

ALMA!

I love you. It's so easy

I love you

Oh, how I would love you

ALMA!

A kinetic opera

Composition: Minna Leinonen

Libretto¹: Hanna Weselius

Choreography and director: Petri Kekoni

Conductor: Jutta Seppinen

Characters:

Alma Mahler, the composer's wife

Lawyer

Aino, painter

Act I

Gustav Mahler, Walter Gropius, Franz Werfel, Oskar Kokoschka among the other men comment Alma.²

I Alma, why do you let this happen?

Alma *Die Welt liegt zu meinen Füßen!*³

Lawyer *The world at your feet! Ha!*

*You have the fullest lips and a high Cupid's bow. A Cupid's bow!
What a ridiculous term. The mouth is for gobbling, biting,
swallowing. It has nothing to do with love. And on your chin you have
a sweet little cleft, the type which some of us receive at birth without
any merit of our own and are quite proud of it.*

*Under the sweet chin cleft is the soft neck cut in two by a high collar.
The collar is so tight it pinches the skin.
The waist is cinched with a corset.
How uncomfortable clothes women had to wear in those days!
They squeeze, they pinch!*

*Alma, Alma, your music flies out of the window free as a bird and
swirls the yellow leaves in the air and the leaves descend and wave
their hems like ladies after dancing.*

*But the music stand remains empty. The music is not printed, not one
soprano gets to see it, it will never be premiered at the Vienna State
Opera. Alma...*

Gustav *Wife! Your music is uneven.*

It is better you quit composing once and for all, it is not appropriate for a married woman.

From now on you have only one profession: to make me happy.⁴

Lawyer *...Alma, why do you let this happen?*

*And besides, why in the hell should music be EVEN?
Your husband Gustav Mahler!*

Choir *The cone-hatted toad!*

Lawyer *The great musician! He stands at the pit and waves his hands.
Alma...*

Alma *I will be everything you could ever wish for. Alles was du willst.⁵*

Lawyer *Alma... Gustav, you devil! You will not get away from me.*

II Aino's obligation song

Narrator *A mirror displays an ordinary woman, a white, modern, educated woman of two men who have gone their opposite ways, a mother of two daughters to two different men. Slightly weary-looking, blonde with blue eyes, which are in fact red for all the staying up late, reading the news and drawing in the dark.*

Aino (at home)

I have to go now! I have to, now! I truly have to go right now!

I will wake up my daughters, look for their clothes, appropriate for the weather, brush their hair, check the calendars, make coffee and tea, fondle their heads and cheeks. Now! I will pour the milk, make the toast, find the cheeses and sausages, smell them, pour the coffee, pack the bags, check their ears and nails, brush their teeth, raise my voice, apologise, hurry the children, swallow my coffee, answer the phone, set a meeting, stand in the doorway, pull up the zipper, touch a shoulder.

Have a nice day at school, I hope nothing bad happens to you today, or ever.

The child supervisor is expecting me!

Aino (at the metro station)

The heart notes consist of patchouli, vetiver and cedar.

Short stubby bodies, black tight clothes. Camel toe in the crotch. Yuck! Eww!

Absurd shoes that are too small, small cold toes crammed in them.

Aino

You smile, how can you smile like that!

I get giggly, do I even dare to look at you.

I'm old enough to be your teacher.

What on earth are you doing?

Abdi

Come with me, woman, d'ya know what I would do to ya, do you know what I can do. Do you wanna. Come!

Aino

No, I won't!

Abdi

C'mon!

Aino

No, I won't!

Aino (to herself)

I love you. It's so easy! I would love you.

Oh, how I would love you.

III You have a clear voice

Aino (in her studio)

It's you!

*You have a clear voice. Like the spring rain, like the colour of the sky.
I draw your shoulder, your arm. I trace your spine under your skin
and muscles. Straight, too straight. Stiff. Tense.*

Don't hunch your shoulders!

You have a clear voice. Like the spring rain, like the colour of the sky.

*I see you. Why can't I draw you the way you are, tense in the
shoulders, possessed. Why can't I draw you the way I see you? Why
can't I? You have a clear voice. Like the spring rain, like the colour
of the sky.*

*The line is awkward, lifeless. It's thick, black, unbearable. My pen
circles round and round, draws back and forth. I break in sweat and
my heart is beating.*

It all goes wrong.

The stomach, it's starving, trained, bullied.

*These breasts don't smell like vanilla and heliotropes, rather like
cheap shower gel from a bottle that says paraben, limonene, linalool
and Tropical Breeze on the label.*

What does that posture mean other than a learned posture?

What does this picture present other than someone posing?

Model

Draw, draw, you're just a drawer.

Aino

Why can't I hold the world in my hands like sand or a rock polished by the sea. Oh why, why can't I brush gently with this soft hand this skin, this light, this room, and this world?

Why can't I? I am a starved animal headed to the slaughterhouse, I am dying, because I cannot draw this line here.

But ha! Now I am drawing the collarbones, I can breathe for a while, here I can see that the light is alive, it glimmers! Wo-hoo!

I climb up along your neck. I draw the cleft in your chin, the line of your mouth and the bow of your lips. I catch the side of your nose and find the astonishment on your forehead and now I descend to your eyes, hold it there, hold it!

I will draw your innate facial expression here.

Why can't I hold the world in my hands like sand or a rock polished by the sea. Oh why, why can't I brush gently with this soft hand this skin, this light, this room, and this world?

I drew a spot as a shadow, but it looks like blood.

A bloody womb forces its way into the picture.

The bloody womb spoils everything!

It bleeds and bangs and crashes and scares everyone away, the bloody womb.

No-one dies.

It all goes on.

The blood is running, but no-one dies.

IV Can you hear it, Alma?

Alma *Eine riesige, langfüssige Schlange dringt in mich ein. Ich ziehe an ihrem Schwanz. Sie will nicht raus. Ich rufe die Dienerin. Sie, ihrerseits, zieht kräftig. Die Schlange hat alle inneren meines Körpers in ihrem Maul. Ich bin leer und öde wie ein zerbrochener Schiffsrahmen.⁶*

Lawyer *Can you hear it, Alma?*

Choir *Gustav declares his assessment of the lied he has just heard:*

Gustav *Even a woman would compose better than that!*

Lawyer *Can you hear it, Alma?*

Choir *They are laughing at you, Alma!*

Lawyer *Can you hear it?
You should compose better, woman.
Better, Alma.*

Alma *Deep inside I am choking, so thoroughly have I been suppressed from living my life. My ship is at the harbour, but it is leaking.⁷*

Lawyer *It is getting late, Alma.
While you keep squeezing your man-less sheets,
I plan to enjoy my life!

My life is wonderful!*

Let me tell you about the cow. The cow is a large-eyed, comfort-seeking, milk-dripping animal that thrives in herds and always turns

its back to the wind. And when the wind changes, the whole herd turns. The cow does not care from where the wind blows, as long as the stud pays a visit every now and then.

So passes the life of a cow, it keeps turning around during the short days of its existence like a weathervane, it gives birth, gives away its calves and its milk and finally, with its own four feet, heads for slaughter. No memorial service is held for it, but if it was, the cow would be remembered as a fine dairy cow. This and this many litres of milk were expressed from it.

Alma! Read my lips: C-o-w...

*Alma, my darling, my sweet Sachertorte,
my fluffy creme munchkin,
you should write music yourself, goddammit.*

*You know, Alma.
And you don't know anything, you powder brush.*

You don't even compose anymore. You are pissed off by Mahler, but you can't see any other solutions besides turning to other men.

*You could turn your face towards the wind. But you won't do that.
You are a cow Alma.*

Lawyer	<i>Gropius will be here any minute!</i>
Choir	<i>Gropius, the man of concrete!</i>
Lawyer	<i>And then Schreker, and Kammerer</i>
Choir	<i>Who were they?</i>
Lawyer	<i>And Mahler dies...</i>
Choir	<i>And you grow tired of Gropius!</i>
Lawyer	<i>And along comes Kokoschka, the boy princess!</i>
Choir	<i>Kokoschka! Kokoschka!</i>

Lawyer

After you ended your love affair with him, the great sculptor and painter Oskar Kokoschka commissioned a soft, naked doll from a doll-maker.

Oh Alma, if only you could see this!

Inside the Alma doll the doll-maker made a fetus, Oskar's unborn child. What a matryoshka doll it was, a doll of dolls, what a giant pin cushion!

And this doll Oskar was then able to twist and turn into impossible postures not having to care about its joints, and paint and sculpture and photograph and draw and scribble and daub and carry around in his bony arms and commit whatever else hideous acts, stroke and pet it on the divan of his dimly lit parlour, the doll that was named...

Alma

Die Schweigsame Frau.

Lawyer

...The Silent Woman.

One day Kokoschka grew tired of his doll, which he thought had started to resemble more of a polar bear than a woman and decided to arrange a memorial service for it. He invited his house full of guests, got drunk, stripped the doll naked and hit it on the head with a bottle of red wine.

That was the death of their eternal love and the end of that silent woman.

Alma...

Alma (in the tower)

*Menschen lieben uns, und unbeglückt stehn sie auf vom Tisch,
um uns zu weinen*

*Doch wir sitzen übers Tuch gebückt,
und sind kalt
und können sie verneinen.*

*Was uns liebt, wie stoßen wir es fort,
und uns Kalte kann kein Gram erweichen.
Was wir lieben das entrafte ein Ort,
es wird hart und nicht mehr zu erreichen.*

*Und das Wort, das waltet, heißt: Allein,
Wenn wir machtlos zu einander brennen.
Eines weiß ich: nie und nichts wird mein.
Mein Besitz allein, das zu erkennen.⁸*

Choir *Can you hear it, Alma?*

Alma *I feel like my wings have been cut off.⁹*

Lawyer *Is this the endeavour you are made for, Alma?*

You cannot fly. You can write music.

Come on off of there, Alma!

Walk down the god damn staircase!

*No, Alma! This is all my fault. I despised you and pressured you and
put the blame on you, I...*

For Christ's sake. The umbrella! The ludicrous parasol.

Narrator *Something that has once come to ones' awareness cannot be made
unknown again. Someone who has once composed cannot forget
having composed, cannot avoid feeling the melodies in their veins, the
melodies which they have made to flow fathomable and true with
their own hard work.*

The pigeon puffs up its feathers to a ball. It does not know it is a round, grey bird, and it could not care less. Only the tail moves up and down a little, the pigeon slumbers. Up, down, up, down, goes the tail. Down on the street-level people scurry each in their own direction.

At that the pigeon snaps out of it, puffs up, collects its feathers and plumes, pushes its way out through a broken window of the church tower, drops down into the street canyon and into a low flight.

Act II

Yack! It seems insane. Who on earth would consider being sterilised or lobotomized! The rear looks better than the face, but the rear is not much to look at either! There is so much grease, lard, plastic and rubber in that carcass that it will never sink! The lips protrude from the depths of the face and attract insects! The rubber bands of the underdrawers seem to have sunk into the flesh permanently. How dare she ventilate her garden in such a way! Yack!¹⁰

V You remind me of a cupcake

Lawyer

You remind me of a cupcake. Your hem is the whipped cream, the lace runs from your shoulders to your hips like vanilla sauce, and on top of it you wear a high hat like meringue, but the colour is off, it is dumb.

A black hat does not fit the outfit. A white one would, it would appear as a fluffy bite. It might have some edible flower on it, like a rose or a violet. But it doesn't.

The jawline is less defined, as they say.

A turkey wattle is what they mean.

Aino *Am I too thin already? Am I at that age already?
Do I look like an old bat, a bag, a hag, a crone, a Baba Yaga, what else have you?*

Lawyer *What an intolerable travesty of a woman, but I must save her all the same.

But how can I save a woman that will not be saved?
I was waiting for you today at 11.*

Aino *I am coming!

I am a woman completely unaware of my own best interest, venturing around wearing my big hair and woollen scarfs out in the open like a flock of geese.*

Lawyer *In the worlds of art, economics and politics a woman under the age 35 is considered young, in all other contexts definitely not!*

Aino *Ok then. But I am coming.*

Lawyer *Come along then.*

Narrator *Traumatised people act the way they act. Some leave their windows unwashed and wipe their floors with their face, others solve their issues through other means, there is an infinite number of ways. From afar their behaviour appears as tiny movement, as if there were tiny twitches on the surface of the earth, as if thin streaks of light cutting across the darkness would hit a dusty crystal ball or a sooty diamond.*

Aino *You can light the candles in your kitchen, pour a glass of rose coloured wine and look through it to see the yellow candlelight blending with the indigo twilight creeping in through the window,*

analysing how the shade of indigo of the spring is different from that of December, because it certainly is different.

*A good painter can paint the difference,
a bad one will keep trying their whole life.*

*The indigo of the spring evening is transparent, comforting,
whereas the December indigo is piercing, melancholic,
the type which you have to cut through together, making every effort
with your light garlands and star-shaped lamps.*

Lawyer *You should be writing music yourself, goddammit, instead of
organizing Gustav's scherzos and allegros.*

*Because what did musicologists do afterwards?
Everything that has passed through your hands...*

Choir *...is stained!*

Lawyer *...they said. It was your purple ink that they were cursing.
Based on this they invented a concept, which they have ever since
applied on any dead composer's any widow that has had the audacity
to say anything about their late husband's inner life, or about their
own, for that matter.*

The concept is called The Alma Problem.

Choir *The Alma Problem!*

Lawyer *You, Alma, have become the ostrich-feather-hatted problem
and I don't know whether to laugh or cry, goddammit.*

Aino *I haven't been near a man in over four years.*

Choir *There has to be at least one normal woman somewhere.*

Lawyer *You mean mute?*

Lawyer & Aino *Dating apps! Men in the photos driving cars, riding motorcycles, hang gliding, motor boating, sailing, rafting, in helicopters, flying airplanes, riding bikes, riding quad bikes, running marathons, riding motor sleds, bungee jumping, mountain climbing, indoor climbing, surfing, downhill skiing.*

And next to these pictures they write that it sure would be nice to find a nice female to share all this with. To be cooped up in the kerosene-stinking cab.

Choir *It sure would be nice to find a nice female to share all this with.*

Lawyer & Aino *Would you go bungee jumping with me?*

Choir *You would most definitely not!*

Lawyer *Stupidity and unhappiness,
inconceivable incompetence!*

Choir, Aino, Lawyer *It's a match! Hey, what are you looking for?*

Aino *But I have my willow catkins.*

VI When a person dies, their mouth forms an "e"

Alma *Sie wollen mich auslaugen! Ich werde Wien nie mehr betreten! Ach!¹¹*

Lawyer *A-ha! You do have it in you, Alma! At last.*

Frau Mahler Gropius Werfel, you never became a proper artist, nor wife, nor mother or a person for that matter, but now that you are old and stinky, you are quite a funny super granny!

Alma

Nonsense! Quatsch!

I saw Mahler, I created Mahler, do you understand!

Ich schuf alle diese mächtigen Männer. Ich war eine Liebesmaschine!¹²

Lawyer

Mahler is dead and soon will you be too, Alma!

Alma

I am the centre of gravity of my own solar system, which the glowing satellites orbit around!!!

Lawyer

When a person dies, their mouth forms an "e".

Aino

When a person dies, their mouth forms an "e".

Aino & Lawyer

How would I love you?

Narrator

If we now tilt this story slightly, we will see that an almost unnoticeable shred is protruding from its surface, a tiny shred with the text:

Aino & Lawyer

We belong together during moments which are not measured in lifetimes, years, or even weeks, days, or hours.

We belong together during moments that are measured in seconds.

How would I love you?

We turn our backs against each other like weary gear wheels and keep spinning around in a black vortex, in some stream pool in space, amongst pieces of meteors, shards of glass and bits of cut flowers,

lightly, in a beautiful yet wretched way we grow attached without ever being able to see each other again.

Narrator

Can you hear it? Stand still and so quiet that you can hear the small vertebrae creaking within your neck. Can you see the badly drawn women? They stand quietly, in peace and harmony, terribly, jubilantly terribly drawn with their stiff torsos scribbled all wrong.

There, amidst the scribbles, they look at each other and the early summer evening fading away behind the windowpane,

they look around with their pencil-drawn faces and unforgettable expressions, calm as owls, awestruck as the new-born.

The End

¹ The libretto is based on Hanna Weselius' novel *Alma!* (Publisher: WSOY, 2016)

² The comments are documented in Françoise Giroud's book *Alma Mahler or The Art of Being Loved* (1989).

³ "The world is at my feet!"

⁴ "From now on you have..." is a direct quote from Gustav Mahler.

⁵ "I will be everything ..." is a direct quote from Alma Mahler.

⁶ Alma's dream is a quote from Alma Mahler's diary. "A big green long-legged snake bursts deep inside me. I pull it by its tail. It will not come out. I call for the maid. She in turn pulls it hard. The snake holds all my intestines in its mouth. I am empty and gaping like a broken shipwreck."

⁷ The quote is from Alma Mahler's diary.

⁸ Alma Mahler, *Der Erkennende* (1915), poem by Franz Werfel.

⁹ The quote is from Alma Mahler's diary.

¹⁰ The Internet in the 2010's

¹¹ "You all want to suck me dry! I will not set a foot in Vienna ever again! Bah!"

¹² All these great men were of my creation! I planned, chose and hand-picked, closed into my arms and breaded! I was the love blender!