

LIFE OF MAHLER

As the CURTAIN RISES, the stage is dark and quiet - save for A FAINT LIGHT resting on a FIGURE¹ at the back. HE is facing the darkness with HIS back to us and only HIS silhouette visible, as if a vision in a dream. HE gently raises HIS hands and begins to sweep the air with them - conducting. We hear the distant sound of a TRUMPET beckoning our attention, as the hand movements become more severe. Eventually, the FIGURE raises HIS hands, as if to strike an approaching foe, and suddenly brings THEM down again...

CRASH!

A BRILLIANT SYMPHONY of MUSIC bursts onto the stage with an orchestral flood. We are hearing the stirring chords of Gustav Mahler's SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN C SHARP MINOR: I. TRAUERMARSCH.

The FIGURE's arms jerk and spasm chaotically, as HE conducts an unseen orchestra. The MUSIC rises, crescendos, crescendos further, and then gradually becomes softer... and softer... and softer... until the LIGHT softens on the FIGURE and rises on ANOTHER MAN off to the side of the stage.

The MAN has been eagerly watching the FIGURE conducting. HE is about 30, dressed respectfully in bourgeois fashion, clean-cut and tidy, and rather earnest and eager in appearance. HIS name is FRANZ KURTZMAN and HE soon turns to us - but then, we get the sense HE is not really talking to "us."

FRANZ

Ever since I was 14 or so, I remember listening to the music of Gustav Mahler - and always, at first, from the sweetest of orchestras. I would walk with Mother as she pushed you in your

¹ The actor playing Gustav Mahler.

FRANZ (CONT)

pram down that dusty road in Durnstein and listen to her hum the Asagietto from his Fifth Symphony. At the time, I was gripped by my emerging love for journalism, so I had little time for music - and Father, being a banker, had even less besides - but Mother, perhaps channeling grandfather's days as an organist in our church, admired Mahler tremendously and taught me to admire him just as eagerly - and somehow, the fact that I couldn't read a single note of music or even comprehend how dots on a page could be anything other than punctuation made my admiration all the greater and my affection more fervent.

By now, the MUSIC has died completely and the LIGHT on the FIGURE has faded to black. FRANZ looks back at where the FIGURE once stood and then turns back to us. Really, however, HE is talking to someone we will come to know as HIS sister, Charlotte. HE is narrating the contents of a letter.

FRANZ

As I write this letter to you, I can't help but be aware that I am piling words upon words and just meandering around the inevitable - and that is simply to say how much I will miss you while I'm in Austria. I know you are well cared for by Mrs. Chatterwell - and having written for so many periodicals and traveled to so many places, this is just another assignment besides - but of course, I know that's not true. I do not know how long I will be away - or whom I will have to meet in the process - but at the end of the day, every writer, even a journalist, wants his words to be read - and perhaps, in my telling the story of Gustav Mahler, you might one day be able to call your loving brother a man of more celebrity than an article or two on election law would allow.

By now, a door has been rolled onstage by a WOMAN - who we will soon know as GISELA. It is the front door of a wooden, three-story villa in Maiernigg (Austria). KURTZMAN knocks on the door, which is then opened by the same GISELA. SHE is the maid of Alma Mahler and dresses very much the part.

FRANZ

My name is Franz Kurtzman. I have come to see Alma Mahler.

GISELA

Frau Mahler has been expecting you.

GISELA beckons FRANZ into the house and HE walks through the door. GISELA pushes this door off to the side and

the LIGHTS rise on the living quarters of the Mahler villa in Maiernigg. It has an elegant simplicity about the place - a bit of "rustic chic" - with some scattered pieces of furniture and a small piano off to the side. Some glass doors look out on a beautiful lake just beyond, through which sunlight gloriously pours.

GISELA

I will get Frau Mahler for you.

GISELA turns and exits up a staircase going to another floor in the house. FRANZ takes a moment to survey the surroundings and seems quite enchanted by them. HE walks over to the large glass doors overlooking the lake and admires the scene. As HE does so, a WOMAN slowly and silently descends the staircase - so quietly and daintily SHE might be mistaken for a phantom. HER name is ALMA MAHLER.

ALMA

Very beautiful, yes?

FRANZ abruptly turns, surprised to hear the voice amidst the silence. HE immediately freezes upon seeing ALMA smiling charmingly at HIM. SHE is so beautiful, as well, it occurs to FRANZ that SHE might be asking about HERSELF rather than the lake.

FRANZ

Yes - very beautiful.

ALMA smiles again and begins to descend the staircase, lightly and airily, almost as if dancing HER way down. SHE has a captivating aura about HER - in HER voice, HER look, HER bearing - that is only enhanced by the simply elegant nature of HER dress.

ALMA

Gustav had this little villa built in Maiernigg almost ten years ago now, shortly before we were married. He so desperately needed a respite from the crowds and all the awful politics of the opera world. Besides, he always loved this part of Austria and the Wörthsee - so peaceful and so bright. No matter what time of day it is, the sun always seems to shine on the right

ALMA (CONT)

spot. Gustav would spend his whole day here in a shack just up the mountain to compose his music. I quite hated the place - but then, he didn't want me there anyway. He would get up at six, have our cook bring him breakfast, go to the shack for five or six hours, and then come down and we'd go bathing in the lake - and perhaps later, a walk in the mountains.

(A beat, very fondly.)

They were... very special times.

By now, ALMA is standing in front of FRANZ - but seeming more to look past HIM out at the Wörthsee in memory. FRANZ seems quite captivated by HER. Suddenly, ALMA registers HIS presence again and snaps back into polite form.

ALMA

It is a pleasure to meet you, Herr Kurtzman.

FRANZ

It is my pleasure above all, Frau Mahler.

The LIGHT SOUND of A YOUNG GIRL PLAYING resonates from out near the lake.

ALMA

That is our daughter, Gucki...

(A beat, as if struck by this thought.)

...or perhaps now I should say my daughter. My husband has been gone only six months and yet I do find the habit hard to break. Gucki is my responsibility now - only mine - which brings me to the purpose of our meeting. I will be honest in saying that my husband's biography is meant to honor him above all - but beyond that, I must provide for my daughter.

ALMA notices GISELA standing at attention, waiting for instruction.

ALMA

Would you like some coffee, Herr Kurtzman?

FRANZ

Yes, please - milk and sugar.

ALMA nods to GISELA, who exits through a door into a nearby kitchen. ALMA gestures for FRANZ to sit. HE sits in a chair and SHE sits on a nearby couch.

ALMA

Milk and sugar, Herr Kurtzman - the way any man from Vienna would prepare his coffee.

FRANZ

I lived in Vienna a few years, but am actually from a small town called Durnstein, on the Danube.

ALMA

Oh, how lovely - yet you live in London now.

FRANZ

My father was a banker and joined one of the larger banking firms in London, so we moved there when I was 18 and I've stayed there ever since. My parents have since died, but I still live in the same house.

ALMA

No wife to speak of, Herr Kurtzman?

FRANZ

The only woman in my life is my sister, Charlotte, who lives with me. She is very ill and has been for some time.

ALMA

I'm very sorry to hear that - and so it is quite a sacrifice for you to come here.

FRANZ

It was a difficult decision, but Charlotte insisted I take such a special opportunity.

ALMA

In that case, you must thank your sister for me.

FRANZ

I will. I plan to write her frequently.

GISELA has entered carrying a tray with a pot of coffee, two cups, some sugar, and milk. SHE lays the tray down on a table where ALMA and FRANZ are sitting and prepares the coffee. FRANZ watches in awkward silence, wanting to say something - which HE eventually does.

FRANZ

Why did you choose me, Frau Mahler? There are thousands of other writers that specialize in music and opera in Vienna alone - who are merely a few hours away by train - who would know where to go to find people and source material - and yet, I have no connections. Nonetheless, you have chosen me above all to write your husband's biography. I am a writer, yes, but of coarser, crasser, more worldly things. I write only about law and politics.

ALMA

Not only, Herr Kurtzman.

ALMA nods at GISELA, as if silently communicating what SHE wants. GISELA has just finished preparing the coffee and handed it to FRANZ and ALMA. SHE reaches behind the couch on which ALMA sits and produces a framed newspaper article. GISELA hands this to FRANZ, who examines it curiously. ALMA watches HIM intently, as GISELA exits.

ALMA

When I retreated here after my husband died, I needn't describe to you my loneliness and despair - and having to sift through an avalanche of condolence letters made it much worse, as if the great space they took up in this room represented the great hole I now found in my life, and Gucki's, as well. Then one day I read your obituary of my husband in *Die Presse* and those pangs of despair started to fade away. It was truly such a wonderful tribute to my husband - very factual, in reciting his many accomplishments, but also very personal, in demonstrating what those accomplishments mean - truly mean - to people, not just to critics or opera directors. You talked about your mother and how my husband's music had touched her life, especially as she was dying, and how you hired a small orchestra to play his "Day of The Wanderer" at her funeral. I was quite taken by it all - and after reading a few more of your articles and seeing how you could take even such dry subjects as politics and enliven them with a certain emotion and feeling, I knew you were the one to write my husband's story.

(Peering at HIM.)

You are a closet poet, perhaps, Herr Kurtzman?

FRANZ

(Still processing this.)

You framed my obituary of your husband.

ALMA

I only had Gisela take it down to surprise you.

ALMA takes the framed obituary and puts it aside.

FRANZ

I am truly honored, Frau Mahler - so very honored to be considered for this opportunity.

ALMA

Oh, you are more than considered.

FRANZ

...but I trust you will not think me forward in saying that I do have some conditions, as I'm sure you do, as well.

ALMA

Why, I only want you to portray my husband's story with the same truth and personal warmth you showed in your obituary. I would not dare put any other conditions on a closet poet. I know the artistic sort, Herr Kurtzman - perhaps a bit too well - and wouldn't dream of chaining your creativity further.

FRANZ

Naturally, those conditions I respect - and mine, I trust, are just as honest and simple. As a journalist, I have a respect for truth and evidence - especially the fullness of it. I would expect that you hold nothing back from your husband's papers - even, please forgive me, if it's not entirely favorable to him.

ALMA

You have my word.

FRANZ nods - can HE truly comprehend HIS good fortune? - and slowly takes HIS cup of coffee. ALMA does the same. THEY gently salute EACH OTHER with the cups, as if signing the contract with the salute.

ALMA

(Abruptly calling out.)
Gisela?

GISELA enters.

ALMA

Bring in the boxes, please.

GISELA exits.

ALMA

(To FRANZ.)
I will have my lawyer work out the contract with you.

Another nod, another sip, and then GISELA re-enters. SHE carries a box filled with papers and deposits it on the floor. During the below, GISELA exits, brings in another two boxes (two trips), and deposits them likewise.

ALMA

(Indicating the initial box.)
There are three of these boxes in total - representing the totality of my husband's correspondence.

FRANZ

Only three boxes?

ALMA

He so hated to write - but as you'll find, the content is dense.

FRANZ casually starts to examine one of the boxes. The SOUND of A YOUNG GIRL'S LAUGH penetrates the room again from the lake just beyond. ALMA looks over to the sound with a mournful glance.

ALMA

We had another child, you know... Putzi.

FRANZ

Yes, I know.

ALMA

Her death was very hard for us both.

FRANZ

I can only imagine.

A tense pause, as ALMA ponders something in HER mind - and then suddenly:

ALMA

Where are you staying, Herr Kurtzman?

FRANZ

At "The Görtschach Inn," just outside town.

ALMA

I will have Gisela take the boxes when she drives you back to the inn and then pay for their transport to London. You can look at them overnight and we can discuss more tomorrow. As I recall, you are staying here through Thursday.

FRANZ

Actually, I am not leaving until Saturday.

ALMA

Wonderful - as we will have a lot to discuss.

FRANZ

In that case, I would rather start my perusing at the inn as soon as possible... if you don't mind.

ALMA

How could ever I mind, Herr Kurtzman?

FRANZ rises and extends HIS hand in business-like fashion. ALMA rises, but takes FRANZ's hand in a more personal, touching way than a handshake.

FRANZ

Thank you, Frau Mahler.

ALMA

Thank you, Herr Kurtzman.

Slowly, the LIGHTS fade, until only FRANZ is present before us. FRANZ faces front and narrates another letter to HIS sister Charlotte.

FRANZ

Dear Charlotte... It has been a few days now since I met Alma Mahler and started to search through the great man's letters. They seemed so few, considering the width and breadth of his life - but once I started reading through them, I appreciated how each letter was so detailed it was like five letters in one and my eyes became quite exhausted by them. Even so, the letters are very business-like and stale - filled with minute details about concerts, conducting engagements, business affairs, and court politics - so much so that I can detect little of the man himself in any of it. Mahler could communicate such emotion through music, but not the written word. Fortunately, I have not been without Frau Mahler in all of this. She has sketched out very thoroughly for me the structure of her husband's life, which would otherwise be lost to me.

During the below, a SPOTLIGHT ever so daintily rises center stage in the back. A FIGURE is gradually revealed to us, as if by some striptease of the mind, holding a large pool cue. HE has somewhat wild hair and paces about rather obsessively. We shall soon know HIM as GUSTAV MAHLER.

FRANZ

As relayed to me, Mahler was born in Bohemia, in the very modest village of Kaliště, and grew up in Iglau, where his father set up a distillery. He discovered piano in his maternal grandmother's basement and started to compose when very young. His father discouraged the young man from pursuing a musical career and beat him quite terribly. Still, encouraged by some friends of the family and local people of influence, Mahler applied and was accepted into the Vienna Conservatory, aged only 15. He then studied at the University of Vienna and began to focus on conducting - composing only rarely. He conducted publicly at the spa at Bad Hall, gaining some valuable experience, and then took various conducting jobs at small venues in Laibach and Olmutz. Even then, he was a fanatical workaholic and perfectionist - and rather difficult.

By now, the SPOTLIGHT at the back has risen fully on MAHLER. As if on cue, HE

pivots like a soldier and stomps forward to the edge of the stage. MAHLER stops and peers out at us with a long look of disdain, clutching the pool cue like a sword.

MAHLER

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Some LIGHT MURMURS sound from an unseen group of petrified singers.

MAHLER

Ah! I hope you will sing louder than that.

Some slightly LOUDER VOICES sound now, with mumbled "good mornings."

MAHLER

(Suddenly bursting forth in controlled rage.)
That, ladies and gentlemen, is your opinion! For me, it is a very bad morning. I have lain awake all night with your terrible singing cursing my ears. My mind would have had a sweeter sound to contemplate if I hired a caravan of gypsies and unrepentant whores to dance upon a sea of cats. If there is a God, may He be praised that Beethoven is not alive for him to witness the hanging, drawing, and quartering of his work.

(Pointing aggressively at us, to the left.)

You - Fraulein Hecht! How long have you been a singer?

OFFSTAGE WOMAN'S VOICE

(Stuttering and terrified.)

Oh, why... f...five years... six...

MAHLER

The number of years don't matter - because whatever they are, they are not enough!

(Pointing aggressively again, to the right.)

You - Fraulein Mannheim! How long have you been a singer?

ANOTHER WOMAN'S VOICE

(Proudly and defiantly.)

Twenty years, Herr Mahler!

MAHLER

Ah, then never in history has a has-been so accurately portrayed an amateur!

(Pointing aggressively again somewhere else.)

You - Herr Gerhardt! You take me as too harsh, do you?

The CROWD MURMURS uncomfortably. MAHLER bangs the pool cue on the ground aggressively for silence.

MAHLER

You harmonize better in your murmuring than your singing.

MAHLER bangs the pool cue again, even more aggressively than before. The CROWD dies down again.

MAHLER

In two days' time, we are to present Beethoven's "Fantasia" to an invitation-only group, including the Prince of Saxe-Weimar-Eisenach - and, as it stands now, your presentation is fit only for his valet. I will not have my name associated with such an atrocious rendition - so terrible, indeed, that I have little sense of what it is attempting to render. If you hit a key correctly, it is only by accident. If you maintain the tempo, it is only because a mouse has bitten your ass.

OFFSTAGE MALE VOICE

Your tempo is too fast!

MAHLER

(Off to the right.)
Excuse me, Herr Schroeder?

OFFSTAGE MALE VOICE

Your tempo is too fast!

MAHLER

(Off to the left again.)
Could it be, Fraulein Hecht, I have found someone less talented than you?

OFFSTAGE MALE VOICE

Beethoven himself wrote the tempo to be slower!

MAHLER

(With a great flail of HIS arms.)
Beethoven... was deaf!

Fed up, MAHLER stalks offstage, as the LIGHTS rise again and the thunderous midsection of Mahler's SONG OF A WAYFARER bursts onto the stage. ALMA and FRANZ are revealed in the Mahler villa in Maiernigg, listening to a victrola playing the MUSIC. There are some plates on the tables in front of the furniture, indicating the end of a satisfying lunch. GISELA is clearing the plates and putting them on a nearby rolling cart. As FRANZ and ALMA continue to listen, GISELA finishes removing the plates and exits, taking the cart with HER. ALMA rises and stops

the victrola. FRANZ takes up a small pen and paper, on which HE scribbles as ALMA discusses HER husband.

ALMA

Gustav wrote that when he was at the Royal Theatre in Kappell.

FRANZ

That was after serving as a conductor at the Royal Municipal Theatre in Olmütz?

ALMA

Yes - Gustav moved to Kappell as the Choral and Music Director, but had a few run-ins with the Kapellmeister, who insisted on reminding everyone who was in charge. My husband rarely did well with those types of reminders. The Kapellmeister even passed over Gustav for a conducting opportunity at their summer festival because he was Jewish. My husband rarely did well with those types of reminders either.

FRANZ

Is that why he converted to Catholicism?

ALMA

Gustav did that about a decade later - but yes. It would be silly of me to pretend that he was a religious man. Gustav only truly worshipped nature - and as someone had to be around to create it all, God seemed like the best option. The idea of it all splashing into existence by chance is very unsatisfying for a romantic. From there, Gustav simply concluded that the Catholic God was the most convenient of the options.

FRANZ

And after his time at Kappell - what then?

ALMA

After Kappell, Gustav moved to the New German Theatre in Prague as a junior conductor and had quite a success conducting a number of German operas. After 12 months, he left and went to the Leipzig Municipal Theatre and worked under their Chief Conductor, Arthur Nikisch. Nikisch was another man who liked to remind everyone who was in charge, so, needless to say, Gustav had his fair share of conflict - but then again, he also had his fair share of triumph, as well. The grandson of the composer Carl Maria von Weber even saw his work and commissioned Gustav to finish his grandfather's opera "The Three Pintos." It premiered at the theater the following year and was very, very successful. That was in 1888, I believe - January.

FRANZ

(Dying to interrupt.)

If you don't mind, Frau Mahler...

ALMA

(Barreling on.)

Shortly after, Gustav was hired by the Royal Hungarian Court Opera as their Artistic Director and Chief Conductor, where he oversaw the premiere of Wagner's Ring operas and also premiered his own First Symphony. A few years later, he became Principal Conductor at the Hamburg Municipal Theatre - but by then, he was getting tired of his 40 years in the wilderness and had been peppering the General Manager of the Imperial Austrian Court Theatre for a better appointment. The pressure had its effect and he was appointed the Director and Chief Conductor of the Vienna Opera and then, later, the Chief Conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. It was unprecedented for someone to hold both positions. That brings us up to about 1897.

FRANZ

Forgive me, Frau Mahler, but I was hoping to learn a little more about your husband as a man. His letters - as detailed as they are - reveal little of him to me.

ALMA

I told you - he was fanatical... fierce... proud...

FRANZ

And sensitive?

ALMA

Again, yes - as I have told you.

FRANZ

So far, I haven't seen much of that feature in him.

ALMA

Neither did anyone else, which is what he preferred.

FRANZ

Your husband exalted in being distant?

ALMA

I don't pretend to know much about the world of journalism, Herr Kurtzman, but I can tell you that the world of music is not unlike being dropped into a vat of vipers. You must bite very fast, otherwise you will be the one bitten.

FRANZ

Even so, did your husband never love anyone... before you?

ALMA

When I met him, Gustav was rather inexperienced when it came to women. There was a woman in Kassel and another in Leipzig - a soprano - for whom he wrote three piano pieces... and then there was the wife of Captain von Weber.

FRANZ

The man who commissioned him to finish his grandfather's opera?

ALMA

Yes - Gustav and Mrs. von Weber had an affair that drove the Captain quite mad - literally, as I understand it. Still, he didn't let it get in the way of Gustav completing his commission. All is fair in love and war... and opera.

ALMA smiles charmingly at FRANZ, who smiles at HER, as well. A pause descends for a moment - followed by:

FRANZ

How did you meet your husband?

ALMA

I don't see how that's relevant.

FRANZ

It is as relevant as you are, Frau Mahler.

ALMA

(Uncomfortably.)

As I recall, Herr Kurtzman, you were commissioned to write my husband's biography, not mine. I can assure you that the readership of Europe - and indeed, the world beyond - is not much interested in anything to do with me. My husband was the musical genius in the family, so I hardly...

FRANZ

Why was your husband inexperienced with women?

ALMA

I'm not entirely sure.

FRANZ

I think you might be.

ALMA

Well, all I can say is that Gustav was a bit frightened of women - mainly because they took him away from his work. There is nothing more frightening to an artist than that.

FRANZ

Yet you didn't take him away?

ALMA just stares back at HIM, clearly hesitant to say anymore.

FRANZ

That sounds like relevance to me, Frau Mahler.

FRANZ smiles at HER for a moment and bends forward with gentle eagerness.

FRANZ

Please, I ask again - how did you meet your husband?

ALMA waits a moment - but being rather cornered, starts to speak in a torrent of words.

ALMA

I must say, Herr Kurtzman, I am starting to regret commissioning a journalist for this project, as you do rush to get to the bottom of things - but since you asked... I met Gustav when he was at the Vienna Opera. I was studying music at the time under a great composer - Alexander von Zemlinsky.

(A beat, rather suddenly.)

By the way, you are not allowed to print any of this, as it is rather embarrassing.

FRANZ

(Ignoring this.)

You studied music yourself?

ALMA

Only for a time - but anyway, that was many years ago...

FRANZ

Conducting...? Singing...?

ALMA

Composing.

FRANZ

(Surprised, intrigued.)

Composing.

ALMA

Yes - but then that's not particularly surprising, as my father was a painter - and my stepfather after him - and my mother was an opera singer. It seemed quite natural that I should follow some footpath through the arts - which I did... or tried to. Herr von Zemlinsky was a wonderful, kind teacher and invited me one night to a dinner party hosted by the society hostess and writer, Berta Zuckerkandl. He couldn't attend, so I went to the dinner party in his place.

The LIGHTS shift slightly, taking us to that moment in ALMA's mind. A TINKLING PIANO dances onto the stage, accompanied by A CONVERSATIONAL MURMUR

from unseen dinner party guests. A flamboyantly attired and very grand-looking woman - BERTA ZUCKERKANDL - enters and floats over to ALMA.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Ah, Fraulein Schindler - what a pleasure.

ALMA

Thank you for inviting me, Madame Zuckerkandl.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Oh, my dear, I wouldn't ever dream of missing you. Alex has said such delightful things about you and your music. In fact, I can't help but notice that he has perked up quite a bit since you became his pupil. Poor man, he had become so hopeless about the younger generation that he was beginning to wear his cynicism as if it were a medal. How very depressed he must be to have even less reason to complain.

(Taking HER by the arm.)

Come, do let me introduce you to some of my guests...

(Pointing off to the side.)

We have Max Burckhard, Director of the Burgtheater and a very good man to know.

(Pointing to another spot offstage.)

Over there, you see Angelo Neumann, one of our more glorious baritones in Vienna.

(Pointing to another spot offstage.)

Off to the side, there's Count von Bezecny, General Manager of the Imperial Court Theatre.

(Turning again.)

And over there...

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL pauses, as SHE and ALMA catch sight of a familiar figure off to the side of the stage. MAHLER has materialized from the darkness and is staring across the stage at ALMA rather intensely.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Of course, Herr Mahler needs no introduction.

ALMA and ZUCKERKANDL consider MAHLER for a moment.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

He does tend to stare rather loudly, doesn't he?

ALMA, enmeshed in thought, can only nod.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Would you like me to introduce you, my dear?

ALMA

(Coldly.)
No... thank you.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Why, my dear, you act as if you were one of his singers.

ALMA

I'm not quite ready for the pleasure of meeting him.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Oh, well, I'm not sure if meeting Herr Mahler would exactly be described as a pleasure. He is a genius, after all, so one must make allowances - at least until the ticket sales drop. No, no, I would not say that meeting him is a pleasure...

(Looking at HER pointedly, even critically.)
...more of a privilege.

ALMA smiles back rather tightly.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

(Looking past ALMA.)
Ah, privilege is coming your way, my dear.

MAHLER is approaching ALMA and MADAME ZUCKERKANDL with a stiff, exact gait. HE stops abruptly like a soldier and extends HIS arm fiercely towards MADAME ZUCKERKANDL. SHE extends HER hand and HE kisses it. MAHLER then turns HIS fierce gaze onto ALMA.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

This is Alma Schindler, Herr Mahler - a pupil of Zemlinsky.

MAHLER

(Still to MADAME ZUCKERKANDL.)
It is a pleasure to meet her anyway.

MAHLER extends HIS hand towards ALMA for a kiss. SHE takes HIS hand and gives HIS a slight shake, rather than waiting for a kiss. MAHLER considers HIS hand, as if it were rather rudely slapped by HER.

MAHLER

You are new to Vienna?

ALMA

I have lived here my whole life.

MAHLER

I have never seen you before.

ALMA

I have never seen you before either, Herr Mahler - but like God, I understood you to exist.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL coughs slightly, as if in warning ALMA to be careful.

MAHLER

(Silently amused, but continuing.)
Zemlinksy, hm? What are you studying?

ALMA

Under Zemlinsky, one could only possibly study music.

MAHLER

Under Zemlinsky, it is a miracle you'd study music at all.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Shall we say, Herr Mahler and Herr von Zemlinsky have some differences when it comes to taste.

MAHLER

Indeed! I have it and he doesn't.

ALMA

(Becoming quite cross.)
Herr von Zemlinsky has been a very good teacher to me.

MAHLER

(Sharply.)
Prove it.

ALMA

(Taken aback.)
I'm sorry?

MAHLER

Don't be.

MAHLER gestures off to the side of the stage, towards the piano - "prove it." ALMA understands and slowly approaches the piano, contemplating a way out of the hole into which SHE has dug HERSELF. SHE sits at the piano like a prisoner approaching the gallows - and does nothing. SHE turns to MAHLER to protest, but HE points aggressively at the piano - "play!" ALMA resolves HERSELF to HER fate, turns to face the piano, and starts playing a tune - LAUE

SOMMERNACHT.² As SHE plays, the CONVERSATIONAL HUM on the stage gradually dies down, until everyone in the unseen dinner party is listening to ALMA playing the piano. The MUSIC continues... continues... and soon is over. Slowly, APPLAUSE of APPRECIATION sounds from the surrounding dinner party. MADAME ZUCKERKANDL, charmed, applauds, as well. MAHLER stands impassively, considering ALMA.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

That was lovely, my dear.

ALMA

Thank you, Madame Zuckerkandl.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Who wrote it? Was that Chopin... Schumann?

ALMA

I wrote it.

(Eyeing MAHLER, but to MADAME ZUCKERKANDL.)

I was taught by the best.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL

Well, my dear, I am sure we will be hearing a lot more of you.

MADAME ZUCKERKANDL smiles at MAHLER (perhaps rather amused HE has been put in HIS place) and exits.

ALMA

Did you like my music, Herr Mahler?

MAHLER

You are very beautiful, Fraulein Schindler.

ALMA

That is not what I asked.

MAHLER

That is all I am willing to answer.

MAHLER turns sharply and makes to leave, when:

² "Laue Sommernacht" is a very short piece and should be played in full in its piano-only version - approximately two and a half minutes.

ALMA

(Rising, now buoyed to speak up.)
You have boycotted Herr Von Zemlinsky's work and not allowed it to be performed by the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

MAHLER, sensing a good fight, turns on
HIS heels again.

MAHLER

That is correct.

ALMA

Why?

MAHLER

Because the Philharmonic does not perform charity events for beggars and I, as the Director, must ensure it never engages in anything so pedestrian and repulsive.

ALMA

The Philharmonic is an orchestra for all the city of Vienna - to celebrate its culture and its composers - and not just to suit the taste of its current director.

MAHLER

My taste, Fraulein Schindler, is superb! As we do not judge the taste of high cuisine by feeding it to a vagabond, who will proclaim any old slop to be filet, so can the taste of music not be adjudicated by a troupe of orangutans!

ALMA

Has it ever occurred to you, Herr Mahler, that you may not always be right?

MAHLER

Of course not!

MAHLER turns again to exit.

ALMA

The critics do not agree with you!

MAHLER

The critics know as little as you do!

ALMA

Of course you would say that, after their reviews of your First Symphony.

MAHLER

(Astonished SHE would be so bold.)
I'm sorry?!

ALMA

(Mocking HIS prior comment.)
Don't be!

MAHLER

My First Symphony, Fraulein Schindler, was...

ALMA

Panned! I remember reading the reviews from Vienna when it premiered at the Royal Hungarian Court Opera! I hope the others will be better - or better yet, that you stick with conducting! Then again, considering you also conducted what you composed, it might be hard to distinguish which of your talents was the poorer of the two!

MAHLER

Ah! You cannot possibly believe that!

ALMA

Of course not - but you're just such a difficult, rude, unpleasant man!

MAHLER

(Not ironically.)
Thank you!

MAHLER storms off and the LIGHTS shift again, bringing us back to ALMA and FRANZ.

FRANZ

What happened after that?

ALMA

We were engaged within three months.

FRANZ

(Surprised, if amused.)
Engaged?

ALMA

After our little scene at the dinner party, Gustav found where I lived and came looking for me. I think I was one of the few people who ever stood up to him. He hated it, of course, but he also respected it - within reason. That was the first time I challenged him... and the last... except for...

ALMA clearly lets HER thoughts trail off into the distance.

FRANZ

(Seeking to break the silence.)
You were engaged in November?

ALMA

Yes - and married in March the following year.

FRANZ

In 1901?

ALMA

Yes - and then our daughter, Putzi, was born in November.

FRANZ looks at ALMA for a moment,
processing the math in HIS mind.

ALMA

Gustav and I had sexual relations before we were married, if that's what you're wondering.

(A beat.)

Does that shock you?

FRANZ

Not entirely.

ALMA

(Coyly.)

Geniuses can be difficult, it seems - but not immoral?

FRANZ smiles, as ALMA continues on.

ALMA

In the first year or two of our marriage, everything went very well. Gustav had a wonderful triumph premiering "Tristan und Isolde" in Vienna and our second daughter Gucki was born. Still, he became increasingly bored with all the politics of the Philharmonic. We started to come here to Maiernigg a lot more, as we so needed a place to get away.

FRANZ

What was he like... as a husband?

ALMA

Oh, well, Gustav could be difficult there, as well - but at his core, he was a good man - and often misunderstood. Most artists are, of course - which is their tragedy - because there are few people who more desperately desire understanding. Gustav was no exception, despite the exterior - and that's what I want people to know about him most in your book.

FRANZ has stopped writing, as if not quite believing ALMA, or feeling SHE is holding something back. ALMA notices HE has stopped HIS scribbling. THEY exchange an awkward stare.

ALMA

(The final verdict.)

Gustav was a good man, Herr Kurtzmann. Write that.

From somewhere, A CLOCK CHIMES the six o'clock hour. FRANZ puts down HIS pen and HIS paper.

ALMA

Goodness, the time.

(Calling through the glass doors.)

Gucki - come inside!

(To FRANZ.)

I didn't realize it was so late.

FRANZ

Indeed, it is - and I should be going.

ALMA

You are leaving for London early, you said.

FRANZ

Yes - and again, must tell you how much I appreciate spending these days with you. They have been most enlightening... and pleasant. I will keep you informed about the research and ask you questions as I start writing.

ALMA

I hope you will make your way back soon.

FRANZ

I aim to do so within a few months at most.

ALMA nods, rather sad at HIS leaving, and extends HER hand.

ALMA

Goodbye for now, Herr Kurtzman.

FRANZ, rather than shaking HER hand, takes it and kisses it.

FRANZ

Thank you again, Frau Mahler.

FRANZ makes HIS way to the exit and walks through the front door off to the side of the stage. Meanwhile, ALMA has wandered over to the piano. Just as FRANZ leaves, SHE begins to play LAUE SOMMERNACHT again on the piano. Outside the front door, FRANZ hears the MUSIC and stops and listens very forlornly. The LIGHTS slowly fall on ALMA, as the

MUSIC continues playing. A SPOTLIGHT picks up FRANZ as HE makes HIS way center stage again and narrates another letter to Charlotte.

FRANZ

Dear Charlotte... It has been barely seven days, but I feel it has been a century or more since I came to Maiernigg and embarked on this journey. By the time you read this, I will not be too far away. I leave Maiernigg with a sense of gratitude that this opportunity has come my way, but also a sense of sadness to abandon Frau Mahler - for abandoning her is somehow what I feel I am doing. From our first meeting, I couldn't help but sense a foreboding loneliness about the Mahler villa - and about Frau Mahler in particular - tended only by a very quiet maid and having little of the exciting life she lived when the great man was alive. This feeling of loneliness only seemed to grow in her face the longer I stayed, as if, by my being there and having someone to talk to, Frau Mahler was recognizing the loneliness she felt just below the surface of life, often veiled by the necessity of daily living. At any rate, I leave early in the morning for Hamburg, where...

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! The KNOCKS come from the front door off to the side. The door now represents the door to FRANZ's room at The Görtschach Inn, where HE is staying in Maiernigg. FRANZ goes to the door and opens it. GISELA is revealed - very nervous indeed.

FRANZ

Gisela?

GISELA

Oh, thank God you are still here.

FRANZ

I don't leave the inn until the morning.

GISELA

(Taking HIS hand.)
Please, Herr Kurtzman... Frau Mahler needs your help!

GISELA practically pulls FRANZ through the door, which again becomes the front door of the Mahler villa in Maiernigg. The LIGHTS rise again faintly, as it is the middle of the night and only a few lamps light the premises. KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK! ALMA hurriedly enters in a nightgown, draped in a shawl for the sake of modesty. SHE goes to the front

door and opens it, revealing FRANZ and GISELA.

ALMA

Oh, Herr Kurtzman, thank goodness.

FRANZ

Gisela explained everything to me.

ALMA

(To GISELA.)

Thank you so much, Gisela - and please, stay with Gucki for me.

GISELA nods and quickly runs up the staircase. A SCURRYING SOUND emanates from some indeterminate place on the stage. FRANZ and ALMA look upwards toward the roof. We recognize it as the sound of an animal scurrying around the upper floors of the house.

ALMA

Dear God, I so hate the sound. Poor Gucki was terrified when she first heard it. It woke her up and the next thing I knew she was screaming from her bedroom. Whatever it is, I don't know how it could have gotten in the attic. I can only assume Gisela must have left the attic window open when I asked her to get all those boxes for you. At any rate, I'm so very glad you are here, otherwise I don't know what I'd do. Gustav and I never socialized with the people in town, so I don't have anyone else to turn to, and Gisela is terrified of animals.

FRANZ

Of course, I am happy to help.

ALMA

I will be forever grateful to you.

The SCURRYING SOUNDS are heard again.

FRANZ

Do you have a broom and a large box?

ALMA

I'll get a broom. There are plenty of boxes up there already.

ALMA exits, as more SCURRYING SOUNDS emanate from the roof. FRANZ removes HIS coat, drapes it over the couch, and rolls up HIS sleeves. ALMA enters again with a broom and a lantern.

ALMA

I'll show you the way.

ALMA starts to climb the staircase, as FRANZ follows HER. The LIGHTS shift and dim, representing the interior of the attic. The door at the side of the stage has now become the door to the attic. A moment later, FRANZ slowly opens it. HE holds the broom and the lantern and shines it into the attic. Eerie SHADOWS fall across the breadth of the stage. Clumps of boxes and furniture have been wheeled onto the stage on a trolley - typical attic clutter. FRANZ enters and quickly closes the door behind HIM. HE then finds a series of empty boxes. HE puts the lantern on top of one box and takes another in HIS hands for the rodent. The SCURRYING FEET sound again, prompting FRANZ to turn HIS head in the direction of the sound. HE carefully steps forward, listening for further sounds... SCURRY, SCURRY! FRANZ turns again, as the SOUND seems to be running circles around HIM. HE is now roughly center stage... SCURRY, SCURRY, SCURRY, SCURRY! FRANZ turns yet again and makes to raise the broom, when HE trips over some bulky objects covered by what appears to be old dresses. ALMA's muffled voice sounds from the below regions of the house.

ALMA'S VOICE

Herr Kurtzman! Are you all right?

FRANZ

Yes... I'm fine!

Aching, FRANZ uncomfortably rises, clearly in a little pain. When HE fell, HE took the dresses with HIM, knocking them to the floor and revealing a large box. The box is bulging with papers. FRANZ sees this and pauses for a moment... SCURRY, SCURRY, SCURRY! However, FRANZ is focused less on the scurrying sound of feet. HE reaches into the box and starts to remove some papers and examine them. HE rises to grab the lantern from the box on which HE placed it and uses it to examine

some of the letters... SCURRY, SCURRY!
 FRANZ hardly moves... SCURRY, SCURRY!
 FRANZ is still too engrossed in looking
 over the letters... SCURRY, SCURRY,
 SCURRY! ALMA's muffled voice sounds
 again from the floor below.

ALMA'S VOICE

Do you have him, Herr Kurtzman?

FRANZ

(Broken out of HIS trance.)
 Not yet!

FRANZ rises to HIS feet - albeit, a
 little wobbly - but soon is upright and
 ready for battle... SCURRY, SCURRY,
 SCURRY! FRANZ spots the offending
 rodent. HE grabs the empty box HE was
 carrying and hobbles forward further
 into the dark. HE approaches the rodent
 carefully and raises HIS broom in the
 air. A brief pause and then HE dives
 into the darkness. An INSTANT BLACKOUT
 descends on the stage.

After a beat, we hear the SOUND of
 CRICKETS CHIRPING. The LIGHTS have
 risen again on the interior of the
 Mahler villa proper. It is about an
 hour later. ALMA is looking anxiously
 out the open glass doors into the night
 just beyond. The sound of CRICKETS is
 emanating through the doors from the
 midnight lake. After a beat, FRANZ
 enters - quite exhausted and sweaty. HE
 carries an empty box.

FRANZ

I let him go near the lake.

ALMA

I can't ever thank you enough.

FRANZ

Yes... you can.

FRANZ walks over to the couch, on which
 we notice the box of papers HE found in
 the attic.

FRANZ

You can explain this to me.

ALMA just stares at HIM, completely devoid of words, despite having some time to figure out what to say.

FRANZ

You told me that you would give me everything of your husband's - including all of his letters and his documents.

ALMA starts to say something - but discovering SHE has nothing redeemable to say, SHE just turns away.

FRANZ

I was wondering why the boxes you gave me before had so few personal letters. Surely, even Gustav Mahler - a man of little personability - was not devoid of human connections. I gather most of his personal correspondence is in this box here... or perhaps even more boxes besides.

ALMA

I told you, Herr Kurtzman - you are commissioned to write a scholarly book about my husband - a composer - and not only a composer, but the composer of his time. I don't want a romantic novella or an adventure yarn. If I did, I would have hired a poet or a playwright, but I hired a journalist instead.

FRANZ stares at HER, not quite buying this diversion.

FRANZ

Are there anymore boxes?

ALMA stares back in fear - answering the question with HER look.

FRANZ

I'm sorry, Frau Mahler, but I must withdraw from this project.

ALMA

(With sudden desperation.)
No! You cannot!

FRANZ

You were not honest with me.

ALMA

There is one more box.

FRANZ

One more?

ALMA

Two more.

FRANZ

Frau Mahler...

ALMA

Two more, that's all! I swear it!

(A beat - almost a whisper.)

I swear it.

FRANZ considers ALMA for a moment and the look of desperation on HER face. HE appears to accept this verdict as true. FRANZ looks at the box full of letters and removes one letter. HE looks at it and begins to read it aloud.

FRANZ

Alma... I arrived today in Amsterdam for my conducting tour and must say...

MAHLER

I was pleasantly unsurprised.

A SPOTLIGHT rises on MAHLER in the back, narrating from the letter.

MAHLER

The city has always been one of my favorites - which says little of my regard for it and more of my disregard for anywhere else. It seems every little crevice of this world only becomes more tedious and revolting every day. At times, I hope God would send another flood, provided it keep the opera houses intact and spare the greatest of conductors, leaving them only a choir of angels to conduct. Seeing as how that is unlikely, I will look forward to six weeks here of applause and adoration from both critics and crowds - and if there is anything less, I shall consider it a singular waste of my time.

Another SPOTLIGHT picks up ALMA on the other side of the stage, listening to HIM. The LIGHTS have fallen generally on the Mahler villa. MAHLER turns to face ALMA and THEY proceed to dialogue together.

MAHLER

You should have come with me.

ALMA

I told you - Putzi and Gucki need me.

MAHLER

That is why we hired that ghastly-looking maid.

ALMA

Yes, I know - but then Gucki doesn't much like her and you know how much I hate travel - especially by train.

MAHLER

(With some surprising feeling.)
All the same... I shall miss you.

ALMA

I shall miss you, too, and do already.

A pause, as THEY consider EACH OTHER fondly.

MAHLER

(Sincerely.)
Are you still upset, Alma?

ALMA, suddenly rather emotional, turns away from HIM.

MAHLER

(Bursting out into typical form.)
Ah! It is for such dramatic turns of the head that I shunned a woman's love for so long - for what does a man get out of it? Too many moments that drag on into hours... Too many words for the barest of thoughts... Oh, and the tears - the tears that flow at the slightest little prick! How can any man be creative when faced with such a torrent of distractions? How can he mine his inner depths of soul while picking up the pieces of a woman's heart? Such a trinket so easily broken should be kept behind a glass wall, not a ribcage. It should be displayed in a museum and not lain bare to life's elements.

ALMA

I do not mean to be a distraction to you.

MAHLER

Ah, but you are - whether meaning to be or not.

ALMA

But surely, you can see why I...

MAHLER

(Barreling on - and on and on.)
I told you before, Alma - there can only be one of our sort between us! It is not possible for a husband and a wife both to be composers. How do you envisage such a ridiculous thing? Do you have any sense of the depth of cultivation and selfishness that true genius requires?

ALMA

(Just wanting HIM to stop.)
Yes... yes, I understand.

MAHLER

Ah, but you don't - otherwise you would see things clearly, as I have told you! Genius is a flower! It requires sunlight... water... time... space! How can two such people thrive when one devours all the water while one hides the other in shade? How can two such people live, unless they live a field apart - and then why bother with the pretense?

ALMA

(Desperate for HIM to stop.)
Gustav...

MAHLER

Shall our tender whispers in the dark descend into chatter on tunes and tempos?

ALMA

(Ditto.)
Gustav...

MAHLER

Shall we compete for the same applause and duel in the same concert halls?

ALMA

Please!

Unable to bear anymore, ALMA collapses into a nearby chair and devolves into tears. MAHLER goes to HER, with surprising tenderness.

MAHLER

Alma... Alma...

MAHLER bends down and takes ALMA's hands gently in HIS. HE looks intently in HER eyes.

MAHLER

If we are to be happy together, you must not be my colleague, but my wife.

ALMA steps back in HER mind to process the choice before HER. SHE thinks for a moment before speaking.

ALMA

When you were young, you said that your father forbade you from studying music - and even when you were at university, he still insisted you take the legal exam - but you ultimately defied him... and here you are. I can imagine there must have been a time - even if brief and long ago - when you looked into your future and considered it without music... but as for me... I

ALMA (CONT)

have never even known that feeling. My father and mother always encouraged me to pursue music. It has been there like a star in the sky that always shines and never moves and takes my mind away from the darkness around me. That star is always up there when I look for it, no matter where I am on Earth or however dense the clouds may be. I don't know what I would do if I looked up at that sky and didn't see it there - but I am worried, when I do - and for you, I will do it - that I would suddenly notice how dark everything really is.

MAHLER

You knew before we married.

ALMA

I did.

MAHLER

We had this whole discussion.

ALMA

It's true.

MAHLER

Then why do you torment me with this?

ALMA

Perhaps, because, I thought you'd change your mind.

MAHLER

Gustav Mahler change his mind?! I would sooner change my hair, my skin, my body... my being!

ALMA looks away again, unable to face MAHLER or the decision SHE is making. MAHLER strokes HER cheek.

MAHLER

I know I am a terrible man, Alma - sometimes cruel and too often proud - but if I am so, it is only because of the yearning inside of me to create. Perhaps you can't understand, because even I cannot - not always - but I do know that, wherever that yearning comes from, I am compelled to feed it. Like God - the Great I Am - it simply is... it simply exists... and it can do nothing but exist... exist and be obeyed... obeyed or else avenged! Those who dare to thwart it will be condemned to torment... including me... including you... including anyone else who dares get in its way! So what choice do I have? I am compelled to obey or else face my own damnation - and you are compelled to obey or else face yours - and together, if we bow, we will share in the eternal life it brings us.

ALMA

For me, there is no eternal life.