**Expressing the Expressionist Age**

 Raymond Deane

In 2006 Ethna Tinney – then opera producer in RTÉ Lyric FM – asked me if I would be interested in writing an opera about the relationship between Mahler’s widow Alma and the young painter Oskar Kokoschka, who, when she left him, transferred his affections to a doll he had manufactured in her image. I had already abandoned the idea of a work based on this material some years earlier, and now was delighted to revisit the story with a playwright of my choice – Gavin Kostick, with whom I had discussed a number of unrealised projects down the years.

I was attracted to this for a number of reasons. For one thing, I trace a vital part of my cultural ancestry to Vienna in the first two decades of the 20th century. Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, Zemlinsky, Schreker, Schnitzler, Kraus, Schiele, and Kokoschka himself were and are congenial figures and in some cases direct influences.

Simultaneously, the theme of the animated doll recalled Offenbach’s *Contes d’Hoffmann* on which I based my 1983 radio opera *Krespel*. The theme of the double – Alma/the doll – echoed doublings in my two other operas: Shelley/Artaud in *The Poet and his Double* (1991), the daughter and her spirit in *The Wall of Cloud* (1997). Kokoschka’s vampiric passion for Alma evoked the incidental music I had written in 1994 for a stage adaptation of Angela Carter’s *Vampirella and the Company of Wolves*, in which the gothic perversion of romantic love was symbolised by a waltz inverting the Prelude to Wagner’s *Tristan*, quoted here and there in *The Alma Fetish*. The *Liebestod* itself features as a Viennese waltz in the opening scene and is inverted in Scene III, while the Prelude introduces Act II and punctuates the art students’ wild Polka in the penultimate scene.

Wagner is not the only composer whose music is taken in vain: the irregular heartbeat from Mahler’s 9th Symphony accompanies the lovers’ bickering in Act I Scene II, in counterpoint with the battle rhythm from Strauss’s *Heldenleben*. Other borrowings include the *Dresden Amen* and the *Internationale*. This, however, is not mere postmodern playfulness: lives and loves in the Expressionist era recognised no clear boundary between the aesthetic and the everyday; the disconcerting vacillation between parody and pathos is both my homage to the epoch and a recurrent feature of my style.

It was Pauleen Bewick who suggested that the six fans Kokoschka painted for Alma should become a motif in Kostick’s libretto. In turn, I adapted the idea of a fanlike expansion and contraction of intervals as one of the opera’s dominant techniques. As a warm-up, I explored these possibilities in two chamber works: *Ventalia* (2006) and *Versura* (2007). As in *The Poet and his Double* and *The Wall of Cloud*, characters are symbolised less by motifs than by scales – whole tone for Oskar, chromatic for Alma, octotonic for Hulda. The chord sequence heard at the opening recurs throughout, and takes on something of the function of a “love motif”. At other points its use is almost serial – Schoenberg, after all, knew both Alma and Oskar well – but it is never transposed. Formally, I think of the two acts as two three-movement symphonic works.

The composition of *The Alma Fetish* stretched over some five years – between 2007-2012. The first scene to be composed (Scene III, as it happens) was commissioned by Lyric FM, recorded with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra of Ireland in January 2009. Work on the remainder was facilitated by two bursaries from The Arts Council/An Chomhairle Ealaíon.