bier,
never again to open my eyes!

4 – Die zwei blauen Augen

My love's two eyes of blue
have sent me out into the wide world.
I had to bid farewell
to the spot I cherish.
O eyes of blue,
why did you look at me?
Now grief and sorrow are forever my lot.
I went out in the still of night,
at dead of night across the gloomy heath.
No one said goodbye to me,
goodbye, goodbye;
my companions were love and grief.
By the road stands a linden-tree:
there at last I found rest in sleep.
Under the linden-tree,
which snowed its blossoms down on me,
I knew naught of life's pain;
all, all was well again -
all, all!
Love and grief,
my world, my dreams!

KINDERTOTENLIEDER

1 – Nun will die Sonn' so hell aufgehn

Now will the sun as brightly rise
as though no evil befell last night!
The evil befell just me alone;

The sun, it shines on all mankind!
You must not enfold the night within you,
you must immerse it in eternal light.
A lamp has gone out in my abode;
Hail to the whole world's gladdening light!

**2 – Nun seh' ich wohl, warum so dunkle
Flammen**

Now I see clearly, O eyes, why such dark
flames
so often leapt out at me
as if you wanted to concentrate
the whole sum of your strength in a single
look.

Yet I never suspected (because of the mists
that hovered round me,
all spun by the deceitful loom of fate),
that those bright beams already sought to
journey
back home – to the place where every
beam originates.

You wanted with your shining light to tell
me:

'We'd dearly love to stay here by you,
but this our destiny denies us.

Ah look at us, for soon we'll be far from
you!

'What are but eyes to you, these present
days,
in nights to come will be to you but stars.'

3 – Wenn dein Mütterlein

When your dear mother
comes in through the door,
and I turn my head
to look across at her,
'tis not on her face
that my glance falls first,
but on that place,
nearer to the floor
there, where your dear face
always used to be,
when all bright with joy
you would come in with her,
in bygone days, my dear daughter!
When your dear mother
comes in through the door

in her candle's shimmer,
it's as though you always
came in with her too,
toddling after her,
as you used to do,

O you, your father's flesh and blood,
ah, gladdening light
too swiftly extinguished!

**4 – Oft denk' ich, sie sind nur
ausgegangen**

How often I think they're just out walking;
they won't be much longer, they'll soon be
returning.

The day is fine, O never fear!

They're only taking the long way back.

Oh yes, they've only gone out walking,
and even now they must be returning.

O never fear, the day is fine!

They're only taking the path into the hills!

They've only started out before us

and won't come back home at all!

We'll soon overtake them, up on the hills,
in the sunshine! The day is fine upon the
hills!

5 – In diesem Wetter, in diesem Braus

In this grim weather, this raging storm,
I'd never have sent the children outside!
But they've taken them out of the house.
I had no say in the matter.

In this grim weather, this howling gale,
I'd never have let the children outside,
I'd fear they might catch an illness;
now these are but idle thoughts.

In this grim weather, this dreadful blast,
I'd never have dared let the children out-
side.

I'd fear they might die tomorrow;
now this is no cause for worry.

In this grim weather, this raging storm,
I'd never have dared send the children out-
side!

But they've taken them out of the house;
I had no say in the matter!

In this grim weather, this howling gale,
this raging storm,

they rest, as if in their mother's house.
No storm can now frighten them,
the hand of God protects them,
they rest as if in the mother's house!

RÜCKERT-LIEDER

1 – Ich atmet' einen linden Duft

I breathed a delicate fragrance.
In the room stood
a spray of lime,
a token
from a beloved hand.
How lovely was the fragrance of lime!
How lovely is the fragrance of lime,
the spray of lime
you delicately plucked!
I gently breathe
the fragrance of lime
the delicate fragrance of love.

2 – Liebst du um Schönheit

If you love for beauty, then do not love
me!
Love the Sun, for he has golden hair.
If you love for youth, then do not love me!
Love the spring, which is young every
year.
If you love for riches, then do not love me!
Love the mermaid, for she has many fine
pearls!
If you love for love, then yes, do love me!
Love me for ever, I'll love you evermore!

3 – Blicke mir nicht in die Lieder

Do not look into my songs!
I cast down my eyes
as if surprised in a naughty deed.
I dare not even trust myself
to watch them growing.
Do not look into my songs;
your inquisitiveness is treason!
Bees, when they build cells,
also will not let themselves be watched,
and do not even watch themselves.
When the rich honeycombs
are at last brought to the light of day,

you shall be the first to taste!

4 – Um Mitternacht

At midnight
I kept watch
and looked up to heaven;
no star of all the host of stars
smiled on me
at midnight.
At midnight
I sent my thoughts
far to the bounds of dark space;
at midnight.
No vision of light
brought me comfort
at midnight.
At midnight
I took note of
the beating of my heart;
a single pulse of sorrow
was set in motion
at midnight.
At midnight
I fought the battle,
O Mankind, of your sufferings;
I could not gain the victory
by my own strength
at midnight.
At midnight
I gave my strength
into Thy hands;
Lord of death and life,
thou keep'st the watch
at midnight!

5 – Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen

I am lost to the world,
on which I wasted so much time;
it has for so long known nothing of me,
it may well believe that I am dead!
Not that I am in any way concerned
if it takes me for dead;
nor can I really deny it,
for truly I am dead to the world.
I am dead to the world's commotion
and at peace in a still land!

I live alone in my own heaven,
in my love, in my song.

DAS LIED VON DER ERDE (Hans
Bethge, Die chinesische Flöte 1907)

1 – Das Trinklied vom Jammer der Erde

Now beckons the wine in the golden gob-
let,
but don't drink before I sing you a song!
The song of sorrow
shall resound in gusts of laughter through
your soul.

When sorrow draws near,
the gardens of the soul lie wasted,
joy and song wither and die.
Dark is life, and so is death.

Master of this house!
Your cellar holds its fill of golden wine!
Here, this lute I name my own!

To strike the lute and to drain the glasses,
these are the things that go well together.
A full goblet of wine at the right time
is worth more than all the kingdoms of this
earth!

Dark is life, and so it death.
The firmament is blue eternally, and the
earth
will long stand fast and blossom in spring.
But thou, O man, for how long do you
live?

Not for a hundred years can you delight
in all the rotten trash of this earth!

Look down there! In the moonlight, on the
graves
squats a mad spectral figure.

It is an ape! Hear him howling
and yelling and shattering the sweet fra-
grance of life!

Now take the wine! Now it is time, com-
panions!

Drain your golden goblets to the dregs!
Dark is life, and so is death!

2 – Der Einsame im Herbst

Autumn mists drift blue over the lake,
covered with rime stands every blade of

grass;
it is as though an artist had strewn dust of
jade
over the delicate blossoms.
The sweet fragrance of the flowers has
faded;

a cold wind bows down their stems.
Soon the withered golden petals
of the lotus-flowers will be floating on the
water.

My heart is weary. My little lamp
has burnt out with a sputter; it puts me in
mind to sleep.

I come to you, beloved resting place!
Yes, give me peace, I need consolation.
I weep much in my loneliness.
Autumn in my heart is lasting too long.
Sun of love, will you never shine again
and dry up, tenderly, my bitter tears?

3 – Von der Jugend

In the middle of the little pool
stands a pavilion of green
and white porcelain.

Like a tiger's back
arches the bridge of jade
over to the pavilion.

In the little house friends are sitting,
beautifully dressed, drinking, chatting.
Several are writing verses.

Their silken sleeves slip
backwards, their silken caps
perch gaily on the back of their necks.

On the little pool's still
surface everything appears
fantastically in a mirror image.
Everything is standing on its head
in the pavilion of green
and white porcelain;
the bridge seems like a half-moon,
its arch upside-down. Friends,
beautifully dressed, are drinking and chat-
ting.

4 – Von der Schönheit

Young maidens are plucking flowers,
plucking lotus-flowers by the river's edge.

Amid the bushes and leaves they sit,
 gathering flowers in their laps, and calling
 teasingly
 to one another.
 Golden sunlight weaves around their
 forms,
 mirrors them in the shining water.
 Sunlight mirrors their slender limbs
 and their sweet eyes,
 and the breeze lifts with wheedling
 caresses
 the fabric of their sleeves,
 bears the magic
 of their pleasing fragrance through the air.

O look, racing along, what handsome lads,
 there on the river bank, on spirited horses,
 afar off shining like the sun's rays;
 now between the branches of the green
 willows they canter along, lads in the
 flush of youth!

The horse of one of them whinnies joy-
 fully,
 and shies and tears away,
 over the flowers and the grass his hooves
 are scudding,
 trampling in sudden onslaught the fallen
 flowers.

Hey! Look at its mane flapping frenziedly,
 its nostrils steaming hotly.
 Golden sunlight waves around their forms,
 mirrors them in the shining water.
 And the loveliest of the maidens sends
 long glances of yearning after him.
 Her proud bearing is only pretence.
 In the flashing of her large eyes,
 in the darkness of her passionate glance.
 The tumult of her heart still surges pain-
 fully towards him.

5 – Der Trunkene im Frühling

If life is but a dream,
 why then toil and fret?
 I drink till I can drink no longer,
 the whole livelong day.
 And when I can drink no longer,
 since guilt and soul are full,

then I stagger to my door
 and sleep stupendously!
 What do I hear when I awake? Listen!
 A bird sings in the tree.
 I ask him if the spring is here;
 I feel as if I were dreaming.
 The bird twitters 'Yes!
 Spring is here – came overnight!'
 In deepest wonder I listen,
 the bird sings and laughs!
 I fill my glass again,
 and drain it to the dregs,
 and sing, until the moon shines bright
 in the black firmament.
 And when I can sing no longer,
 then I go back to sleep;
 for what does spring matter to me?
 Let me be drunk!

6 – Der Abschied

The sun is going down behind the moun-
 tains.
 In every valley evening is descending,
 bringing its shadows, which are full of
 coolness.
 O look! Like a silver bark
 the moon floats up through the blue lake of
 heaven.
 I sense a delicate breeze shivering
 behind the dark fir trees.
 The brook sings melodiously through the
 darkness.
 The flowers grow pale in the twilight.
 The earth takes deep breaths of rest and
 sleep;
 All desire now turns to dreaming.
 Weary people go homewards,
 so that, in sleep, they may learn anew
 forgotten joy and youth.
 The birds huddle silent on the branches.
 The world is falling asleep!
 A cool breeze blows in the shadow of my
 fir trees.
 I stand here and wait for my friend.
 I wait for him to take a last farewell.
 I long, O my friend, to be by your side,
 to enjoy the beauty of this evening.
 Where are you? You leave me long alone!

<p>I wander to and fro with my lute on pathways which billow with soft grass. O beauty! O eternal-love-and-life-intoxic- ated world! He alighted from his horse and handed him the drink of farewell. He asked him where he was going, and also why it had to be. He spoke, his voice was veiled: 'Ah! My friend - Fortune was not kind to me in this world! Where am I going? I am going to wander in the mountains, I seek rest for my lonely heart! I am journeying to the homeland, to my resting place; I shall never again go seeking the far dis- tance. My heart is still and awaits its hour! The dear earth everywhere blossoms in spring and grows green again! Everywhere and forever the distance shines bright and blue! Forever... forever...</p>	<p>Trallali, trallalei, trallala. My brothers are thick on the ground, they lie as if mowed down.” Up and down he beats the drum, he wakes his silent brothers. Trallali, trallalei, trallali, trallalei, they attack their enemies; trallali, trallalei, trallaleralala, terror smites the enemy. Up and down he beats the drum, now they're back at their billets, trallali, trallalei, trallali, trallalei, wheeling out into the lane they halt in front of his sweetheart's house. Trallali, trallalei, trallalera. In the morning the skeletons stand there, in rank and file like tombstones. The drummer stands in front, so that she can see him. Trallali, trallalei, trallalera.</p>
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Revelge (transl. William Mann 1989)

Between three and four in the morning
we soldiers have to march
up and down the lane.
Trallali, trallalei, trallalera,
my sweetheart looks down.
“O brother, now I've been shot,
the bullet has hit me hard,
carry me to my billet.
Trallali, trallalei, trallalera,
it isn't far from here.”
“O brother, I can't carry you,
the enemy has beaten us.
May dear God help you!
Trallali, trallalei, trallalera,
I must march on to death!”
“O brothers, you're going past me
as if I were finished.
Trallali, trallalei, trallalera,
you are coming too close to me.
I surely must beat my drum,
trallali, trallalei, trallali, trallalei,
or I shall be lost.

B. List of works

(Extracted from Opus magazine and the *Cambridge Companion*.)

1866: Polka for piano

1875: Herzog Ernst von Schwaben (Unfinished, opera)

1876: Piano quartet in a minor (Unfinished)

1875-78: Sonata for violin and piano

 Nocturne for cello and piano

 Piano quartet

 Piano suite

 Symphony in a minor (Unfinished)

1877-80: Die Argonauten (Unfinished, opera)

1878: Piano quintet (Unfinished)

1878-80: Das klagende Lied

1878-82: Scandinavian symphony (Unfinished)

1880-81: Rübezahl (Unfinished)

1883: Prelude with choir

1884: Der Trompeter von Säkkingen

1884: Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen

1884-86: Symphony 1, D major

1888: Sketches for an opera

1888-1900: Des Knaben Wunderhorn

1888-94: Symphony 2, c minor

1895-96: Symphony 3, d minor

1899-1901: Symphony 4, G major

1901-02: Rückert-lieder

1901-03: Symphony 5, c sharp minor

1901-04: Kindertotenlieder

1903-04: Symphony 6, a minor

1904-05: Symphony 7, e minor

1906-07: Symphony 8, E flat major

1907-08: Das Lied von der Erde

1908-10: Symphony 9, D major

1910: Symphony 10 (Unfinished)

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