

ALEXANDER ZEMLINSKY

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Alexander von Zemlinsky was born in Vienna on 14 October 1875 to a highly multicultural family. Zemlinsky's grandfather, Anton Semlinski, emigrated from Zilina, Hungary (now in Slovakia) to Austria and married an Austrian woman. Both were from staunchly Roman Catholic families, and Alexander's father, Adolf, was raised as a Catholic. Alexander's mother was born in Sarajevo to a Sephardic Jewish father and a Bosnian Muslim mother.

Alexander's entire family converted to the religion of his maternal grandfather, Judaism, and Zemlinsky was raised Jewish. His father added an aristocratic "von" to his name, though neither he nor his forebears were ennobled. He also began spelling his surname "Zemlinszky."

Alexander studied the piano from a young age. He played the organ in his synagogue on holidays, and was admitted to the Vienna Conservatory in 1884. He studied piano with Anton Door, winning the school's piano prize in 1890. He continued his studies until 1892, studying theory with Robert Fuchs and composition with Johann Nepomuk Fuchs and Anton Bruckner. At this time he began writing music.



His opus 1 is a set of eleven rustic dances for piano which are all waltzes and in the style of lesser composers such as Johann Strauss, Schubert and Chopin. Frankly, they are awful.

The year 1891 saw the production of the Three Pieces for cello and piano namely a humoreske, a lied and a tarantella. The first movement is lively, the second is a gentle rhapsody and the finale is another contrasted piece. They were probably written for Buxbaum who left Vienna to be the principal cellist for the Scottish Orchestra. They are very attractive pieces and show maturity.

The substantial Sonata in A minor for cello and piano dates from 1894. The influences in this work may be obvious but it is a work of distinction. The opening shows an indebtedness to Brahms and some also say Tchaikovsky. The work is finely structured and excellently written for both players. The coda is impressive. The slow movement is very poetic but not weak and is melodic. The finale is serious and may again invoke Brahms and is sometimes serene.

Zemlinsky had a valuable supporter in Johannes Brahms. In 1893, on the invitation of Zemlinsky's teacher, Johann Nepomuk Fuchs, Brahms attended a performance of Zemlinsky's Symphony in D minor. Soon after that, Brahms attended a performance of one of Zemlinsky's string quartets by the Hellmesberger Quartet. Brahms, impressed with Zemlinsky's music, recommended the younger composer's Clarinet Trio (1896) to the Simrock company for publication.

Zemlinsky also met Arnold Schoenberg when the latter joined Polyhymnia, an orchestra in which he played cello and helped found in 1895. The two became close friends and later mutual admirers and also became brothers-in-law when Schoenberg married his Zemlinsky's sister, Mathilde. Zemlinsky gave Schoenberg lessons in counterpoint, thus becoming the only formal music teacher Schoenberg would have.

The Trio for clarinet, cello and piano Op 3 dates from 1896 and is in three movements lasting about half

an hour as does the Cello Sonata. The Trio's opening movement is decisive and perhaps ruminative. The second movement is lyrical and the finale trips along in a rondo form. It has so much to commend it.

In 1897, Zemlinsky's Symphony No. 2 (chronologically the third he had written, and sometimes numbered as such) was a success when premiered in Vienna. His reputation as a composer was further helped when Gustav Mahler conducted the premiere of his opera *Es war einmal...* (Once Upon a Time) at the Hofoper in 1900. In 1899, Zemlinsky secured the post of Kapellmeister at Vienna's Carltheatre.

In 1900, Zemlinsky met and fell in love with Alma Schindler, one of his composition students. She reciprocated his feelings initially. However, Alma felt a great deal of pressure from close friends and family to end the relationship. They were primarily concerned with Zemlinsky's lack of an international reputation and by his unappealing physical appearance. She broke off the relationship with Zemlinsky and subsequently married composer Gustav Mahler in 1902. At first she was fascinated by Zemlinsky and was one of his pupils having turned her passion from painting to music.

The year saw the symphonic fantasy *The Mermaid* for orchestra in which the three movements follows Andersen's story. The first movement is sumptuously scored including a solo violin and expressive woodwind writing. It may sound a little like Tchaikovsky now and then. A more original scoring appears in the second movement which also has a hymn-like theme and some melancholy music which is also present in the finale. The music here is more active and sometimes powerful. The music has a passion and influences give way to a personal style. It sometimes suffers from being lush and overtly romantic. Richard Strauss's *Don Juan* is not far away and when Zemlinsky uses the full orchestra it is to great effect.

Zemlinsky married Ida Guttmann in 1907, but the marriage was an unhappy one. Following Ida's death in 1929, Zemlinsky married Luise Sachsels in 1930, a woman twenty-nine years his junior, and to whom he had given singing lessons since 1914. This was a much happier relationship, lasting until Zemlinsky's death.

In 1906, Zemlinsky was appointed first Kapellmeister of the new Vienna Volksoper and from 1907/1908 at the Hofoper in Vienna. From 1911 to 1927, he was conductor at Deutsches Landestheater in Prague, premiering Schoenberg's *Erwartung* in 1924. Zemlinsky then moved to Berlin, where he taught and worked under Otto Klemperer as a conductor at the Kroll Opera. With the rise of the Nazi Party, he fled to Vienna in 1933, where he held no official post, and concentrated on composing and making the occasional appearance as guest conductor. In 1938, he moved to the United States and settled in New York City.

Although fellow émigré Schoenberg was celebrated and feted in the Los Angeles in the 1930s and 40s – teaching at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and the University of Southern California (USC) and gaining a new generation of acolytes – Zemlinsky was neglected and was virtually unknown in his adopted country. He fell ill, suffering a series of strokes, and ceased composing. Zemlinsky died on 15 March 1942 in Larchmont, New York of pneumonia.

Zemlinsky's best-known work is the *Lyric Symphony* (1923), a seven-movement piece for soprano, baritone and orchestra, set to poems by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (in German translation), a work which Zemlinsky compared to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* in a letter to his publisher (though the first part of Schoenberg's *Gurre-Lieder* is also a clear influence). The work in turn influenced Alban Berg's *Lyric Suite*, which quotes from it and is dedicated to Zemlinsky.

There are seven movements in which the baritone appears in movements 1, 3 and 5 and the soprano in the other movements and the alternating of the soloists gives the work a sort of dialogue which may suggest a love affair. The music is sometimes self-conscious. The first two movements are about desire; the first of a lonely man seeking a companion ; the second a young woman trying to alert her

mother about a prince passing by who she is trying to attract ; the third and fourth songs are love songs with opening words You are my own, my own and Speak to me, my love which has an ethereal beauty. Songs five and six speak about freedom, separation and resignation and the final song asks What is death to do with love?

This work is so much better than the song cycles of Mahler with its angst and misery. Zemlinsky's work does not get stuck in a rut, has greater contrast and stunning orchestration. There is something very special about this remarkable and rewarding work.

Other orchestral works include the aforementioned large-scale symphonic poem *Die Seejungfrau* (The Mermaid). This work, premiered in 1905 in the same concert as Schoenberg's *Pelleas und Melisande*, was considered 'lost' until 1984, since when it has become one of Zemlinsky's most frequently performed scores. A three-movement *Sinfonietta* written in 1934, admired by Schoenberg and Berg, is written in a style comparable to contemporary works by Paul Hindemith and Kurt Weill. Some claim that they can detect Mahler in this work which has a tragic feel about it but that does not deter from its evident quality. The first two movements suggest a Chamber Symphony by Schoenberg while the finale is hair raising excitement.

Other works include eight operas, including *Eine florentinische Tragödie* (1915–16) and the semi-autobiographical *Der Zwerg* (The Dwarf, 1919–21), both after Oscar Wilde; chamber music (including four string quartets) and the ballet *Der Triumph der Zeit* (1901). He also composed three psalm settings for chorus and orchestra and numerous song cycles, both with piano and with orchestra, of which the *Sechs Gesänge*, Op. 13, to texts by Maurice Maeterlinck is the best-known.

I regret that this article is inadequate as I have not dealt with Zemlinsky's main genre, that of opera because I do not know them.

While the influence of Brahms is evoked in Zemlinsky's early works (prompting encouragement from Brahms himself), an original voice is becomes present with the handling of dissonances. Later works adopt the kind of extended harmonies that Wagner had introduced whilst also drawing a few influences from Mahler.

In contrast to his friend Schoenberg, he never wrote atonal music, and never used the twelve-tone technique. However, late works such as the *Symphonische Gesänge*, *Sinfonietta* and third and fourth string quartets move away from post-Romanticism towards a leaner, harder-edged idiom that incorporates elements of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Neoclassicism and even a slight hint of jazz.

But his masterpiece is the *Lyric Symphony* of 1922 and 1923 and I do recommend the Fischer-Dessau, Varady, Maazel version now available on Brilliant Classics 9120. As we have said the text is by Tagore whose work *Gitanjali*, a lyric offering was published in English and made his name. The work was published in other languages. It was proclaimed as beautiful verse, profound and sensitive. The poet was concerned about the schisms between society and cultures.

We have also noted that Zemlinsky's work has been likened to Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* but the Zemlinsky is more immediately impressive and does not have angst. Zemlinsky's work is not bogged down by emotionalism and it has far more elegance and grace. There are a few elements of suffering usually in F sharp minor but the majority has its centre in D major suggesting positivity and enlightenment. The *Lyric Symphony* is in an individual language.

As a conductor, Zemlinsky was admired by, among others, Kurt Weill and Stravinsky, not only for his notable interpretations of Mozart, but also for his advocacy of Mahler, Schoenberg and much other contemporary music. As a teacher, his pupils included Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Hans Krása and Karl Weigl.

Selected works:

Operas

- Sarema – 3 parts – the composer, Adolf von Zemlinsky and Arnold Schoenberg 1893–95.
Premiere 10 October 1897, Munich, Hofoper
- Es war einmal – Prologue and 3 acts – Maximilian Singer after Holger Drachmann 1897–99.
Premiere 22 January 1900, Vienna, Hofoper. revised 1912
- Der Traumgöрге Nachspiel – 2 acts and a postlude Leo Feld 1904–06
11 October 1980 Nuremberg, Opernhaus
- Kleider machen Leute – musikalische Komödie – prologue and 3 acts. Leo Feld, after Gottfried Keller. 1907–1909, revised in 1910 and 1922. 2 December 1910, Vienna, Volksoper
- Eine florentinische Tragödie – 1 act – Oscar Wilde's A Florentine Tragedy, translated by Max Meyerfeld 1915–16. 30 January 1917, Stuttgart, Hoftheater
- Der Zwerg – 1 act – Georg C. Klaren based on Oscar Wilde's The Birthday of the Infanta 1919–21. 28 May 1922, Cologne, Neues Theatre
- Der Kreidekreis 3 acts – the composer after Klabund, 1930–31. 14 October 1933, Zurich, Stadttheater
- Der König Kandaules – 3 acts – the composer after André Gide's Le roi Candale in the German translation by Franz Blei, 1935–36, orchestration completed by Antony Beaumont (1992–96). 6 October 1996 Hamburg, State Opera

Other stage works

- Ein Lichtstrahl (A Ray of Light). Mime drama for piano (scenario by Oskar Geller, 1901, rev. 1902)
- Ein Tanzpoem. A Dance Poem in one act for orchestra (Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1901–04, final version of the ballet Der Triumph der Zeit)
- Incidental music for Shakespeare's Cymbeline for tenor, reciters and orchestra (1913–15)

Choral works

- Frühlingsglaube for mixed chorus and string orchestra (T: Ludwig Uhland) (1896)
- Geheimnis for mixed chorus and string orchestra (1896)
- Minnelied (T: Heinrich Heine) for men's choir and chamber ensemble (c.1895)
- Hochzeitgesang (T: Jewish liturgy) for tenor solo, chorus, and organ (1896)
- Frühlingsbegräbnis (Text: Paul Heyse). Cantata for soprano, baritone, mixed chorus and orchestra (1896/97, rev. c.1903)
- Aurikelchen (T: Richard Dehmel) for women's choir (1898)
- Psalm 83 for soloists, mixed chorus, and orchestra (1900)
- Psalm 23 for chorus and orchestra, Op. 14 (1910, first performance, Vienna 1910)
- Psalm 13 for chorus and orchestra, Op. 24 (1935)

Voice(s) and orchestra

- Waldgespräch (T: Joseph von Eichendorff) for soprano, two horns, harp and strings (1896)
- Maiblumen blühten überall (T: Richard Dehmel) for soprano and string sextet (c.1898)
- Sechs Gesänge after poems by Maurice Maeterlinck, Op. 13 (1913, orchestrated 1913/21)
- Lyric Symphony for soprano, baritone and orchestra, Op. 18 (after poems by Rabindranath Tagore) (1922–23)
- Symphonische Gesänge for baritone or alto and orchestra, Op. 20 (T: from Afrika singt. Eine Auslese neuer afro-amerikanischer Lyrik, 1929)

Songs for voice and piano

- Lieder, Op. 2 (1895–96)
- Gesänge, Op. 5 (1896–97)
- Walzer-Gesänge nach toskanischen Liedern von Ferdinand Gregorovius, Op. 6 (1898)

Irmelin Rose und andere Gesänge, Op. 7 (1898/99)
Turmwächterlied und andere Gesänge, Op. 8 (1898/99)
Ehetanzlied und andere Gesänge, Op. 10 (1899–1901)
Sechs Gesänge after poems by Maurice Maeterlinck, Op. 13 (1913)
Sechs Lieder, Op. 22 (1934; first performance, Prague 1934)
Zwölf Lieder, Op. 27 (1937)
Three Songs (Text Irma Stein-Firner) (1939)

Orchestral works

Symphony in E minor (1891) - two surviving movements only
Symphony No. 1 in D minor (1892–93)
Symphony No. 2 in B-flat major (1897)
Drei Balletstücke. Suite from Der Triumph der Zeit (1902)
Die Seejungfrau (The Little Mermaid), fantasy after Hans Christian Andersen (1902–03),
premiered in Vienna in 1905)
Sinfonietta, Op. 23 (1934, first performance, Prague 1935)

Chamber music

Three Pieces for cello and piano (1891)
String Quartet in E minor (c.1893)
Sonata in A minor for cello and piano (1894)
Two Movements for string quintet (1894/1896) – surviving movements of the String Quintet in
D minor
Serenade (Suite) for violin and piano (1895)
Trio for clarinet (or violin), cello and piano in D minor, Op. 3 (1896)
String Quartet No. 1 in A major, Op. 4 (1896)
String Quartet No. 2, Op. 15 (1913–15, first performance, Vienna 1918)
String Quartet No. 3, Op. 19 (1924)
Two Movements for string quartet (1927) – completed movements of abandoned quartet,
originally intended as No.4
String Quartet No. 4 (Suite), Op. 25 (1936)
Quartet for clarinet, violin, viola and cello (1938/39) – unfinished, fragments only
Humoreske (Rondo) for wind quintet (1939)
Jagdstück (Hunting Piece) for two horns and piano (1939)

Works for piano

Ländliche Tänze, Op. 1 (1892)
Vier Balladen (1892–93)
Albumblatt (Erinnerung aus Wien) (1895)
Skizze (1896)
Fantasien über Gedichte von Richard Dehmel, Op. 9 (1898)
Menuett (from Das gläserne Herz) (1901)

Principal publishers: Universal Edition, Ricordi Munich, Simrock/Boosey & Hawkes.

It seems clear that his music has been overshadowed by the inventiveness of Schoenberg on the one hand and by Mahler on the other. Yet Zemlinsky influenced Mahler but, as he followed Viennese tradition, his own music was said to be traditional. Zemlinsky had a passion for cigars and he was small in stature and often rejected for his ugliness, eventual toothlessness and dirty.

There are some composers who are treated like gods and woe betide any one who speaks against such acclaimed musicians but other musicians of great skill are ridiculed and abused when often their

music is of far greater quality. We hear such inanities as Bartok was a rubbish composer but everything that Schubert wrote was pure genius.

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