

Israeli composer channels aspects of her life in opera about Vienna's Alma Mahler

Ella Milch Sheriff discusses working on 'Alma' in shadow of October 7 attack, and incorporating the composer's antisemitism in her opera's libretto

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Opera composer Ella Milch Sheriff during rehearsals for "Alma," premiering October 26, 2024, at the Vienna Volksoper. (Barbara Pálffy/Vienna Volksoper)

On October 7, 2023, composer Ella Milch Sheriff woke up early in her Tel Aviv apartment to what sounded like a bomb.

The skies were blue, the sun was shining, and her partner told her to go back to sleep. Moments later, the sounds of police sirens and ambulances led them to discover that a rocket launched from Gaza had fallen in front of their building.

"That's how it started for us," said Milch Sheriff.

It was the beginning of the Hamas terror onslaught that killed more than 1,200 in Israel's south, with 251 people taken hostage to Gaza.

"The shock was huge," said Milch Sheriff.

She couldn't compose or listen to music, much less work on "Alma," an opera commissioned by the Vienna Volksoper and dedicated to composer Alma Mahler-Werfel, the wife of the famed Gustav Mahler.



From "Alma," Ella Milch Sheriff's opera about the life of Alma Mahler-Werfel, premiering October 26, 2024, in Vienna, Austria. (Barbara Pálffy/Vienna Volksoper)

At the time, Milch Sheriff was deep into composing the second act of the opera, which premiered on October 26. She had a strict deadline to finish the piano score by mid-January, a typical deadline for European opera theater, which is usually planned at least four years in advance.

She eventually returned to her safe room, which also doubles as a studio, put her headphones back on, and concentrated on composing a 20th-century-themed Viennese opera.

"It was a huge help for me for a couple of hours a day to overcome the terrible things that had happened around me," said Milch Sheriff.

Now, one year later, Milch Sheriff is in Vienna, Austria, for the dress rehearsals and opening of "Alma," a project she's worked on for much of the last decade.

When Milch Sheriff spoke to The Times of Israel, it was during the final week of rehearsals. It's been six years since Milch Sheriff's last major production, 2018's "The Banality of Love," about the affair between the philosopher Hannah Arendt and her mentor Martin Heidegger.

At the time, she already had the idea for an opera about the life of Alma Mahler-Werfel, someone she wasn't as familiar with as she is now.



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She was intrigued by the story of this woman, a young composer and muse who gave up her music for her first husband, the great composer Gustav Mahler. Elements of Mahler-Werfel's story mirrored Milch Sheriff's own life as the wife of the late Noam Sheriff, the well-known Israeli composer and conductor who died in 2018.

Like Mahler-Werfel, Sheriff was also twenty years older than his wife, though he never insisted that she give up her work to marry him.

Alma Mahler-Werfel met and fell in love with Mahler, the music director of the Viennese opera, a very prominent conductor, composer and personality. He insisted that she give up her work, a decision that Milch Sheriff said killed Alma's soul.

Over the years, Milch Sheriff learned about Mahler-Werfel's anguished motherhood as a mother of four with only one surviving child, Ana Mahler, the second daughter of Alma and Gustav. She is a character with a major role in the opera.

Mahler-Werfel lost three children and aborted another, and didn't attend the funerals of some of her children, leading Milch Sheriff to wonder what happened to this young beautiful woman in Vienna who became a drunk, bitter older woman.

"If she would have lived nowadays, her destiny and her life would've been completely different," said Milch Sheriff.



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Milch Sheriff draws her own conclusions from Mahler-Werfel's unhappy life and asks audiences to understand the process her protagonist went through, even if they may not like or identify with her.

There are other elements of the opera and Mahler-Werfel's story that have resonated more in recent months. She was antisemitic like much of Viennese society of the times, a fact that wasn't avoided by Israeli playwright Ido Ricklin, who wrote some of that hateful dialogue into the libretto.

(While Mahler-Werfel was antisemitic, she married two Jewish men, Gustav Mahler, who converted to Catholicism, and her third husband, writer Franz Werfel.)

Milch Sheriff didn't want to hide that detail either, and found herself thinking about it even more in recent months. She has been in Europe since the October 7 Hamas attack and the ongoing war in Gaza, with anti-Israel sentiments at an all-time high.

The Israeli composer said she tries to emphasize in interviews and conversations that she is a peace activist and is against the current Israeli government, but distinguishes being opposed to the government and to Israel the country.

"We have a beautiful country with amazing people in it, and unfortunately the center and left are like prisoners in the hands of the extreme right," she said. "In Europe, they mix up being anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli, which makes me mad."

Throughout it all, during the last 12 months of Israel's post-October 7 reality and amid a war, Milch Sheriff continued to work on the opera and she sees that as part of the continuum of her country, of Israel.

"We make culture, opera, music, literature, art, we didn't stop making culture and had we stopped, that would have been the end of Israel. We survive through culture, not through religion," she said.

The same could be said of her opera, of "Alma," said Milch Sheriff.

“We have three Israelis — the composer, Ricklin the playwright, and Omer Meir Wellber the conductor — presenting a new opera in one of the most prestigious opera houses, about a Viennese subject,” she said. “During this period, in this time, I would say it’s a kind of provocation.”

“Alma” is being performed five times, on October 26 and 31, and November 4, 6 and 9.