

Lyric Symphony in Seven Songs, After Poems by Rabindranath Tagore, Op. 18

Alexander Zemlinsky

Among the array of powerful talents populating turn-of-the-20th-century Vienna was Alexander von Zemlinsky. (He would drop the aristocratic “von” after World War I.) He instructed and championed a heady roster of composers, whose works would become better remembered than his own. He took a young Arnold Schoenberg under his wing, taught him personally, and employed him as a musical assistant. (Schoenberg’s Op. 1, a set of songs, is dedicated to his “teacher and friend Alexander von Zemlinsky”; in 1901 the two became brothers-in-law when Schoenberg married Zemlinsky’s sister Mathilde.) Alban Berg and Anton Webern were among his students in the art of orchestration, and in 1900 his friend Gustav Mahler conducted the premiere of Zemlinsky’s *Es war einmal ... (Once Upon a Time ...)*, the second of his eight operas, at the Vienna Hofoper.

Zemlinsky also promoted his composer-colleagues from the podium, and by all accounts was a refined conductor of not only the classics but also of music by the aforementioned Schoenberg (including the 1924 premiere of his *Erwartung*), Berg, and Webern, as well as Schulhoff, Korngold, Weill, Krenek, Hindemith, Janáček, and many other notables of Central European modernism. He held a succession of

prestigious conducting appointments, including those at the Vienna Volksoper (where he led the Viennese premiere of Richard Strauss’s *Salome*), the Hofoper (where he worked alongside Mahler), and, from 1911 to 1927, the Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague (later renamed the Deutsches Landestheater).

Apart from his 16-year tenure in Prague, Zemlinsky tended to move frequently from one post to another, and he sometimes became swept up in aesthetic disagreements and personal rivalries. Inevitably, he ran afoul of the Nazis, and during those dark years his oeuvre was consigned to the list of forbidden “degenerate music.” His mother was the issue of a mixed Sephardic-Turkish Muslim marriage and his father, born a Catholic, had converted to Judaism. If such a pedigree hadn’t done Zemlinsky in after the rise of the Nazis, his promoting of composers whose works were more brashly modernist than his own would have proved insuperable. A few months after the Anschluss, Zemlinsky and his wife fled from Vienna, via Prague, to New York, where he found little success before he was disabled by a stroke, in 1939. His death three years later went largely unnoticed.

In September 1922 Zemlinsky advised his publisher, Emil Hertzka:

In Short

Born: October 4, 1871, in Vienna, Austria

Died: March 15, 1942, in Larchmont, New York

Work composed: April 2, 1922–August 29, 1923; the texts are from *The Gardener*, by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), in Hans Effenberger’s German translations of 1914

World premiere: June 4, 1924, in Prague, the composer conducting the ISCM Festival orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere and most recent performance: The Orchestra’s only previous performances of this work were December 13–15, 1979, James Levine, conductor, Johanna Meier, soprano, Dale Duesing, baritone

Estimated duration: ca. 45 minutes

This summer I've written something along the lines of the *Lied v.d. Erde*. I haven't yet found a title for it. There are seven completely interrelated songs for baritone, soprano, and orchestra, which run without a break.

Some might view it as foolhardy, or even an act of hubris, to place before the public a work so obviously descended from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, which had been unveiled in November 1911, six months after the death of its composer. The resemblance cannot be missed. Both are imposing examples of the symphony-as-song-cycle, Mahler's cast in six discrete movements, Zemlinsky's in seven connected ones. Both use a large orchestra with two alternating vocal soloists: contralto (or baritone) and tenor for Mahler, soprano and baritone for Zemlinsky. Both employ (at least ostensibly) Asian texts of a mystical bent, in German translation: presumed eighth-century Chinese poems chosen by Mahler; poems by the Bengali writer Rabindranath Tagore chosen by Zemlinsky. Antony Beaumont, in his biography of Zemlinsky, insists:

the similarities are skin deep. The form of Mahler's work is linear, Zemlinsky's is circular; Mahler divides his work into six clearly separated movements, Zemlinsky prefers a through-composed, operatic structure.

Fair enough, and Beaumont notes differences of ethos, too, with Mahler bidding a nostalgic adieu to the natural world while Zemlinsky traces a sensual encounter between a man and a woman. Still, most of us are likely to remark on the works' similarities rather than their disparities, and we may well



About the Poet

The polymathic Rabindranath Tagore (born in Kolkata, a.k.a. Calcutta, in 1861; died there in 1941) remains a towering figure of Indian cultural history even if his stock has fallen somewhat in the Western world. The son of a Maharashi ("great sage"), he began winning acclaim in his twenties for his poetry, some of which was radical in embracing verse forms not previously espoused by Bengali poetic traditions.

While managing his father's estates, he lived in close contact with impoverished laborers, an experience that fed his humanitarian instincts and the political potency of his future writings. Prolific to a fault (his complete writings run to nearly 30 thick volumes), Tagore was also a noted painter and musician; he wrote more than 1,000 songs, one of which, "Amar Shonar Bangla" ("My Golden Bengal"), has served since 1972 as the national anthem of Bangladesh.

In 1913 Tagore became the first non-European honored with the Nobel Prize in Literature, in recognition "of his profoundly sensitive, fresh, and beautiful verse, by which, with consummate skill, he has made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West" In 1915 he was awarded a British knighthood, which he renounced four years later to protest British colonial abuses in India. From 1912 to 1933 he traveled widely throughout the world, hailed on five continents as a celebrity.

The composer Alexander Zemlinsky may have first met Tagore during the poet's visit to Prague in 1921. Certainly they met in 1926, during a follow-up visit there, when the festivities included Zemlinsky conducting the last movement of his *Lyric Symphony* in Tagore's presence.

agree that Zemlinsky's achievement in this remarkable work is not lessened by its obvious genealogy.

Instrumentation: four flutes (two doubling piccolo), three oboes (one doubling English horn), three clarinets (one doubling E-flat

clarinet) and bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, xylophone, triangle, cymbals, tam-tam, tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, harp, celesta, harmonium, and strings, in addition to the soprano and baritone soloists.

From the Premiere

Shortly after the premiere of the *Lyric Symphony*, during the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music) Festival in Prague in 1924, Zemlinsky received an enthusiastic letter from his former pupil Alban Berg. Berg had known Zemlinsky since 1905, and in 1926 he would quote his teacher's *Lyric Symphony* in his own *Lyric Suite* for String Quartet. The letter itself is now missing, but Berg's preliminary draft of the letter survives:

[Even if] now at last I believe that I really know your *Lyric Symphony*, in ten years' time [I will] be forced to admit that today I have only an *inkling* of the score's boundless beauties. But this can do nothing whatsoever to diminish my love, which – as it affects me in a *particularly personal way* – is that true love which overcomes me only in the case of a small, select body of music.

[...] Freed from all the secondary considerations, limitations, and obstacles that have to be surmounted in works of other genres [...], with the *Lyric Symphony* (never before was a title so ambiguous & at once so meaningful) a musical [child] is born – one that contains not one note too many, nor indeed one too few.



Text and Translation

Zemlinsky's *Lyric Symphony in Seven Songs, After Poems by Rabindranath Tagore, Op. 18*

I

*Ich bin friedlos,
ich bin durstig nach fernen Dingen.
Meine Seele schweift in Sehnsucht,
den Saum der dunklen Weite zu berühren.
O grosses Jenseits,
o ungestümes Rufen deiner Flöte.
Ich vergesse, ich vergesse immer,
dass ich keine Schwingen zum Fliegen habe,
dass ich an dieses Stück Erde
gefesselt bin für alle Zeit.*

*Ich bin voll Verlangen und wachsam,
ich bin ein Fremder im fremden Land —
dein Odem kommt zu mir
und raunt mir unmögliche Hoffnungen zu.
Deine Sprache klingt meinem Herzen
vertraut wie seine eigene.
O Ziel in Fernen,
o ungestümes Rufen deiner Flöte.
Ich vergesse immer, ich vergesse
dass ich nicht den Weg weiss,
dass ich das beschwingte Ross nicht habe.*

*Ich bin ruh'los,
ich bin ein Wanderer in meinem Herzen.
Im sonnigen Nebel der zögernden Stunden,
welch gewaltiges Gesicht von dir
wird Gestalt in der Bläue des Himmels.
O fernstes Ende,
o ungestümes Rufen deiner Flöte.
Ich vergesse, ich vergesse immer,
dass die Türen überall verschlossen sind
in dem Hause, wo ich einsam wohne,
o fernstes Ende,
o ungestümes Rufen deiner Flöte.*

I have no peace,
I thirst after far-off things.
My soul roams in longing
to touch the hem of dark distance.
O vast beyond,
o untamed call of your flute.
I forget, I always forget,
that I have no wings to fly,
that I am chained to this piece of earth
for all time.

I am full of longing and vigilant,
I am a stranger in a strange land —
your breath descends upon me
and whispers impossible hopes.
Your language is as familiar to my heart
as is its very own.
O far-off goal,
o untamed call of your flute.
I always forget, I forget
that I do not know the way,
that I do not have the winged horse.

I am restless,
I am a wanderer in my heart.
In the sunny haze of the languid hours,
how powerfully your visage
takes shape in the blue of the sky.
O furthest end,
o untamed call of your flute.
I forget, I always forget,
that the doors are shut
everywhere in the house, where I dwell alone,
o furthest end,
o untamed call of your flute.

(Please turn the page quietly.)

*Mutter, der junge Prinz muss an uns'rer Türe
vorbeikommen:*

*wie kann ich diesen Morgen auf meine Arbeit
acht geben?*

*Zeig mir, wie soll mein Haar ich flechten;
zeig mir, was soll ich für Kleider anziehen?
Warum schaust du mich so verwundert an,
Mutter?*

*Ich weiss wohl, er wird nicht ein einz'ges Mal
zu meinem Fenster aufblicken.*

*Ich weiss im Nu wird er mir aus den Augen
sein;*

*nur das verhallende Flötenspiel
wird seufzend zu mir dringen von weitem.*

*Aber der junge Prinz wird bei uns
vorüberkommen,
und ich will mein Bestes anziehen für diesen
Augenblick.*

*Mutter, der junge Prinz ist an uns'rer Türe
vorbeigekommen,*

*und die Morgensonne blitzte an seinem
Wagen.*

*Ich strich den Schleier aus meinem Gesicht,
riss die Rubinenkette von meinem Hals
und warf sie ihm in den Weg.*

*Warum schaust du mich so verwundert an,
Mutter?*

*Ich weiss wohl, dass er meiner Kette nicht
aufhob.*

*Ich weiss, sie ward unter den Rädern zer-
malmt*

*und liess eine rote Spur im Staube zurück.
Und niemand weiss, was mein Geschenk
war und wer es gab.*

*Aber der junge Prinz kam an unsrer Tür
vorüber*

*und ich hab' den Schmuck von meiner Brust
ihm in den Weg geworfen.*

Mother, the young prince must surely pass
by our door:

how am I to concentrate on my work this
morning?

Show me, how shall I braid my hair;
show me, how shall I clothe myself?
Why do you look at me so amazed,
mother?

I know well that not even once
will he glance up at my window.

I know he will disappear in an instant from
my view;

only the vanishing sound of the flute
will reach me, sighing from a distance.

Yet the young prince will
pass by,
and I wish to be arrayed in my finest for this
moment.

Mother, the young prince has passed by our
door,

and the morning sun flashed from his
chariot.

I swept aside the veil from my face,
tore off the chain of rubies from my neck
and flung it into his path.

Why do you look at me so amazed,
mother?

I know well that he did not pick up
my chain.

I know it was crushed under the
wheels,

leaving behind a red streak in the dust.
And no one knows what my gift was and
who gave it.

Yet the young prince did pass by
our door

and I did fling the jewels from my breast
into his path.

*Du bist die Abendwolke,
die am Himmel meiner Träume hinzieht.
Ich schmücke dich und kleide dich immer mit
den Wünschen meiner Seele.
Du bist mein Eigen, mein Eigen,
Du, die in meinen endlosen Träumen wohnt.*

*Deine Füße sind rosigrot
von der Glut meines sehnsüchtigen Herzens.
Du, die meine Abendlieder erntet.
Deine Lippen sind bittersüß
vom Geschmack des Weins aus meinem
Leiden.
Du bist mein Eigen, mein Eigen.
Du, die in meinen einsamen Träumen wohnt.*

*Mit dem Schatten meiner Leidenschaft
hab' ich deine Augen geschwärzt,
gewohnter Gast in meines Blickes Tiefe.*

*Ich hab' dich gefangen und dich
eingesponnen, Geliebte,
in das Netz meiner Musik.
Du bist mein Eigen, mein Eigen.
Du, die in meinen unsterblichen Träumen
wohnt.*

You are the evening cloud,
floating in the sky of my dreams.
I bejewel and clothe you ever with the
longings of my soul.
You are my own, my own,
you, who dwell in my infinite dreams.

Your feet are rosy-red
with the glow of my yearning heart.
You, who gather my songs in the evening.
Your lips are bittersweet
with the taste of the wine of my
sufferings.
You are my own, my own.
You, who dwell in my solitary dreams.

With the shadow of my passion
I have darkened your eyes,
intimate guest of my gaze's depth.

I have captured and woven you,
my love,
in the net of my music.
You are my own, my own.
You, who dwell in my undying
dreams.

(Please turn the page quietly.)

IV

*Sprich zu mir, Geliebter,
sag' mir mit Worten, was du sangest.
Die Nacht ist dunkel, die Sterne sind in
 Wolken verloren.
Der Wind seufzt durch die Blätter.
Ich will mein Haar lösen,
mein blauer Mantel wird dich umschmiegen
 wie Nacht.
Ich will deinen Kopf an meine Brust
 schliessen
und hier in der süssen Einsamkeit lass dein
 Herz reden.
Ich will meine Augen zumachen und lauschen,
ich will nicht in dein Antlitz schauen.
Wenn dein Worte zu Ende sind
wollen wir still und schweigend sitzen.
Nur die Bäume werden im Dunkel flüstern,
die Nacht wird bleichen, der Tag wird dämmern.
Wir werden einander in die Augen schauen
und jeder seines Weges ziehn.
Sprich zu mir, Geliebter.*

Speak to me, my love,
tell me in words what you told me in song.
The night is dark, the stars are lost in the
 clouds.
The wind sighs through the leaves.
I want to untie my hair,
my blue cloak will enfold you
 like night.
I want to clasp your head to
 my breast
and have your heart speak in the sweet
 loneliness.
I want to shut my eyes and listen,
I do not want to glance at your face.
When your words are at an end
we want to sit still and silent.
Only the trees will whisper in the dark,
the night will pale, the day will dawn.
We will look into each other's eyes
and each will go his way.
Speak to me, my love.

V

*Befrei' mich von den Banden deiner Süsse,
Lieb! Nichts mehr von diesem Wein der Küsse,
dieser Nebel von schwerem Weihrauch
 erstickt mein Herz.
Öffne die Türe, mach Platz für das
 Morgenlicht.
Ich bin in dich verloren, eingefangen
in die Umarmungen deiner Zärtlichkeit.
Befrei' mich von deinem Zauber
und gib mir den Mut zurück,
dir mein befreites Herz darzubieten.*

Free me from the bonds of your sweetness,
my love! No more of this wine of kisses,
this mist of heavy incense stifles
 my heart.
Open the doors, make place for the morning
 light.
I am lost in you, captured
by the embraces of your tenderness.
Free me from your spell
and give me back the courage,
to offer you my freed heart.

VI

*Vollende denn das letzte Lied
und lass uns auseinander gehn;
vergiss diese Nacht, wenn die Nacht um ist.
Wen müh' ich mich mit meinen Armen zu
umfassen?
Träume lassen sich nicht einfangen,
meine gierigen Hände drücken Leere an
mein Herz
und es zermürbt meine Brust.*

Complete the final song now
and let us part from one another;
forget this night, when the night is no more.
Who do I uneasily clasp in
my arms?
Dreams cannot be made captive,
my anxious hands press emptiness to my
heart
and it bruises my breast.

VII

*Friede, mein Herz,
lass die Zeit, für das Scheiden süß sein,
lass es nicht einen Tod sein, sondern
Vollendung.
Lass Liebe in Erinnerung schmelzen
und Schmerz in Lieder.
Lass die letzte Berührung deiner Hände
sanft sein,
wie die Blume der Nacht.
Steh' still, steh' still, o wundervolles Ende,
für einen Augenblick
und sage deine letzten Worte in Schweigen.
Ich neige mich vor dir,
ich halte meine Lampe in die Höhe,
um dir auf deinen Weg zu leuchten.*

Peace, my heart,
let the time for parting be sweet,
let it be not a death, but, rather,
completion.
Let love melt into memory
and pain into song.
Let the last touch of your hands
be gentle,
like the nocturnal flower.
Stand still, stand still, oh wondrous end,
for a moment
and say your last words in silence.
I bow to you,
I hold up my lamp,
to light you on your way.

English translation by Steven R. Cerf

Translator's note: This English version is, by and large, a literal rendering of Hans Effenberger's German translation of Tagore. The attempt has been made to capture Effenberger's own neo-Romantic idiom, to which Zemlinsky obviously attuned his music with considerable care. — S.R.C.

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