



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Alma by Ella Milch-Sheriff

Volksoper Vienna, 13.11.2024 [ENA]

Ella Milch-Sheriff's opera *Alma*, centered on the fascinating and tumultuous life of Alma Mahler-Werfel, is a riveting exploration of a woman who embodied creative brilliance, personal tragedy, and complex ambition. This production delves into Alma's lesser-explored role as a mother, bringing her psyche to life in a way that is at once bold and heartbreakingly vulnerable.

With Milch-Sheriff's emotionally resonant score and nuanced libretto, the opera becomes an introspective look at a legendary figure, peeling away layers of myth to reveal the essence of a woman caught between her passions, losses, and societal constraints. The result is a powerful work that captivates from the first note to the final curtain. The opera opens with *Alma*, seen both through the eyes of her daughter Anna and through flashbacks of her own memories. Milch-Sheriff's libretto and score work in harmony to present *Alma* as a woman driven by a fierce intellect and an insatiable desire for life, who nonetheless suffers the toll of personal and familial tragedy.

Known for her role as a muse to prominent figures like Gustav Mahler, Oskar Kokoschka, and Franz Werfel, *Alma* has often been depicted through the lens of her famous relationships. Here, however, Milch-Sheriff reclaims *Alma*'s identity, bringing out the tension between her creative ambitions and her roles as lover, mother, and wife. This nuanced portrayal highlights *Alma*'s conflicted identity, depicting her not merely as a muse but as a force of her own—ambitious, resilient, yet haunted by the weight of her losses. Her psyche is laid bare, especially through her fraught relationship with her surviving daughter, Anna.

This mother-daughter dynamic brings a fresh perspective to *Alma*'s story, delving into the emotional scars she carries from the loss of her children and the constraints she endured as a woman of her time.

Milch-Sheriff's ability to capture *Alma*'s raw complexity in both her musical themes and the character's vocal lines is a testament to her deep understanding of *Alma*'s legacy.

Milch-Sheriff's score is remarkable for its emotional immediacy and atmospheric depth. Drawing on her experience as both a composer and singer, she crafts a soundscape that mirrors the intense fluctuations in *Alma*'s life—from moments of soaring passion to depths of despair. The orchestration is rich yet carefully controlled, allowing *Alma*'s voice to remain the focal point of each scene. There are echoes of Mahler and echoes of the Viennese late-Romantic style *Alma* would have known, but Milch-Sheriff's voice is distinctly

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modern and personal, offering a fresh sound that bridges past and present.

One of the opera's most striking musical moments occurs in the first act, when Alma recalls her daughter Manon, who died tragically young. Here, Milch-Sheriff uses dissonant chords and fragmented melodies to convey Alma's grief, with the music reflecting her inner turmoil and guilt. The appearance of Manon's spirit is marked by a haunting melody, underscoring the unresolved anguish that permeates Alma's memories. Milch-Sheriff's ability to translate complex emotions into music that is both accessible and deeply layered makes this opera an experience that resonates on multiple levels.

The vocal writing is equally impressive, with Alma's character demanding a soprano of great technical skill and emotional depth. The role requires moments of restrained intensity as well as explosive passion, and Milch-Sheriff's score allows the singer portraying Alma to explore the full range of the character's emotions. In contrast, Anna's lines are imbued with a softer, more introspective quality, creating a tonal dialogue between mother and daughter that mirrors the generational tension and love that binds them. This contrast also highlights Alma's struggle to reconcile her personal ambitions with her maternal role, a conflict that becomes central to the opera's dramatic structure.

The cast of Alma brings Milch-Sheriff's vision to life with remarkable conviction. The actress-singer in the title role is both powerful and nuanced, embodying Alma's contradictions with striking authenticity. Her portrayal captures the character's pride and vulnerability, rendering Alma as a figure who is both intimidating and deeply sympathetic. In moments of reflection, her voice softens, conveying the woman beneath the myth, yet in scenes of confrontation, particularly with Anna, she exudes a fierce defiance that speaks to Alma's indomitable will.

The role of Anna, Alma's only surviving child, is performed with sensitivity and grace. Anna's scenes are characterized by an intense emotional restraint that contrasts beautifully with Alma's volatility. Her character serves as a conduit for the audience's empathy, as she navigates her complex relationship with a mother who is as flawed as she is formidable. The confrontation between Alma and Anna, particularly in the third act, is one of the production's emotional highlights. Here, Anna challenges Alma's choices, confronting her mother about the impact of her decisions on those around her. The singers' chemistry is palpable, making this scene both heart-wrenching and cathartic.

The supporting cast also shines, with each character bringing depth to Alma's world. Notably, the roles of Gustav Mahler, Oskar Kokoschka, and Franz Werfel provide insight into Alma's relationships, not as a glorified muse but as an equal who profoundly influenced these men's lives. Their interactions with Alma reveal different facets of her character, allowing the audience to see her not merely as an object of desire, but as a person of intellect and passion.

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The staging of *Alma* is simple yet evocative, relying on minimalistic set design to allow the characters and music to take center stage. The set consists of a few essential elements—a grand piano, a cradle, a sculpture—symbolizing the facets of *Alma*'s life as artist, mother, and muse. The use of lighting is particularly effective, with shifting colors and shadows that create a dreamlike quality. This approach enhances the opera's introspective nature, making it feel as though the audience is peering into *Alma*'s memory, witnessing her life unfold as a series of flashbacks and reflections.

Costuming, too, plays a significant role in establishing the opera's emotional tone. *Alma*'s attire evolves throughout the acts, reflecting her psychological state and the societal constraints of her time. In the earlier acts, she wears gowns that emphasize her allure and status, while later scenes reveal a more somber, restrained side. The subtle shifts in her wardrobe mirror her internal journey, as she transitions from a woman of power and beauty to one grappling with loss and introspection. These visual elements, paired with the music, make *Alma* a deeply immersive experience that captures the complexity of its protagonist.

Milch-Sheriff's *Alma* resonates on a contemporary level, exploring themes of ambition, creativity, and motherhood that are as relevant today as they were in *Alma*'s time. The opera's focus on *Alma*'s role as a mother adds depth to her character, highlighting the sacrifices and personal struggles that accompany her artistic life. By examining her as both creator and mother, Milch-Sheriff reclaims *Alma*'s story from the narratives that have historically reduced her to a muse or femme fatale, offering a portrayal that is rich in empathy and insight.

In conclusion, *Alma* is a triumph of modern opera, a work that challenges and captivates in equal measure. Milch-Sheriff's music is at once haunting and beautiful, capturing the inner life of a woman who defied the limitations of her era. With a stellar cast, insightful direction, and a score that is as complex as its subject, this production brings *Alma* Mahler-Werfel's story to life with sensitivity and power. It is an opera that lingers in the mind, inviting reflection on the interplay between art, love, and identity. *Alma* is a must-see for anyone interested in the transformative potential of opera to tell stories that resonate across time.

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