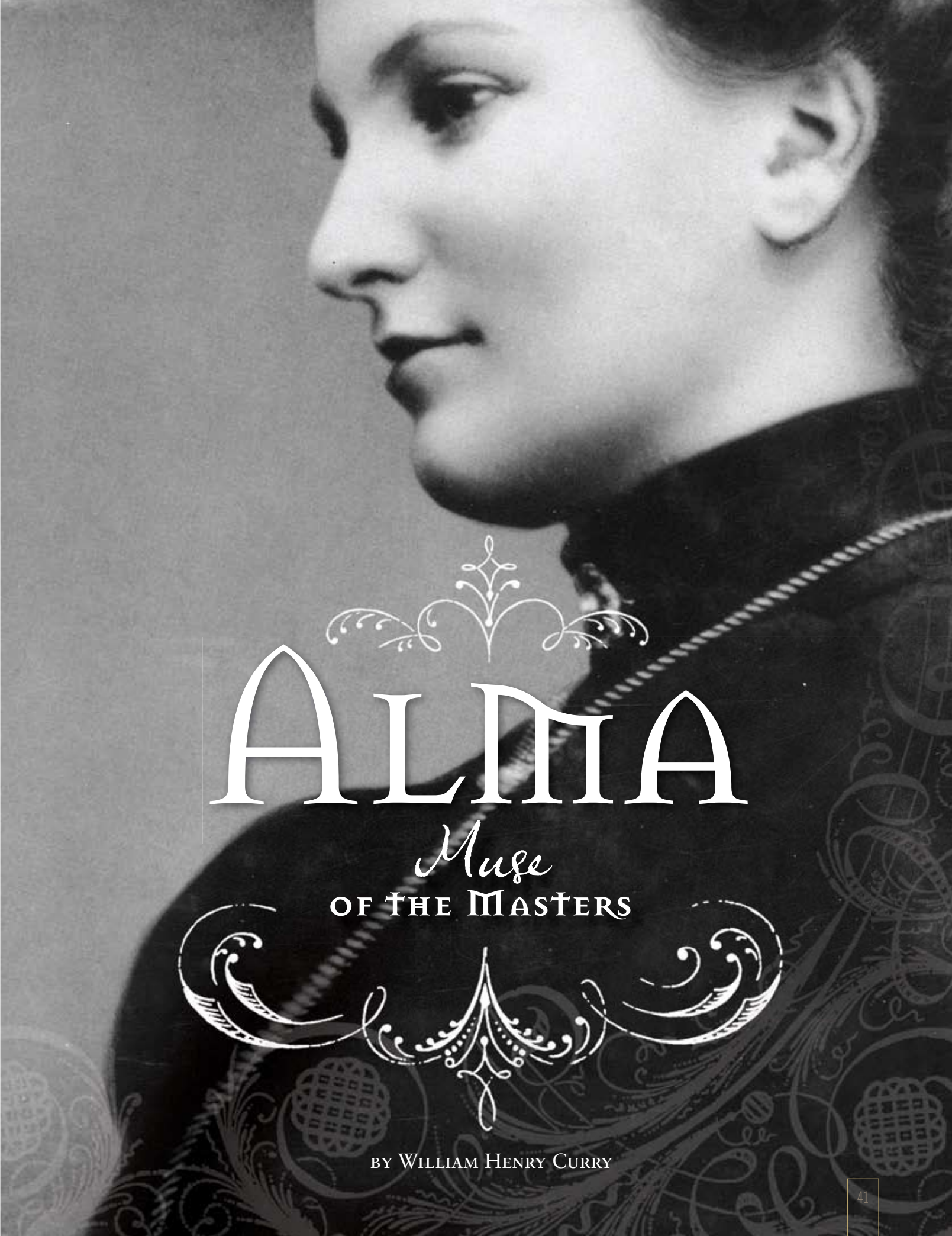


Alma

Muse of the Masters

by William Henry Curry

At the beginning of Gustav Mahler's Symphony No. 6 we hear march music that is marked to be played "energetically." But this is not an ebullient march in the style of Sousa; it is rather an implacable, negative juggernaut that crushes all before it. After two minutes, the mood lightens considerably as the dark clouds are vanquished by a lyrical, even rapturous, melody that is the antithesis of the opening theme.

Mahler said that this joyous melody was a musical portrait of his wife. Who then was this person? And was her spirit and personality as strong and radiant as this melody? And how did this poorly educated woman manage to effortlessly capture the hearts of many of the greatest intellectuals and artists of her time? North Carolina Symphony Resident Conductor William Henry Curry explains the essence of this haunting Muse of the Masters.

Spring's Awakening

Alma Schindler was born in Vienna in 1879. She was the child of a well-to-do couple that was deeply involved in the arts. Like most young ladies of the era, her schooling was limited. She was mentored by friends of the family and was raised in the Catholic faith.

The young Alma was innately inquisitive and a voracious reader. She was also a revealing and eloquent diarist who eventually published several books. She especially had an intense interest in music and loved all the famous composers, especially Wagner. Most remarkably, she composed many songs and hoped to become the first woman to write a great opera.

She had other gifts, as well. By the time she was 17 her physical appeal was more than obvious. She was often referred to as being "the most beautiful young woman in Vienna." Pictures of her at this time do reveal a strikingly attractive, charismatic and self-assured young lady. Men of all ages were now noticing her. And she was noticing them in return.

She became enamored of her mother's friend, the theatrical producer Max Burckhard. This infatuation had primal roots. The first influential man in her life had been her father, an accomplished landscape painter. The credo that he bequeathed to her was "reach for the stars," a summons to challenge herself to be the eternal student of the best in Western culture. Alma adopted this philosophy and developed a love of the arts and its heroes. For the rest of her life she would grant respect only to artistic men of significant accomplishment. At the age of thirteen, Alma lost her beloved father and as a young woman she longed to fill this void with an older, respected man of the arts.

Burckhard, 25 years her senior and her literary guide, fit the bill. Though a friend of the family, he was still hard-pressed

...young Alma was innately inquisitive and a voracious reader.

to conceal his feelings for the bewitching Alma. An entry in her diary about him reveals the awakening of her sex drive; "His vigorous manhood intrigues me."

Her next crush was the gifted artist Gustav Klimt. When they first met, he was 18 years older than she and considered to be a scandalous person. His paintings featured highly erotic visions of the female form and he went about in a loose-fitting monk's robe that made him look like a rag-picker. Although the opposite of stylish, Klimt was a brilliant talker and a genius, and for Alma, attributes such as these always trumped the physical ones. Klimt fell deeply in love and made no attempt to withhold this from her. Men had silently loved Alma in the past but none had overtly expressed their love for her with the kind of visceral passion Klimt evinced.

In a letter to her disapproving stepfather, Klimt unsuccessfully pled his case with words men would use for the next forty years to describe Alma's hold on them – "Alma is beautiful, intelligent, witty and has everything a man can wish for in a woman, and in abundant measure. I believe that wherever she goes in the world of men she shall be mistress and sovereign. Can't you understand that there are moments when one loses control of one's thoughts and becomes confused with regard to her?"

Klimt was the first of many Alpha males this femme fatale would effortlessly bring to their knees. Her next suitor, Alexander von Zemlinsky fell quite literally. "I want to kneel down, kiss the hem of your dress and worship you as something sacred," he wrote to her.

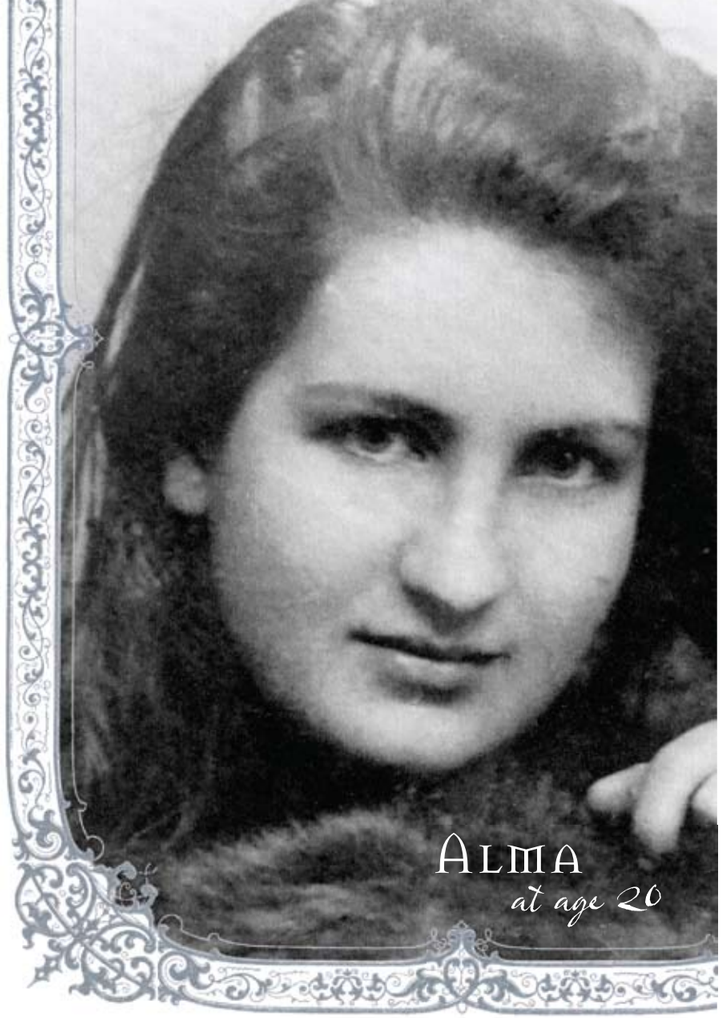
Alma and Alexander, a brilliant young composer-conductor and also Alma's music teacher, created an unusual couple. If she was considered to be the "most beautiful woman in Vienna, he was generally thought to be its ugliest man. In her diaries she said of Zemlinsky, "He is a hideous gnome. He cuts the most comical figure imaginable. A chinless caricature, small, with bulging eyes. He is dreadfully ugly, yet I find him to be quite enthralling."

It was his worldly accomplishments and his eyes, sparkling with intelligence that made him so intriguing to Alma. He courted her for two years. During this time their physical relationship included caresses and kisses but Alma was very careful to protect her virginity. Eventually, he demanded a physical consummation of their feelings. "As proof of our love," he wrote, "I must have one hour of happiness alone with you." Alma's diary at this point reveals a burgeoning libido, a defining aspect of her that would frequently overwhelm her emotions and mute her more rational senses. "I madly desire his embraces. I would like to kneel down before him and press my lips to his naked body, kiss everything, everything! Amen!"

It was also at this time that several unattractive traits surfaced regarding Alma's personality when in love. One was a pathological jealousy. She required loyalty not only in the present but the past also. Her supremacy was not to be threatened by her mate looking at other women or even admitting to having had previous romantic relationships.

She also required the banishment of her lover's male friends. There was to be no rival for her attention. Equally troubling was her insensitivity and sometimes outright cruelty to men she now considered her property. With Zemlinsky, this thoughtlessness revealed itself when she callously showed to him her diary entries in which she ridiculed his compositions and his appearance.

The most beautiful girl in Vienna seemed to want to convince her captures that they owed her much for the right to love her. Zemlinsky wrote: "Have you really so much to give that others must always beg?" As their affair deepened, Alma realized that she did indeed love him. As her diaries explicitly state, their longed-for "one hour of happiness" was seemingly all but an hour away when she had the most important encounter of her life.



Alma
at age 20

Gustav Mahler

On November 7, 1901, Alma was a dinner guest at a party honoring the most important and controversial musician in Vienna, Gustav Mahler. At 41, he was nearing the height of his musical career.

Now he is considered to be one of the great symphonists of all time but at this time he was best known for being the brilliant and volatile director of the Court Opera. Mahler the man was a complex person whose arduous path to fame had been strewn with paradoxes and contradictions.

Born into a poor Jewish family, he became the most prominent opera conductor in Europe through the sheer force of his personality and unimpeachable integrity. This was quite an achievement, considering that Vienna was the most anti-Semitic city in Europe at the time.

As a person, he could be difficult and withdrawn but when relaxed and around familiar company he could be tender and witty. Above all, he was a Man on a Mission; he believed that he was the most important symphonic composer since Beethoven and was determined to leave a lasting legacy worthy of his gifts. Alma had attended some of his concerts and admired him. "As for Mahler," she wrote in her diary, "I'm virtually in love with him."

She was eager to meet this incendiary being but something within her told her to coolly keep her distance. When their paths did eventually cross, they were only able to exchange a few shy words. It was at this dinner party at the end of 1901 that they had their first real conversation.

It was rare for Mahler to accept a society invitation. On these infrequent occasions he would often disappear into the library, stretch out on a sofa and read a book. He grudgingly attended this event in order to please a friend but warned the hostess in advance that he only ate bread and apples.

While there, he overheard Alma discussing, with great insight and wit, the nature of physical beauty. Intrigued, he asked to join the conversation. Later, when the topic changed, Alma found herself arguing with Mahler as she passionately defended the genius of her friend Zemlinsky.

Mahler was impressed by her verbal dexterity. He was also no doubt astonished that someone, and a very pretty someone at that, had dared to stand up to him. From that moment on, the rigidly disciplined Mahler, who had not had a romantic relationship in five years, was smitten.

After she left, he told the hostess that he had never enjoyed a party so much. "She is a bright and interesting lady. I didn't like her to begin with, because she seemed to be nothing but a doll. It's not every day that one meets such a pretty young thing who's actually busying herself with something serious. If Beethoven, Wagner and Goethe came to life again today, her young heart would kneel down before them and worship them."

Here the roots of Mahler's infatuation are revealed. It was thrilling for this man, wholly devoted to the arts, to find a woman whose magnificent exterior housed such a considerable intellect. That night, Alma wrote in her diary, "I must say, I liked him immensely, although he's dreadfully restless. He stormed about the room like a savage. The fellow is made entirely of oxygen. When you go near him, you get burnt." One affair ended and another one began that night.

The next day, with a chaperone, they met in Mahler's office at the Opera. The following day, he sent her an "anonymous" love poem. The two obviously enjoyed each other's company and so the affair proceeded at a brisk pace, with conversations centering on literature, music, philosophy and religion.

On November 27th, during a romantic walk in the snow, Mahler suddenly blurted out, "It is not easy to marry a man like me! I am and must remain entirely free and can't allow myself to be bound by material things." Their affair was only three weeks old… he had yet to say that he loved her. They had not even kissed!

Alma was silent, overwhelmed by the implications of his words. When they got back to her house, he kissed her and according to Alma's account "he began talking about marriage as though it were a simple and obvious thing, as though it had been settled by the few words he's uttered along the way – so why wait?"

Alma confessed in her diaries the next day that she was still grappling with the "why" of her love for Mahler. In these lines, Alma, the past, present and future collector of men of accomplishment, reveals her uncertainty about the derivations of her infatuations – "I don't know whether I love him or not… whether I love the director of the Opera, the wonderful conductor... or the man. And what if Alex were to become famous?"

Ominously, she confesses that she is deeply concerned about her negative assessment of Mahler the composer and his lack of interest in her creative work – "Mahler's music leaves me dreadfully cold... [and] one question plagues me – whether Mahler will inspire me to compose… whether he will support my artistic striving. He thinks nothing of my art… and much of his own. And I think nothing of his art and much of my own. [As a composer] Gustav is so poor… so dreadfully poor… am I supposed to lie for the rest of my life?!" Considering the events to come, these words were highly prophetic.

Despite her fears, soon they were exchanging kisses and sharing intimate secrets. Two very different people were slowly and tenuously becoming a couple. "Never in my life have I met someone as alien as he," she writes. "How alien (and yet so close!) I cannot say. Maybe that's one of the things that attracts me to him… already, I'm aware of changes in myself, due to him. He's taking away from me and giving me much in return. If this goes on, he'll make a new person of me. A better person? I don't know. I don't know at all."

Over the following days, her diaries became more explicit about her love for Mahler and in them she wonders whether her independent streak will be able to coexist with someone as dominant and larger-than-life. "Burckhard has advised me against marrying Mahler. He says that when two strong personalities come together, they usually fight until one of them is forced into submission. And that would probably be me. Must I be subdued? I can and will not. I must have my freedom! Complete freedom!"

Alma goes on to assess her feelings for the important men in her life – "My feeling for Zemlinsky was wild and carnal. Burckhard brought out my frivolity. With Mahler however, I feel imbued with the holiest feelings. Are you happier when you live frivolously, unscrupulously or when you acquire a beautiful, sublime outlook on life?"

She was not the only one with doubts. Mahler himself was aware of the inherent problems concerning this match. He was troubled by the potential problems that might arise from their seventeen year age difference. "Isn't it a crime that I, the autumn, should bind itself to the spring? [The result will be that] she will forgo summer."

And as he was getting to know her better he was discovering things about Alma that deeply concerned him. It was evident that Alma, despite the brilliance of her repartee, was still a typically callow 22-year-old whose personality was still in a state of development.

At the height of his insecurity he wrote her a twenty-page letter that has been called "unique in the history of love letters." It is a blunt tract that outlines in sometimes withering detail several examples of her immaturity and selfishness. However, in the letter he reveals his own selfishness by demanding that she cease all of her own composing ("There will be only one composer in this family!"). He issues an ultimatum – if they are to be married, her sole activity in life must be to attend to his every need.

It is a remarkable document. It is candid but not insensitive and gives strong evidence of Mahler's extreme narcissism. If we find ourselves shocked by his dictatorial stance, we must nonetheless keep in mind two things. First, Mahler was a child of his time in that he adopted certain traditional mores about the relationship between the sexes. In 1901 we are many years away from female suffrage and equality in the home and the workplace.

Second, Mahler's occupation was that of a conductor. Even today, after a half century of increased democratization of the conductor-orchestra dynamic, a conductor's autocracy largely remains in place. It might be said that one of the occupational hazards conductors must master is the conscious or unconscious desire to transpose their power and unquestioned authority to their other relationships, both private and professional.

Alma was shocked by Gustav's letter and her mother advised her to drop him. Alma thought it over, slept on it and the next day, a sea change had occurred in her heart. "Yes, he is right. I must live entirely for him, to make him happy. I want absolutely nothing except to obey him. And what if I were to renounce my music out of love for him? I must admit that scarcely any music now interests me except his." A bargain had been struck, but it was a Faustian one that would one day demand payment.

On December 27, not quite two months after that fateful dinner party, they were formally betrothed. For some reason, Mahler had neglected to tell his friends anything at all about his interest in Alma and so he hastily threw together a dinner party where she could be formally introduced to them.

The occasion was a disaster. All night her thoughtless and sarcastic remarks made a poor impression on all. Finally, someone asked her point blank, "What do you think of your fiancé's music?" Alma replied; "I know very little of it and what I do know, I do not like!" Stunned silence.

And yet, Gustav laughed uproariously,

…her diaries became more explicit about her love for Mahler and in them she wonders whether her independent streak will be able to coexist with someone as dominant and larger-than-life.

took her into the next room, closed the door, and chatted intimately with her while totally ignoring the other guests. Mahler lost virtually all of his close friends that night, something that privately pleased his bride-to-be.

The rocky engagement period ended with their marriage on March 9, 1902. Over the next ten years, almost all their fears about their ultimate compatibility would prove to be well-founded.

The Marriage of Fire & Fire

At first, there were many encouraging signs that this truly was a blessed union. Alma had little experience at house-keeping but she was a born organizer. Very soon, she created a home for them that answered all of Gustav's needs for a stable domestic life.

Mahler was completely absorbed in his work and was probably oblivious to Alma's frustration at no longer being at the center of glamorous society. Nonetheless, they enjoyed each others' company at meals and during intellectually stimulating walks. Still, Alma was often lonely.

On November 3, 1902, she gave birth to a daughter, whom they named Maria, in honor of Gustav's mother. It was a difficult birth, because, as the doctor told Mahler, "the baby presented itself bottom first." Mahler laughed and said, "That's my child! She shows the world right away what she thinks of it!"

Maria was a smiling, healthy baby who received the lavish affections of her father. Alma however, turned out to have virtually no maternal instinct and was happy to have the nanny take over as often as possible. Slowly, the first cracks in Eden became apparent.

Alma's diaries from this time mention her loneliness and her dismay at having nothing creative to absorb her attention during the many hours her husband was absent. "I must begin another life. I can't stand this one anymore. I am just vegetating. I must start reading again, learn something. I have been taken firmly by the hand and led away from myself. My child doesn't need me. In any case I can't keep myself busy with **that**."

Nowadays, a woman of Alma's ambition and drive would probably seek fulfillment in the workplace. But this was a hundred years ago, when such things were either frowned upon or considered to be impossible. Her isolation was not helped by the fact that Mahler, though one of the most famous public figures of his day, was essentially an introvert, an ascetic with monastic tendencies. He brought no new or old faces into their orbit and there was no fawning male around for her to flirt with.

In 1903, Mahler continued his draining schedule at the Opera and in the summer, he composed his Sixth Symphony. One morning he came to her and said "I have portrayed you in one of the themes. I don't know if I have succeeded, but I think you will like it!"

It is an amazing melody with an ascending curve, and its ecstatic mood vanquishes the nihilistic mood that has thus far predominated. The truth of the matter is that Alma inspired a good deal more than this one theme. He told her that her presence helped to eliminate the maddening writer's blocks that haunted him. She was becoming many things to him – his wife, the mother of his children, a perfect domestic partner and his ideal muse.

In the summer of 1904, she became pregnant again. The father-to-be was, as usual, tender and vigilant, but eccentric. When Alma's intense labor pains began, his risible response was to read out loud to her from the writings of the most turgid of German philosophers, Emmanuel Kant. After many minutes of this she pleaded with him to let her suffer in peace. The next day, she gave birth to another daughter, who they named Anna, after Alma's mother.

In general, 1904 was a happier year than the previous one because Mahler was now willing to allow a bit more activity in their social life. However, Alma was horrified that Gustav chose this time to add two more songs to his "Songs on the Death of Children." "Isn't this overtly tempting fate?" she asked.

In her diary she accused him of being a carnivorous genius who thought he was a vegetarian. In September she had a crisis – "Klimt is getting married! I am a bit jealous. As for his fiancée, she is faultless, perfect. Apart from that, she is a nobody."

It was at this time that Mahler began to reveal his irritation with his wife's fre-

When not conducting at the Metropolitan, Mahler lived the life of a semi-invalid and spent his free time in bed.

quent sullen moods. "Is it because your beautiful, elaborate dreams have not come true?" he sarcastically demanded.

Of course the inevitable happened; she began to flirt again. This time it was another musical genius, Hans Pfitzner, who would write one of the most profound 20th-century German operas, *Palestrina*. Like Mahler, he was an incredibly austere, physically unprepossessing and dedicated artist. Pfitzner arrived in Vienna to watch Mahler conduct a production of his latest opera but he seemed to only have eyes for Alma. He fell under her spell and became aggressively romantic when alone with her. "He was very amorous," Alma wrote. "I liked it. My skin tingled under his touch in a way it had not done for so long."

Mahler got wind of these episodes but remained calm, even indifferent, to the situation. Pfitzner soon abandoned the scene but the event re-invigorated Alma's sexuality, an awakening that would have inevitable consequences.

Before this could happen they went through the most disastrous month of their marriage. In June 1907, their oldest daughter contracted diphtheria and died two weeks later after a painful illness. This was the daughter that most resembled Gustav, both physically and temperamentally. "She was completely his child," Alma wrote. "They used to have long conversations. No one knew what they talked about. I never disturbed them. She was destined to be his joy for a few years, and that in itself was worth an eternity."

Two days after, as Maria's tiny coffin was being taken away, Alma fainted. A doctor came and ordered her to bed. "While you're at it doctor, would you mind examining my heart?" said Mahler. "My wife is always worrying about my heart."

Mahler lay down on a couch and the doctor quickly examined him. The doctor's face then turned pale and he said, "Well, a heart like that is nothing to be proud of!" A more complete diagnosis that month revealed terrible news – he had a severely damaged heart and was ordered to immediately give up all physical exertions. His world would never be the same. He had been an ardent conductor, a mountain climber, a swimmer, and a cyclist, but that part of his life was over. Every movement he took now filled him with fear. The cruelty of this catastrophe was exacerbated by its coming in the aftermath of the death of a favored child and a bitter conclusion to his stormy tenure at the Court Opera.

In the face of a significant loss in income and imminent death, Mahler's primary goal at this point became his mission to leave behind as much money as possible for his wife and daughter. The Metropolitan Opera in New York City beckoned and Mahler accepted.

Coming to America

When not conducting at the Metropolitan, Mahler lived the life of a semi-invalid and spent his free time in bed. Alma was his full-time nurse. Her socializing was restricted to attendance at her husband's performances, where bedecked in the finest fashions, the 28-year-old Alma was as stunning as ever.

On one such an occasion an American noted that she was "the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. In a way it seemed only right that Mahler, who was not good-looking and wore glasses, should have attracted such a beautiful woman by the force of his genius."

It was not an easy first year for her. She spoke no English and suffered a miscarriage. However, her letters to her friends in Europe paint a rosy picture of their new life in America. Was she just whistling in the dark?

In the summer of 1908, they traveled back to Europe where Mahler wrote "The Song of the Earth," a bittersweet evocation of the beauties of life that ends with a feeling of resigned acceptance in the face of one's mortality.

The return to New York in the fall found them enjoying a new measure of peace. As a person and as a musician Mahler had become increasingly less controlling and rigid. He was less dictatorial at rehearsals, less consumed by health worries and there was even a miracle; he became eager to accept social invitations!

Their momentary respite from distress was shattered when Mahler suddenly discovered one night that Alma was infatuated with a young pianist. They had a heated argument until Mahler retired to his room. Alma then went to their 11th floor window, opened it, and thought of jumping to her death. All night long, she stood at the window.

In the following weeks, they endured the misery of Alma's second miscarriage and Gustav's flu scare. They returned to Europe in the summer of 1909 where Mahler worked on his Ninth Symphony. Like "The Song of the Earth," this was another achingly beautiful symphonic swan song.

In October, they returned to New York were he accepted a new post as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic. Again, there was a period of calm. After seven turbulent years, they had won for themselves a hard-fought measure of peace and acceptance. The inner and outer storms had strengthened them. However, this divided house was not meant to stand and the time now arrived when Alma could no longer accept the creative and sexual void at the center of her life.

Death March

In the summer of 1910, Alma met Walter Gropius at a vacation spa. He was 27 and at the very beginning of a career as an architect. In later years he would be world-famous for his role, along with Paul Klee and Vassily Kandinsky, as one of the cofounders of the Bauhaus school of architecture.

Alma had unerringly picked out another artist who would one day make his mark on the world. While her husband was composing in the Austrian countryside, she began a passionate love affair with Gropius. This was more than an erotic fling; their feelings for each other lasted a lifetime. Unlike Alma and Gustav, they were not opposites, they

were soul mates; two rivers that blissfully joined and flowed together.

It wasn't long before Mahler found out. He became obsessed with the thought that this crisis was solely his fault. As he had feared, the combination of the difference in their ages and the restrictive pre-nuptial agreement he had imposed on her came back to bite him.

When she said that she would give up Gropius and stay with him, Mahler was relieved. Overnight his behavior towards her dramatically changed. He began to encourage her to compose again and even saw to it that some of her songs were published. These songs reveal a composer of talent, but perhaps not genius. And as much as possible, he remained by her side. It was as if he could not bear to let her out of his sight.

His feelings of regret and guilt could not be held at bay. He became impotent and fears of abandonment and physical oblivion consumed him. Slowly, what was left of his inner security began to crumble. The crisis left its mark on his music. When he was working on his tenth symphony, a work he would not live to complete, his manuscript was scrawled with indications of a spiritual breakdown: "O God, O God, why hast thou forsaken me! The devil dances with me! Farewell my lyre!"

In desperation, he decided to seek help from Sigmund Freud, already famous for his psychoanalytic theories. On a four-hour walk in Leiden Holland they discussed the roots of Mahler's condition. (If only the conversation of these two mega-geniuses could have been recorded for posterity!)

Gustav agreed with Freud's contention that Mahler and Alma's attraction for each other could be explained through his theories of the Oedipus complex. Mahler had always wanted to call Alma by her middle name, Maria, which also happened to be his mother's name. And many times he had told Alma, one of the world's great beauties, that he wished that her face showed the scars of long-suffering, like his mother's.

The immediate result of this consultation was that Mahler, once more, was able to make love to his wife. He also became obsessive in his constant praise for Alma. One morning she found a note from him on her bedside table, "Breath of my life! I have kissed your slippers a thousand times. You have had mercy on me, goddess mine, but the demons have punished me again because I thought once more, of myself and not of you, my darling."

Alma wrote to Gropius, "The idolatry, the admiration he now has for me are definitely not normal." Alma was trapped. To leave Mahler now in his weakened and near-crazed state might be equal to a death sentence. And neither could she deny her feelings for her other lover. She made this clear when she wrote to Gropius, "I know I am living only for the time when I can be completely and utterly yours." She signed this letter "From your wife."

The 1910-11 season in New York began with a flurry of concert activity for Mahler. Gropius remained in Europe and Alma was composing again. One day Mahler awoke with a sore throat and fever that continued to worsen. These were the signs of the escalating heart disease that would eventually kill him.

The next two months in New York were an emotional roller coaster ride of recoveries and relapses. On bad days he would be candid about his fear of dying. On good days he would joke with Alma about who her next husband should be. Alma was increasingly tender and attentive to him during this time. At last, through grief and selflessness, this classic egocentric had found her inner nobility.

Mahler's condition continued to worsen. Finally, in the spring of 1911, they decided to move back to Europe where he could be examined by the best bacteriologists. When it came time to board the boat, Mahler had a raging fever, was deathly pale and could barely walk.

The writer Stefan Zweig was also on board and left this moving account of the dying Mahler lying on his cot on the deck: "The man of fire was weak. But his silhouette… unforgettable, unforgettable… set against an unending grayness of sky and sea. Infinite sadness was in that sight but also something transfigured by greatness, something moving slowly towards a perfect ending, like music." The end came a month later in a hospital in Vienna. The 31-year-old Alma, on doctor's orders, did not attend the funeral. A few days later, she received a bill from Freud for "services rendered."

Mahler had been successful in his quest to provide enough money to guarantee his wife and daughter a comfortable living. She eventually had a happy reunion with Gropius but within a month, tension arose. Alma admitted to him that at the same time they were having their illicit affair, she had continued to sleep with Mahler. Gropius took this news very badly.

For the moment, things cooled considerably. Someone new then entered her life. This was the 24-year-old painter Oscar Kokoschka, tall, charismatic, emotionally unstable – and a genius. Their relationship led to the most unbridled sexual passion of Alma's life.

This was to be the great physical passion of her life and she was truly touched by his artistic gifts When they weren't making love he was drawing pictures of her. Three days after meeting Alma, he begged her to marry him. "Alma if you don't soon become my wife my great talent will come to a miserable end."

This galvanized the Muse into action: she agreed to marry him, if he produced a masterpiece. The result was a painting of them that became his most famous artwork: *The Bride of the Wind*. In the picture, she is placidly sleeping on Oscar's shoulder. He however is wide awake and looks like he has electricity coursing through his veins.

Alma had her masterpiece. She became pregnant by Kokoschka and started to make wedding plans. Then one day Mahler's death mask arrived and Alma carefully put it on display. Oscar went into a rage and demanded that something so fraught with meaning from her past life should be excluded from their present one. Harsh words were exchanged. A few days later, she went to a clinic and aborted their child.

Despite this, Oscar could not tear himself away from her. It was only when he volunteered at the beginning of World War I that they had a temporary break from each other. Alma by this time was in fear of their ungovernable lust.

Perhaps unconsciously trying to seek an escape, her love for Gropius returned in all its intensity. He had also enlisted but they were able to renew their relationship when he was on leave. They were married in August 1915.

Kokoschka never got over Alma. In a futile attempt to avoid a total separation from her, he commissioned a life-size doll that was to be her exact replica. He drew paintings of it and spread rumors that he took it for rides and to the opera. Finally, in an attempt to cure himself of his obsession for Alma, he threw a wild, drunken party with the doll as the honored "guest." At the climax of this orgy, he broke a bottle of red wine over its head and decapitated it. The next morning, police arrived in response to the rumors that there was a bloody, headless corpse in Kokoschka's garden.

The exorcism, however, was a failure. He loved her for the rest of his life and continued to send her letters, flowers and telegrams.

While Gropius was at war, Alma stayed at home and grew increasingly bored. The very thing that had initially excited her about him – their easy compatibility – now seemed to be a drawback. Alma began to yearn for more tension and more fireworks in her life. "Sometimes I get impatient and want to do something wicked," she wrote. "No marriage can be carried on at a distance."

Her ennui was eased by the arrival of a man that would become her love for the next 30 years: the 27-year-old Austrian/Bohemian writer Franz Werfel. Another of Alma's "discoveries," he went on to be, with Franz Kafka, an important exponent of German expressionism.

Werfel lived for pleasure and art and had a certain Viennese charm. His description of her could be the template for all the comments of her lovers: "She is one of the few sorceresses of our time. She lives in a luminous magic in which there is a strong desire to destroy and dominate. Her perception is sharp and clear. She has acquired great influence over me, because she is a power, a productive organism."

She juggled both men for a while, fought off new advances from Pfitzner and considered getting back together again with Kokoschka. Her marriage to Gropius ended in 1919. For a decade she was loathe to marry again but in 1929 relented. "Franz is the kindest, most affectionate man in my life."

She was now 50. In the early 1930s, Werfel became the most famous Austrian author. But he had a problem: he was Jewish in a country that was beginning to legally persecute members of his race. Franz and Alma fled to America and settled in Los Angeles. Upon arriving, Franz wrote a novel called *The Song of Bernadette* which became a best seller and a box office hit as a movie. Sadly, he was unable to enjoy his American success for very long. He died in 1945 at the age of 56. Alma would live another 19 years but he was to be her last love.

The Legend and The Legacy

Alma became an American citizen in 1947 and moved to New York City in 1952. While there, she played to the hilt her role as "the widow of the Four Arts." Clad in black but smothered in jewels she remained an imposing figure at her parties that included the cream of society. Little did she know that one last upheaval, this a pleasant one, was soon to change her life.

For half a century after his death, Mahler's music had languished in semi-obscurity. He had predicted that his time would come and when it did, during the celebration of his centennial in 1960, it led to a rediscovery of his music that was to prove to be the most exciting musical find of its time.

As a result, 81-year-old Alma now preferred to be called "Frau Mahler" rather than "Frau Werfel" and she basked in

Her visual persona invites attention, or rather, demands it. Her fascination is both tangible and elusive.

her newly minted fame. New friends were now added to her circle, including Leonard Bernstein and Benjamin Britten.

Ghosts from her romantic past returned for a last curtain call, as well. The ever-faithful Gropius visited her often and these reunions warmed them both. But one day Kokoschka suddenly turned up in New York City and asked to see her. All the old emotions that had overwhelmed her about him now came flooding back. What to do?

She vacillated – and turned him away because she wanted him to remember her as he once knew her, "the most beautiful woman in Vienna." He replied with one last telegram: "Dear Alma, in my *Bride of the Wind* we are forever united."

In an elegiac mood one night before her death in 1964, The Muse reviewed the famous men in her life and produced this stunning summation: "I never really liked Mahler's music, I never understood what Gropius was trying to do, I was never interested in what Werfel wrote, but Kokoschka, yes, Kokoschka always impressed me."

More than forty years after her death, interest in Alma Mahler has yet to peak. She has been the subject of books, movies, a long-running play and a song by Tom Lehrer. Every picture of her seems magnetic and casts a kind of hypnotic spell. Her visual persona invites attention, or rather, demands it. Her fascination is both tangible and elusive.

That she had the ability to inspire creative people to create is beyond question. What is less easily captured is how she achieved this. She was very pretty and very smart but surely that is no solution to her mystery. The giants that she seduced saw infinitely more to her than that, but what? The one thing these men had in common was their belief that she was intoxicating and impossible to resist.

Until we understand more about the immutable and perhaps unknowable laws of human attraction, a part of her will always remain an enigma.

She never returned to composition, but her memoirs are art works of a sort. They are a mixed bag. They are eloquent and uninhibited but occasionally self-serving and not always factually reliable. In them we see the beauty queen, warts and all.

More important was her indispensable biography of Mahler, remarkably, the only work of its kind by the spouse of a great composer. And though the paintings she inspired by Kokoschka will always be an important part of her legacy, it is in the field of art music that her reputation will always be the most secure.

On his deathbed, Mahler exacted a promise from her to look after his friend, the composer Arnold Schoenberg. This she did through financial and moral support. He went on to become the inventor of a whole new way to compose called Serialism that made him second only to Stravinsky as an influence on 20th-century music.

Through Schoenberg, she met his composition pupil, Alban Berg. She provided the advocacy he needed to publish his operatic masterpiece *Wozzeck*. This work from 1922 is dedicated to her and was the last Austro-German opera to become part of the standard repertoire

Of all of her inspirations, the one she treasured most was Manon, the daughter created with Walter Gropius. Manon was as captivating as her mother and had an ineffable grace that reminded people of a doe or a gazelle. Tragically, she contracted polio at the age of 17 and died soon after. Berg was so moved by her death that he wrote a violin concerto in her honor. It is dedicated "to the memory of an angel." The work turned out to be a requiem for two; he died shortly after finishing it. This was the last Austro-German concerto to enter the standard repertoire.

During the tremendous renaissance of interest in Mahler's work during the 1960s, many historians requested permission from Alma to peruse the sketches of his Tenth Symphony. Upon close examination of the manuscript it turned out that all this "unfinished symphony" needed to be completed was to be orchestrated and filled out harmonically where the texture was uncharacteristically thin.

Alma gave these sketches to the British scholar Deryck Cooke and his "performing version" of this posthumous masterpiece was premiered in 1964. It became the last Austro-German symphony to enter the standard repertoire. These works were the glorious climax of a musical legacy that can be traced back to Haydn. For these, we owe Alma much.

Anna, the only surviving daughter of the Mahlers, went on to imitate her mother in physical allure and frequency of trips to the altar. However, like her father, she had superior creative skills. As a sculptor, she won international awards and achieved a fame unrelated to either parent. In 1962, Anna summed up her artistic philosophy: "Value in art is not determined by superficial characteristics, but by the ability to reach and touch our innermost feelings." If one slightly alters this sentence it more than partially solves the mystery of Alma and her Masters: "Value in people is not determined by superficial characteristics, but by their ability to reach and touch our innermost feelings."