

Die Seejungfrau (The Little Mermaid), Fantasie in Three Movements for Large Orchestra after Tales of Hans Christian Andersen, Op. 18

Alexander Zemlinsky

Among the array of powerful talents populating turn-of-the-century Vienna was Alexander von Zemlinsky. (He would drop the aristocratic “von” after World War I.) He instructed and championed a heady roster of composers whose works would be better remembered than his own. He took the young Arnold Schoenberg under his wing, taught him personally, and employed him as a musical assistant; Schoenberg’s Op. 1, a set of songs, is dedicated to his “teacher and friend Alexander von Zemlinsky.” They became brothers-in-law when Schoenberg married Zemlinsky’s sister Mathilde in 1901. In the preceding year another friend, Gustav Mahler, conducted the premiere of *Es war einmal ...* (*Once Upon a Time ...*), the second of Zemlinsky’s eight operas, at the Vienna Hofoper. Another of his pupils was Alma Schindler, with whom he became romantically involved in 1901. (Their intense, teasing affair lasted about nine months, after which she cast him aside and married Mahler instead.) Alban Berg and Anton Webern were among his students in the art of orchestration.

Zemlinsky also promoted his composer-colleagues from the podium and, by all accounts, was a refined conductor of not only the classics but also music by Schoenberg (including the 1924 premiere of *Erwartung*), Webern, Berg, Schulhoff, Korngold, Weill, Krenek, Hindemith, and Janáček, among many other notables of Central European modernism. He held a succession of prestigious conducting appointments, including at the Vienna Volksoper (where he led the

Vienna premiere of Richard Strauss’s *Salomé*), the Hofoper (where he worked alongside Mahler), and the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague (later renamed the Deutsches Landestheater).

Apart from his 16-year tenure in Prague, Zemlinsky tended to move frequently from one post to another, and he sometimes became swept up in aesthetic disagreements and personal rivalries. Inevitably, he ran afoul of the Nazis and was consigned to the forbidden list of composers of “degenerate music.” His family heritage did not help matters, as his mother was the product of a Sephardic-Turkish Muslim marriage and his father, born a Catholic, had converted to Judaism. A few months after the Anschluss, Zemlinsky and his wife fled from Vienna, via Prague, to New

IN SHORT

Born: October 4, 1871, in Vienna, Austria

Died: March 15, 1942, in Larchmont, New York

Work composed: February 1902–March 20, 1903; with substantial cuts prior to the work’s premiere

World premiere: January 25, 1905, at Vienna’s Musikverein, in a concert presented by the Vereinigungschaffender Tonkünstler in Wien

New York Philharmonic premiere and most recent performances: May 14–16, 1998, James Conlon, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 41 minutes

York, where he found little success. He was disabled by a stroke in 1939, and his death three years later went largely unnoticed.

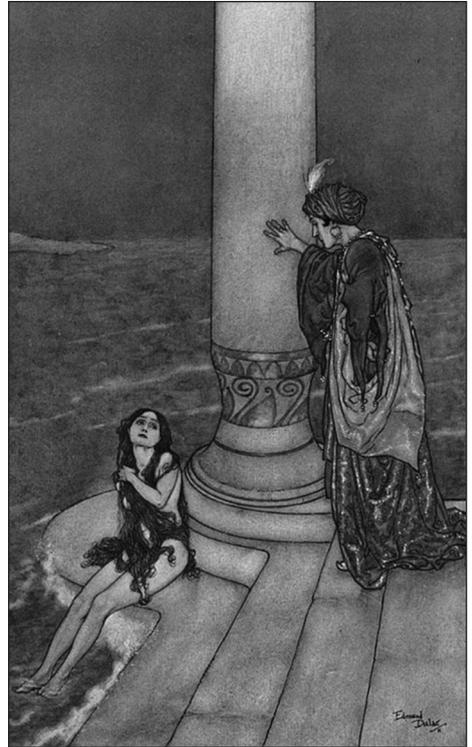
When Zemlinsky composed *Die Seejungfrau* (*The Little Mermaid*), in 1902–03, he and Schoenberg were both seeking to address the genre of the symphonic poem through an advanced musical language that might inspire listeners to overcome the perceived gap between “program music” and “absolute music.” It was unveiled on the same program as Schoenberg’s symphonic poem *Pelleas und Melisande*, which fared less well with the

audience. Zemlinsky initially envisioned the piece as divided into two parts. The first would depict the undersea setting and then move to the mermaid’s rescue of the prince in a storm. The second part would depict the mermaid’s longing and her encounter with the sea witch, before proceeding to the prince’s wedding and the mermaid’s subsequent demise. As Zemlinsky worked on the piece, it grew into three discrete movements. It appears that the composer wrote a somewhat detailed program, but it has not survived. At this point, lining up portions of the

The Story

Hans Christian Andersen’s 1837 tale *The Little Mermaid* revolves around a young mermaid who, upon turning 15, is allowed to swim to the surface of the sea to glimpse the world in which humans dwell. She saves a prince from drowning in a shipwreck, and is so smitten with him that she bargains with a sea-witch to exchange her tongue for legs; this will allow her to seek him out in the world of humans, even though she will be able to communicate with the prince only through dancing (and legs prove unfortunately painful for her). The prince ends up marrying a human princess, and the mermaid is doomed to the fate awaiting all her kind when they die, which is to dissolve into seafoam. Andersen later appended a “happy ending” in which her soul proves immortal and she ascends to the skies to join other spirits of the air.

In addition to Zemlinsky’s symphonic poem, a handful of operas have been inspired, at least in part, by this story: Dvořák’s *Rusalka* (1901), Germaine Tailleferre’s *La Petite sirène* (1957), and several by composers consigned to obscurity, including Yuliya Lazarevna Rimskaya-Korsakova Veysberg’s *Rusalochka* (1923), Witold Maliszewski’s *Syrena* (1928), and Léopold Samuel’s *La Sirène au pays des hommes* (1946).



The Little Mermaid and the prince, illustrated by Edmund Dulac, 1911

score with “plot points” would be an exercise in speculation, notwithstanding the fact that the music includes numerous Wagner-style leitmotifs (the most recurrent of which oddly resembles a theme from Tchaikovsky’s Fifth Symphony).

A performance in Berlin was already scheduled by the time the Vienna premiere took place, but Zemlinsky withdrew his score and the work was not revived during his lifetime. He took the second and third movements with him when he fled to America in 1938. His widow was under the impression that

they were the middle movements of a symphony, but in the early 1980s musicologists figured out what the scores actually were and managed to reunite them with the first movement, which had survived in a private library in Europe.

Instrumentation: four flutes (two doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, three bassoons, six horns, three trumpets, four trombones, bass tuba, timpani, orchestra bells, low bells, triangle, cymbals, two harps, and strings.

The Author and His Music

Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805–75), whose tales inspired both Zemlinsky’s *Die Seejungfrau* (*The Little Mermaid*) and Stravinsky’s *Chant du rossignol* (*The Song of the Nightingale*), is today remembered principally through his collections of more than 150 fairy tales, published from



1835 through 1872. However, during his lifetime Andersen was famous for his stage works, travel writing, and novels. He was also involved in the world of music, having worked for a short while as an opera singer and dancer at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. He produced a number of librettos for stage productions, including adaptations of such famous literary works as Sir Walter Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor* and Alessandro Manzoni’s *I promessi sposi*.

Andersen traveled widely, and during 30 major European tours constantly attended concerts and operatic performances, recording his thoughts about them in his diaries. He loved the music of Mendelssohn unreservedly, but not so much that of Brahms. He grew passionate about the works of Wagner but objected to his anti-Jewish bigotry; this dichotomy plays an important role in Andersen’s late novel *Lykke Peer* (*Lucky Peer*). That book involves a singer-composer who aspires to perform the title role of *Lohengrin* (a work Andersen saw on the opening night of its Danish premiere) and subsequently writes the libretto and music – both based on Wagnerian operatic ideals – for a new opera in which he also stars.

Hans Christian Andersen in Copenhagen, 1869