



# ECSTASY

MARY SHARRATT

A NOVEL OF KLIMT'S MUSE AND MAHLER'S GREATEST LOVE:  
ALMA MAHLER, THE WOMAN WHOSE LIFE WOULD DEFINE AND DEFY AN ERA

## A CONVERSATION WITH MARY SHARRATT, AUTHOR OF *ECSTASY*

### What inspired you to write a novel about Alma Schindler Mahler?

Few twentieth-century women have been surrounded with such an aura of scandal and notoriety as Alma Schindler Mahler Gropius Werfel. She was married to, or had love affairs with, some of the greatest creative geniuses of her time, including Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka, and yet she was stubbornly her own woman whom no man could ever possess. Over fifty years after her death, Alma still elicits very strong reactions. Either she is romanticized as a muse to great men (a legend she helped create), or else she is demonized as a man-destroying monster. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's observation that well-behaved women seldom make history could have been written about Alma.



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I have long idolized Gustav Mahler and own multiple recordings of each of his symphonies and song cycles. I fell in love with both his music and the entire mythos surrounding him. For me, his character arc is that of the perfect tragic hero who met his untimely death with courage and nobility. Yet as deeply as I admire Mahler, I would not want to be his wife.

Some Mahlerites blame Alma for his downfall. Despite the fact that Mahler died of a hereditary heart condition, they appear to believe that Alma's adulterous affair with the young architect Walter Gropius hastened Mahler's demise. I think the most fanatical Almaphobes would love nothing better than to dig her out of her grave in Vienna's Grinzing Cemetery and burn her remains at the stake for her perceived sins against Gustav Mahler.

Yet Mahler loved Alma as passionately as some of his fans seem to hate her. We can feel Alma's indelible presence in his music from his Fifth Symphony onward. His most tender adagios are declarations of his devotion to her. In his tenth and final symphony, we can literally hear his heart breaking for her. He scrawled on the score, "To live for you, to die for you, Almschi." As an author, I wanted to discover how one woman could inspire such emotional extremes. The deeper I delved into Alma's story, the more complex and compelling her character revealed itself to be. She was herself a composer who gave up her own music at Mahler's behest as a condition of their marriage. For me, this casts her in a completely different light.

### **So who was Alma, beyond her historical bad girl rep?**

According to *The International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*, Alma Maria Mahler (1879-1964) was an "Austrian pianist, writer and composer."

Born in Vienna in 1879, Alma Maria Schindler was an unusually gifted young woman who grew up surrounded by artists and intellectuals. Her father, Emil Schindler, who died when she was thirteen, was one of Austria's foremost landscape painters. Her mother, Sophie Bergen Schindler Moll, was an opera singer. Her stepfather, Carl Moll, was a painter and founder of the Secession Art Movement.

Though lacking in a formal education, Alma devoured philosophy books and avant-garde literature. She was a most accomplished pianist—her teacher thought she was good enough to study at Vienna Conservatory. However, Alma did not want a career of public performance. Instead, most ambitiously of all, she yearned to be a composer. Her lieder, composed under the guidance of her mentor and lover, Alexander von Zemlinsky, are arresting, emotional, and highly original and can be compared with both Zemlinsky's work and the early work of Zemlinsky's other famous student, Arnold Schoenberg.

At the age of twenty-two, Alma met the famous composer and opera director Gustav Mahler at a dinner party. Nearly twenty years her senior, Mahler fell in love with her, literally overnight, according to a poem he wrote for Alma. He proposed only a few weeks later. But his demand that she give up her own composing career as a condition for their marriage plunged her deep into turmoil.



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Alma wrote in her diary, “I have two souls: I know it.” Born in an era that struggled to recognize women as full-fledged human beings, Alma experienced a fundamental split in her psyche—the rift between herself as a distinct creative individual and herself as an object of male desire. To win Mahler’s love, she sacrificed her creative individuality. The suppression of her true self to become the woman her husband wanted her to be was unsustainable and inhuman. Eventually, the authentic Alma erupted out of this false persona.

What emerged was a free-spoken woman far ahead of her time, who rejected the shackles of condoned feminine behavior and insisted on her independence and her sexual and creative freedom. Alma eventually returned to composing and went on to publish fourteen of her songs. Three of her other lieder have been discovered posthumously. Now her work is regularly performed and recorded.

As Susanne Freund observed in her 2007 documentary, *Big Alma*, Alma became the first woman to pioneer the vocation that we now call artistic management. She used her many social connections and networking skills to enhance the artistic careers of her husbands and lovers. Alma’s autobiographical books, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters* and *And the Bridge is Love*, describing her dramatic life with the creative geniuses she loved, made Alma a legend in her own lifetime.

In my view, Alma is a hero as courageous as Mahler and deserves to be the center of her own story. This was why I wrote this novel. She was not only a composer, but what in German is called a *Lebenskünstlerin*, or life artist—she pioneered a new way of being as a woman that was in itself a work of art.

### **Why have biographers taken such strong—and largely negative—views on Alma?**

Like unconventional women throughout history, Alma to this day faces a backlash of misinterpretation and outright condemnation. She was a complex, transgressive, ambitious, and often perplexing woman full of unending contradictions.

Instead of exploring this complexity in depth, however, most biographers have written what Susanne Rode-Breymann, coeditor of the German edition of Alma’s diaries, has called “moralizing scandal biographies.” Austrian academic Sandra Marchl agrees and has written an entire book on the subject—*Alma Mahler-Werfel in der Biographik: Die Dekonstruktion einer Legende*—describing how these biographies narrowly focus on what they regard as the salacious, sensationalistic aspects of Alma’s life and how the authors use techniques usually associated with fiction writing to heighten the dramatic effect, even if this takes us away from documented fact. Even the more “scholarly” of these biographies tend to read in places like trashy, voyeuristic novels. The biographers use Alma’s sexuality as a selling point for their books while standing in stern moral judgement of her and having nothing good to say about Alma as a human being, much less as a composer. This lurid focus on Alma’s sexuality, at the expense of the other areas of her life, demeans and degrades her. Alma is reduced to the men she was involved with and how she failed to be the ideal woman for them. As Marchl has observed, these biographies have created a “Schreckbild” of Alma, turning her into a grotesquely caricatured, sex-obsessed monster-woman.



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Ultimately, any biography that demeans and degrades Alma also demeans and degrades the men who loved her and chose to spend their lives with her. If Alma were truly so horrific, why would such a brilliant and sensitive man as Mahler have loved her so profoundly—was he an idiot?

But Susanne Freund's documentary *Big Alma* and Susanne Rode-Breymann's *Die Komponistin Alma Mahler-Werfel* and *Alma-Mahler-Werfel: Muse, Gattin, Witwe*, reflect a much more nuanced view of Alma. Haide Tenner's *Ich möchte so lange leben, als ich Ihnen dankbar sein kann*, about the five-decades-long correspondence and friendship between Alma Mahler and Arnold Schoenberg, reveals a lesser known side of Alma, namely that she was a devoted patron of other artists. She provided Schoenberg and his family with much needed moral and financial support. Arnold Schoenberg's daughter, Nuria Schoenberg Nono, quoted in Tenner's book, remembers Alma as a dear and loyal family friend, and is saddened by the tarnished image that some biographers have attached to her. Some people, Schoenberg Nono told Tenner, just want Alma to be bad.

### **Did you face any special challenges in writing a novel about such a larger-than-life woman?**

Trying to capture Alma's essence in one novel proved to be an extraordinary challenge. Originally, I wanted the novel to tell the story of her entire life, but it took me 400 pages just to try to do justice to her young adulthood and first marriage. Narrating the full sweep of Alma's long and turbulent life would require a trilogy, at the very least. In my humble opinion, novelists have a much more difficult vocation than biographers. As a novelist, I can't just expose Alma with all her flaws, foibles, and dirty laundry. Unlike biographers, I must make her compelling and sympathetic to the reader—otherwise why should the reader bother with Alma? Even if I don't endorse or agree with everything Alma ever said or did—even if there are aspects of Alma I wish to starkly distance myself from—as a novelist I must nonetheless offer insight as to why Alma behaved the way she did, why she made the choices she did. It's my hope that these insights and nuances can allow the reader to feel they have gained a deeper understanding and even a sense of compassion for this very complex and unconventional woman.

### **How did you research this book?**

I immersed myself in Alma's early diaries, *Alma Mahler-Werfel 1898-1902*, and then in Gustav Mahler's letters to her, *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*, and in Alma's memoir of their life together, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*. For my portrayal of Alma as a composer, I'm deeply indebted to Susanne Rode-Breymann's scholarship, to Sally MacArthur's "The Power of Sound, the Power of Sex: Alma Schindler-Mahler's *Ansturm*" in *Feminist Aesthetics in Music*, and Diane W. Follet's luminous essay, "Redeeming Alma: The Songs of Alma Mahler." I listened to Alma and Gustav's music continually while writing this novel.

I went on three separate research trips to Vienna, which included visits to the Vienna State Opera to see a production of Alma's most beloved opera of all, Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. I also attended concerts at the Musikverein. The Schoenberg Center was an important resource and has many materials documenting Alma's friendship and



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correspondence with Arnold Schoenberg and his family. The exhibition “The Better Half—Jewish Women Artists Before 1938” at the Jewish Museum of Vienna was pivotal for my portrayal of Alma’s girlhood friend, the sculptor Ilse Conrat, and the prevailing and crushing misogyny that all creative women in early twentieth-century Vienna were up against. The exhibition also featured Albrecht Joseph’s documentary film, *A Stone Figure*, which shows Alma’s daughter, the renowned sculptor Anna Mahler, at work chiselling a two ton slab of Indiana limestone into a female figure.

I visited the villa in the Hohe Warte where Alma lived before her marriage and the apartment building on Auenbruggergasse where Alma lived with Mahler and their young daughters. I also visited the Mahlers’ summer retreat in Maiernigg on Lake Wörthersee. Their summer house is private but Mahler’s composing hut is open to the public and is a veritable shrine to Mahler. I sat in the forest outside the hut and listening to a recording of his Second Symphony while marveling how harmoniously the music merged with the birdsong and the wind in the trees. I also visited the Mahlers’ last summer house in Trenkerhof, South Tyrol, in what is now northern Italy, and spent many beautiful afternoons hiking in Mahler’s beloved Dolomite Mountains.

#### **What’s next? Do you have a new novel in the works?**

*Revelations*, my new novel in progress, should be of special interest to fans of my 2012 novel, *Illuminations: A Novel of Hildegard von Bingen*. Here I return once more to the realm of the female medieval mystics. *Revelations* is the story of the intersecting lives of two spiritual women who changed history—earthly Margery Kempe, globetrotting pilgrim and mother of fourteen, and ethereal Julian of Norwich, sainted anchorite, theologian, and author of the first book in English by a woman. Imagine, if you will, a fifteenth century *Eat, Pray, Love*.



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