

Too little

Bride of the Wind, directed by Bruce Beresford, written by Marilyn Levy

David Walsh
17 August 2001

Bride of the Wind is a fictionalized account of thirty years in the life of Alma Mahler (1879-1964), who was married to composer Gustav Mahler, architect Walter Gropius (a founder of the Bauhaus) and writer Franz Werfel (*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*), and linked romantically with Expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka (and possibly composer Alexander Zemlinsky and painter Gustav Klimt). Alban Berg dedicated his groundbreaking opera *Wozzeck* to her. She is considered one of the twentieth century's most remarkable "muses."

A dozen extraordinary films or novels could be made from this material. Alma Mahler's life was bound up with many great questions: Viennese culture and politics, the specific genius and dilemmas of Mahler, the rise of modernism in art, the collapse of the Hapsburg empire, the impact of the Russian Revolution on the European intellectuals, the growth of fascism, and so on. (To escape the fascist threat Alma and the Czech-born, Jewish Werfel left Austria in 1938 for France. In 1940 they fled—over the Pyrenees by foot, in the company of Heinrich Mann—to Spain and ultimately to the US. Alma died in New York in 1964.) Unfortunately, the filmmakers have chosen to treat her life in a narrow fashion, apart from most of these issues, and the result is ultimately weak.

Bride of the Wind (the name of a famous Kokoschka painting) covers the period approximately from Alma's first encounter with Mahler near the end of 1901 to her marriage to Werfel in 1929. In her early 20s, when we first see her, she is a headstrong and privileged young woman, devoted to music and art, with a mind and opinions of her own. In her first conversation with Mahler, two decades her senior and a leading figure in the Viennese music world, she subjects his composing to a sharp critique, calling it "repetitive" and full of foreign influences.

Mahler wins Alma over musically and personally, and soon proposes marriage, setting only one condition: that she abandon her efforts at composition. (The film condenses into one brief café conversation what was actually the substance of a 14-page letter Mahler wrote to Alma, which read in part, "How do you envisage a marriage of two composers such as we would be? Has it occurred to you how ludicrous and subsequently humiliating for ourselves such a bizarre rivalry would inevitably become?") Alma acquiesces, but naturally resents the suppression of her work.

These and the subsequent sequences of Alma and Gustav's married life are the film's strongest. Jonathan Pryce is affecting as Mahler, as is Sarah Wynter, the Australian actress, in this first part of the work, before the somewhat one-note character of her performance (varying shades of petulance) begins to set in. Director Bruce Beresford has obviously taken pains to capture the look of Vienna and the Austrian countryside at the time. A certain intelligence and sensitivity are at work.

These qualities, however, are insufficient by themselves to validate or save any work. Here they are outweighed and ultimately defeated by the limitations of the filmmakers' vision. Much of this, unhappily, is all too

predictable, including the script's feminist proclivity. Mahler's demand was reprehensible, but, given the historical circumstances, hardly surprising. The film, however, is organized around one central notion: that Alma's decision under duress to give up composing is the key to her life and all her relationships. "A legion of lovers: that's my only accomplishment," she complains at one point. Complaining, in fact, becomes her chief activity. The night of Mahler's great musical triumph, Alma greets him with, "The first violin came in too early." And when others surround and congratulate him, pushing her to the background, we are presumably to sympathize with her. "He stifled me," she later laments to a friend. Perhaps, but is this all that can be extracted from these extraordinary people and events? How petty.

One moment with serious potential, which hints at broader social contradictions, occurs when Mahler discovers that Alma has been having an affair (with Gropius, as a matter of fact). She responds by accusing him of suffocating her and concludes the angry tirade by denouncing his "Jewish music." In this fleeting moment, a remarkable truth is revealed. "Oppressed woman" does not adequately sum Alma up: she is also a spoiled petty bourgeois with more than a trace of anti-Semitism in her blood, a victimizer as well as a victim. If only this were followed up. Instead, like an entire series of critical questions, it is merely referred to, teasingly, and dropped. The film is burdened, after all, with the sort of script in which a Gropius can mutter, "We have to get rid of all that ornamentation," and that is apparently intended to account for the subsequent development of the Bauhaus movement.

The film's weaknesses appear to stem from two, perhaps related problems: first, it is palpably noticeable that one's interest in the work falls off sharply when the character of Mahler is no longer present (he died in May 1911, two months before his fifty-first birthday). The Alma-Kokoschka segment of the film is irritating (Vincent Perez as Kokoschka is a principal irritant), the Alma-Gropius interlude is perfunctory and the Alma-Werfel portion, fairly inane. Pryce's performance as Mahler has something to do with holding our interest, but it must go beyond that, to the figure of the composer himself.

Alma Mahler was undoubtedly an extraordinary individual, as were a number of her admirers and lovers. To be blunt, however, Gustav Mahler was the greatest of those artist-intellectuals represented in *Bride of the Wind* and the filmmakers provide just enough of a glimpse of him, even in fictional and simplified form, to whet, but not satisfy, our appetite.

A few words about Mahler. Born in Austrian Moravia (contemporary Czech Republic) in 1860 to Jewish parents, a café owner and distiller and the daughter of a soap boiler, Mahler showed an early gift for music and attended the Vienna Conservatory from the age of 15. He eventually chose to follow the profession of a conductor, composing prolifically in his spare time. In 1888 he was appointed director of the Hungarian Opera in Budapest and in 1897 the court opera in Vienna. His principal works are

his 10 symphonies (the last unfinished), to whose number could be added *The Song of the Earth*.

A commentator notes: "From a purely musical point of view, Mahler takes chromatic harmonies, first introduced with [Wagner's] *Tristan* and *Parsifal*, to extreme lengths. In this respect he forms the link between Wagner and Schoenberg, who was soon to complete the destruction of classical tonal harmony. As a composer, Mahler, undoubtedly one of the most original artists of his time, was an intellectual and a powerful ideologist. He broke away from traditional forms and created symphonies of gigantic proportions, with overwhelmingly rich orchestral texture, inspired by the spiritual and poetic demands of the work."

Mahler once wrote, in an attempt to "explain" one of his symphonies: "What did you live for? Why did you suffer? Is it only a vast terrifying joke? We have to answer those questions somehow if we are to go on living—indeed, if we are only to go on dying!"

As an intellectual, Mahler pursued various lines of philosophical inquiry. He read and absorbed Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, like many of his class and time, as well as lesser known figures, particularly those who attempted to reconcile science and metaphysics. He weighed up pantheism, Buddhism, and so on.

It is not possible, however, to account for the unsettling and disturbing quality of Mahler's music, and its sense of foreboding, simply by asserting, as one biographer does, that his head "was throbbing with ... problems of philosophy and metaphysics." A composer is not an "empty machine" (Trotsky) who exists for the purpose of creating form, but a living human being, existing under definite social circumstances and inevitably reflecting them in some fashion in his or her work.

Mahler is one of the major artistic figures of the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth. Trotsky characterized those years: "Capitalist society passed through two decades of unparalleled economic prosperity which destroyed the old concepts of wealth and power, and elaborated new standards, new criteria of the possible and of the impossible, and urged people towards new exploits.

"At the same time, the social movement lived on officially in the automatism of yesterday. The armed peace, with its patches of diplomacy, the hollow parliamentary system, the external and internal politics based on the system of safety valves and brakes, all this weighed heavily on poetry at a time when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave sign of impending great explosions."

The period witnessed the general increase in the political self-consciousness of the working class, expressed in the growth of mass socialist parties, as well as a counteroffensive by the European bourgeoisie, in the form of the encouragement of extreme nationalism and anti-Semitism. This is the era of the Dreyfus case in France. In Vienna, Karl Lüger was elected mayor in 1897 on an openly anti-Semitic platform. That same year, presumably as a precondition to his appointment as director of the opera, Mahler officially converted to Catholicism. This did not fool the reactionary elements. In 1900 he was subjected to the first sustained anti-Semitic campaign; various press attacks and intrigue followed. He was forced to resign in 1907, when he was engaged as chief conductor of the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

It is difficult to believe that the stress of his situation, as well as an exhausting conducting and composing schedule (he conducted 107 performances in his first 10 months at the opera in Vienna, in addition to conducting his own music in various European cities and composing), did not contribute to his early death from endocarditis.

Mahler could not have remained entirely insulated from the political and social conflicts of the day. It is worth noting that in 1879-80 he befriended Victor Adler and Engelbert Pernerstorfer, pioneers of Austrian socialism. A biographer notes that "For Mahler, the political element in all this ran only skin-deep." No doubt in the superficial sense this is true. (Although the same biographer notes that years later, when he was an "establishment

figure," Mahler voted for Adler and briefly joined a workers' May Day demonstration—relatively bold actions, one would think, for an essentially apolitical man under almost continual attack by hostile forces.) But it ignores the larger, organic connection between the development of modern culture (including technique and science) and socialism.

In any event, there is abundant material for drama in Mahler's life. Even as a supporting figure, more could have been made of his circumstances in *Bride of the Wind*. While it would not have excused his heavy-handed attitude toward his wife's composing efforts, it might have provided at least some historical context.

And this lapse is bound up with the film's second and more general problem, the failure of the filmmakers to probe in any serious depth the character of life and society in Vienna in the first decade of the twentieth century. In the end, this is why Alma's own magnetism is never truly accounted for. There are many good-looking, outspoken women; Alma Mahler must have represented something more: the brilliance of cultural and intellectual life translated largely (because she was prevented from following the artist's vocation) into the terms of a personality.

But if one is unable or unwilling to examine that cultural and intellectual life—this is the Vienna of Kokoschka, Klimt, Egon Schiele (painters), Mahler, Arnold Schönberg, Berg, Anton von Webern (composers), Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Robert Musil (writers), Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler (psychoanalysts), Adolf Loos, Otto Wagner (architects), Karl Kraus (journalist-essayist), the Austro-Marxists, as well as Russian revolutionary exiles such as Trotsky and Joffe—then not much can be done. Such an examination would inevitably entail taking into account the role of the socialist labor movement and Marxism, the intellectual current toward which all other critical trends gravitated. Suffice it to say that the only reference in the film to the workers' movement is a brief scene of a demonstration at which red flags are visible.

So, the film has intelligent moments, bright spots, flashes of insight, but it lacks genuine weight and presence. It ends on a concert of Alma's songs (performed by Renée Fleming at the Brahms Hall at the Musikverein in Vienna) and the belated public recognition of her composing abilities. An entirely legitimate event, but isn't it absurdly shortsighted to focus so heavily on this personal success and personal happiness (she has recently married Franz Werfel), when we know that only several years later Werfel's books would be burned by the Nazis and, a few years after that, the couple would be obliged to flee Austria? At some level or other, the filmmakers must have been aware of the inappropriateness of their blissful denouement; the film doesn't so much end as slip, shamefaced, out the back door.

One is obliged to return to this theme time and again. Too many artistic treatments of historical subjects are weakened at present—or undermined entirely—by the ahistorical and shallow approaches that the majority of contemporary artists have at their disposal. To imagine and then reproduce a set of moral, social and emotional circumstances distinct from one's own—as well as the complex linkages between that set of circumstances and one's own—requires serious knowledge of history and the historical process.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact