

7 *Gustav Mahler to Alma*

The Mahler literature is huge, and many of Mahler's letters have already appeared in print. But what has come fully to light during the last decade adds greatly to our understanding of Mahler and his marriage. Henry-Louis de La Grange has masterminded this volume; and while we wait eagerly for the appearance in English of the completion of his monumental biography, this contribution allows us not only to fill in some gaps but also to gain a vivid and telling portrayal of Mahler's personality in his own voice.

The book is the work of several hands and derives from a number of sources. After Alma Mahler's death in 1964, her papers, including all Mahler's letters to her, passed to her daughter, Anna. She in turn sold the letters to Hans Moldenhauer, and his celebrated archive passed them on the Bavarian State Library. They published a catalogue of their holdings and also held an exhibition of them in 2003. The initial German edition of *Gustav Mahler: Letters to his Wife* came out in 1995, but it did not include consideration of Alma's early diaries (from January 1898 to March 1902). They were published only in 1997. Copies of both the letters and Alma's diaries have been collected from the 1960s onwards in de La Grange's *médiathèque musicale, Mahler in Paris*.

The third major source is Alma's writings, published and unpublished. Two books will be familiar to the older generation of Mahler enthusiasts. *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* appeared in Britain in 1946 just after the war; it was translated by Basil Creighton. Of less value was her autobiography (ghosted by E. B. Ashton) of 1958, *And the Bridge is Love*. Of its 312 pages, only sixty-six were devoted to her life with Mahler, and they are a sentimentalized précis of the former volume. Finally, there is an absence. This is no *Briefwechsel*: for half of that is missing. Alma destroyed all her letters to her husband after his death – save one, written before they were married.

Now the trouble starts. Before we can usefully discuss anything in Mahler's hand, we must consider Alma as a witness. For like the fat lady in the *Morecambe and Wise Show* who used to elbow Eric and Ernie at the end while milking applause, Alma developed very early on an ability to place herself centre-stage in any situation in which she found herself. To achieve this end, reality often had to be adjusted. Memories would be censored, narratives doctored, events and people's presences in them altered or airbrushed altogether, her own importance in the action always emphasized. Mahler's letters did not escape correction and heavy editing after his death, sometimes quite meaninglessly. Even Alma's own diaries, when she came to transcribe them, suffered the same impact of second thoughts. Antony Beaumont sums it up: 'A true picture of Alma can emerge only from those documents with which she herself had no chance to tamper.'

So most of the supporting evidence is irremediably tainted and it is difficult to know what can, and what cannot, be believed. It is hard to gauge what was lost

to the world when Alma's early ambitions as a composer (to which most of the distortions in her personality were due) were stopped in its tracks by marriage. But her two books show she had another, never fully exploited talent: a flair for writing light romantic fiction. She showed a gift for snappy, journalistic writing: she understood instinctively that any regard for the complexities of truth must give way to the claims of the theatrically effective. She was the high mistress of the *ben trovato* anecdote and the well-told tale. She succeeded in creating a sort of beguiling fiction which gave a romanticized picture of her marriage and her husband on which a whole generation of music-lovers were brought up. It became the life-work of Henry-Louis de La Grange to scrub away at the novelette until he could present in detail a picture of Gustav Mahler as he really was.

The most exciting story Alma has to tell is that of her meeting and marrying Mahler. What the commentary rightly characterizes as 'her desire to create a legend', which she pursued relentlessly throughout her marriage (and indeed for the rest of her life), actually started here. The opening chapter of *Memories and Letters* begins with her ostentatious reluctance to meet Mahler at the Zuckerhandls' dinner party. But by the end of the evening she had made her conquest: 'I was certainly flattered by the exclusive attention he paid me.' In fact, the diaries reveal that she had encountered the great man several times before, with the mixed-up reactions to him typical of a precocious teenager.

Once he had declared himself, Mahler regarded their marriage as settled. He fell in love with Alma and was to love her consistently and constantly until his death. Their basic incompatibility and the twenty-year age gap are sometimes cited as examples of a great man's naivety. They were nothing of the sort. The love letters of December 1901 – almost daily from Berlin, and on 18 and 19 December from Dresden – show clearly that he was fully aware of this young girl's personality with all its virtues and defects, and quite prepared to tell her of them before they married. In short, he knew exactly what he was letting himself in for. The cumulative and longest letter of 19 December was one that he found difficult to write, and knew would be unacceptable: she must lay on one side her composing ambitions and be first and foremost his wife.

Alma was at that very moment still entangled with the composer Alexander Zemlinsky and busy initiating other trivial flirtations. After the initial shock she went, as they say, into denial: she dealt with this letter by virtually ignoring it. In *Memories and Letters* the twenty pages of 19 December are reduced to a vision of Mahler lying awake in Dresden and worrying, "What if I were too old for her?"

After the marriage, the letters fall into two main categories. Most of them are the fruit of Mahler's journeys to fulfil conducting engagements and to supervise first performances all over central Europe. But a sizeable minority were written from Maiernigg (their villa on the Wörthersee) to Alma in Vienna, and a smaller number from Vienna to Alma in Maiernigg. From 1908 onwards, when they had sought and found a house at Toblach in the South Tyrol, most of his letters

(apart, of course, from those written while on tour) are from there, and in 1910 mostly to Tobelbad near Graz, where Alma was enjoying a prolonged stay in a sanatorium.

Mahler was a regular correspondent and especially in the earlier days there is a clear regret over their separation. He expects Alma to write back frequently (and this sometimes means daily) and as fully as he does, and always complains when she fails to do so. He complains even more bitterly about her impossible handwriting – as Zemlinsky had done before him – with a mixture of amusement and exasperation. (Generations of scholars since have felt the same.) As a matter of course he straightaway writes a postcard from the railway station before leaving – sometimes when he has only just said goodbye to her, or at the beginning of a return journey from cities all over Europe – from Amsterdam to St. Petersburg. He always asks after the children and always complains when Alma sends him inadequate news of them.

Once at his destination there is a lively account of rehearsals, of performance, and sometimes of critical reaction. He does not often describe the life of the city he has come to: but a lively picture emerges of the remote Lemberg (Lvov), then very much in the outback of the Habsburg Empire. He also gives a vivid description of Amsterdam, where he stayed with the Mengelbergs. Nine annotated postcards from Zaandam wax lyrical about the place and his visit.

Alma was an intelligent girl and she was well read. Educated people whose mother tongue is German can be expected to respond to a quotation from Goethe's *Faust* more easily than native English speakers would to Shakespeare (Mahler quotes Shakespeare too). He expects thrown-off references from Schiller – a poet he could quote at length – to be picked up as well. He has an endearingly wide range of tag-lines from the libretti of a wealth of not always well-known operas, or ones that have since fallen out of the repertory, such as Albert Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmerman*. (The translator and editor might note in this context that *La dame blanche* is by Boieldieu, not Auber.)

Other composers are discussed, sometimes sharply. A performance of *Tosca* heard in Lemberg is made fun of: 'I need scarcely add that the score is a masterly sham: nowadays every shoemaker's apprentice is an orchestrator of genius.' Down at Maiernigg on his own, he decides to go through Brahms's chamber music, 'some of which, I regret to say, is sterile note-spinning'. Later, he criticizes Brahms's 'so-called development sections' and compares Brahms generally unfavourably with Wagner. Strauss's *Salome* makes a deep impression, and this starts an (unsuccessful) campaign to stage it at the Hofoper. Some minor Sibelius heard at Helsinki is dismissed ('a standard piece of kitsch spiced with a national sauce'), though when Mahler met Sibelius he found he liked him and could talk to him.

The prevailing tone throughout this correspondence is intimate and jokey, full of puns of the most fiendish ingenuity (which don't at all go into English) and

satirical fantasies (which do). There is an amazing range of dialect expressions, not only Viennese but also north German – from Berlin and Saxony (my favourite expression is ‘püdel-närrisch’) – and also the thick Bavarian which Richard Strauss and his wife Pauline used (this defies English too).

The letters are rarely philosophical. Most of the time they are domestic – dealing with the local odd-job men at Maiernigg, organizing sandpits for children to play in, giving reassuring advice about snakes, passing on a newspaper article about breast-feeding. At Toblach Mahler worries about the supply of his favourite apples, getting the right sort of butter, ‘Graham bread’ (whatever that was) and dealing with the paraffin stove. It is all so practical and so sympathetic and, as Beaumont says, ‘astonishingly down to earth.’

Even when Alma goes off to Tobelbad to be treated for her ‘nervous condition’, the affectionate tone does not falter. He soon senses that there is something wrong, even before he is faced directly with Alma’s betrayal of him with Gropius. Then follows the agonized sequence of love poems and the visit to Freud at Leyden. The early set of love letters before they were married is now balanced by a fervent series from Munich where he is rehearsing the Eighth Symphony. Meanwhile, Alma has got Walter Gropius in her jaws and they go off for a few days in Paris together: the Alma/Gropius correspondence was to go on up to Mahler’s death.

The last written communication between Alma and Mahler was an exchange of telegrams in the American winter. Alma had been reading (at Mahler’s suggestion) Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* on a train journey and she wired: ‘Splendid journey with Alyosha.’ Mahler, on tour with the New York Philharmonic, wired back: ‘my journey with almiosha even more splendid wonderful snowy weather today.’

Source: ‘As Alma Said’, *TLS*, 12 November 2004, p. 7: review of *Gustav Mahler. Letters to His Wife* (1995), edited by Henry-Louis de la Grange and Günther Weiss, translated by Antony Beaumont (Faber, 2004).