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GUSTAV MAHLER AND THE CRISIS OF JEWISH MASCULINITY

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INTRODUCTION:

In January 1902, Alma Schindler described one of her early sexual encounters with her husband-to-be, Gustav Mahler.¹ Much to the frustration of both parties, this interaction was both brief and unfulfilling. The distraught Alma confided in her diary:

What I have to write today is terribly sad. I called on Gustav – in the afternoon we were alone in his room. He gave me his body - & I let him touch me with his hand. Stiff and upright stood his vigor. He carried me to the sofa, laid me gently down and swung himself over me. Then – just as I felt him penetrate, he lost all strength. He laid his head on my breast, shattered – and almost wept for shame. Distraught as I was, I comforted him. We drove home, dismayed and dejected ... Then I broke down, had to weep, weep on his breast. What if he were to lose that! My poor, poor husband! I can scarcely say how irritating it all was. First his intimate caresses, so close – and then no satisfaction. Words cannot express what I today have undeservedly suffered. And then to observe his torment – his unbelievable torment! My beloved!²

¹ My warmest thanks are extended to the many scholars who helped me develop this work. Particular thanks are extended to Freya Jarman for their paper ‘The Jew’s Noise’ given at RMA Nottingham in 2023, Christian Utz and Christian Glanz for their constructive suggestions and feedback following my paper at the ‘Mahler in Political Contexts’ conference at MDW in Vienna in November 2023, Jeremy Barham for the endless support, feedback, and lengthy conversations about Mahler, Lawrence Kramer for his thoughtful comments on this text, and the members of the University of Bristol Writing Group for reading countless drafts.

² It is unclear from Alma’s diary entry whether this encounter ended due to premature ejaculation or an inability to sustain an erection. Regardless, I refer to the issues of Mahler’s sexual dysfunction as impotence, drawing upon Angus McLaren’s definition of the term which includes failure to achieve an erection, failure to penetrate, failure to

Fortunately for the pair it seems that any lack of satisfaction was quickly resolved in their subsequent attempts, as just two days later Alma wrote in her diary, “Bliss and rapture,” and the following day, simply: “Rapture without end!”³ Although easily overlooked as just an unfortunate sexual anecdote, this encounter not only offers an insight into Gustav and Alma’s relationship but also informs us of the changing interpersonal and sexual dynamics between men and women at the turn of the century. Studies of sexual impotence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries tell us that an experience such as this would not only have been embarrassing but also, as Alma aptly captures, highly shameful and emasculating for Mahler.⁴ Although his ability to perform clearly improved in their later attempts (and we know he had many positive sexual encounters prior to his relationship with Alma)⁵, his decision to become “celibate” and withdraw from sexual intimacy later in life functions as just one example of the ways in which Mahler’s world becomes deeply entangled with the gender politics of *fin-de-Siècle* Viennese society.⁶ As women gained greater sexual and economic autonomy in the early twentieth century, there arose a crisis of masculinity and “antifeminist action” from men that Elaine Showalter calls an “awakening of consciousness of what it means to be a man.”⁷

As I investigated Mahler’s own crisis of masculinity, it became clear that any conversation about the composer’s understanding of gender, sex, and masculinity could not be separated from conversations

ejaculate, or ejaculating prematurely. See Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007): p. xiii.

³ Alma Mahler and Antony Beaumont, *Alma Mahler-Werfel: Diaries, 1898-1902* (London: Faber, 2000), p. 467.

⁴ Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History*.

⁵ See M. Solvik and S. E. Hefling, “Natalie Bauer-Lechner on Mahler and Women: A Newly Discovered Document,” *The Musical Quarterly* 97, no. 1 (2014): 12–65.

⁶ Mahler’s celibacy was documented by Alma in her book, *Mein Leben*, and was later corroborated by Sigmund Freud who met once with the composer for psychotherapeutic treatment. See, Alma Mahler-Werfel, *Mein Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1960), p. 40.

⁷ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 2010), p. 9.

about his Jewishness and thus also about antisemitic criticism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is well-documented that Mahler suffered from severe antisemitic criticism in the Viennese press, and that he was chided for the “banal” tunes and Jewish musical inflections in his songs and symphonies.⁸ His feelings of displacement and alienation as a Jew in Vienna are aptly captured in his oft-quoted statement “I am thrice homeless, as a native of Bohemia in Austria, as an Austrian among Germans, and as a Jew throughout the world.”⁹ Although antisemitic ideologies had been accumulating in German-speaking lands since the 1810s, Otto Weininger’s 1903 text *Sex and Character* contributed a decidedly gendered lens to antisemitic criticism by equating Jewish men with women and chiding them for their inherent weakness, inferiority, and femininity.¹⁰ As Paul Lerner, Benjamin Maria Baader, and Sharon Gillerman observe, “Because the figure of the unmanly Jew was an extraordinarily powerful image in German and Austria at the turn of the twentieth century, German-speaking Europe provides an ideal terrain for ... historical exploration of Jewish masculinity.”¹¹ In Jewish studies, there is a growing body of research that interrogates the relationship between gender and Jewishness—specifically masculinity—which has demonstrated the importance of adding a gendered lens to studies of anti-Jewish and antisemitic discourses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Austro-German context.¹² Mahler’s Jewishness

⁸ See for example Karbusicky, ‘Gustav Mahler’s Musical Jewishness,’ in: J. Barham, ed, *Perspectives on Gustav Mahler* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 198–199; Knittel, *Seeing Mahler: Music and the language of antisemitism in fin-de-siècle Vienna*; Talia Pecker Berio, ‘Mahler and Judaism,’ *Muziek & Wetenschap - Dutch Journal for Musicology*, vol. 5, no.3 (1995): 405–416; Francesca Draughon and Raymond Knapp, ‘Gustav Mahler and the Crisis of Jewish Identity.’ *Echo: A Music Centered Journal*, Vol.3, No.2 (Fall 2001.)

⁹ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Knud Martner, trans. Basil Creighton (London: Cardinal, 1990), p. 109.

¹⁰ Otto Weininger, *Geschlecht Und Charakter: Eine Prinzipielle Untersuchung* (München: Matthes & Seitz, 1997).

¹¹ B.M. Baader, S. Gillerman, P. Lerner, *Jewish Masculinities: German Jews, Gender, and History*, (Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 6.

¹² See for example, B.M. Baader, S. Gillerman, P. Lerner, *Jewish Masculinities*; M. A. Kaplan, D.D. Moore, *Gender and Jewish History*, (Indiana University Press, 2001); Sander Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, (Routledge Press, 1991); D. Luft, *Eros*

has also been widely discussed in Mahler scholarship, with a number of studies exploring Mahler's Jewish musical inflections, his conversion to Christianity, and the quasi-religious and philosophical questions that permeate his biography and his compositions.¹³ Lastly, as this special issue shows, there has been a need for deeper investigation into Mahler's life and works from the perspective of gender studies.¹⁴ However, there has yet to be a study which considers the connections between these three fields of research and the importance of these interactions for the field of Mahler Studies.¹⁵ This article seeks to fill the gap by moving beyond the dualist approach that dominates current scholarship and providing a 3-dimensional interrogation into Mahler's crisis of Jewish masculinity in the changing landscape of *fin-de-Siècle* Vienna. The historical and cultural circumstances in which Mahler lived and worked had deeply gendered Jewish roots and were surrounded by a growing antisemitic discourse. Thus, no study of Mahler's Jewishness is complete without a consideration of gender and masculinity at the *fin-de-Siècle*, and no study of gender in Mahler's world is complete without a consideration of Jewishness.

JEWISHNESS AND GENDER:

and Inwardness in Vienna: Weininger, Musil, Doderer, (University of Chicago Press, 2003); Harrowitz, *Jews & Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*, (Temple University Press, 1994).

¹³ See fn 6.

¹⁴ See for example, K. Painter, 'The Sensuality of Timbre: Responses to Mahler and Modernity at the "fin-de-siècle," *19th-Century Music*, Vol.18, No.5, (Spring 1995): 236–256; S. Monahan, "'I have tried to capture you...': Rethinking the "Alma" Theme from Mahler's Sixth Symphony,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 64, No.1, (2011): 119–178; F. Draughon, 'The Dance of Decadence: Class, Gender, and Modernity in the Scherzo of Mahler's Ninth Symphony,' *The Journal of Musicology*, 20/3, (2003); 388–413.

¹⁵ Both Ian Biddle, K.M. Knittel, and Francesca Draughon have peripherally mentioned the relationship between Mahler, Jewishness, and gender in their work, but this article acts as the first to take it as the central focus and interrogate it in any detail. See: Ian Biddle, *Music, Masculinity and the Claims of History: The Austro-German Tradition from Hegel to Freud*, (London: Routledge, 2016), and K. M. Knittel, *Seeing Mahler*. F. Draughon, 'The Dance of Decadence.'

The act of differentiating Jewish men from their non-Jewish counterparts due to their inherent femininity—both in body and in character—can be traced back to the thirteenth century. The French historian Jacques de Vitry stated that Jewish men were “unwarlike and weak ... as women” and argued that Jewish men suffered from a monthly menses.¹⁶ This act of equating Jewish men with menstruation, and consequently with women, stemmed from a Christian desire to label Jewish individuals as corrupt and degenerate, character traits that, since Eve’s transgression with the apple in the garden of Eden, had become directly associated with women.¹⁷ Léon Poliakov records that medieval Christians described the Jews as “suffering from a thousand malignant afflictions that only Christian blood can cure ... They are born misshapen, they are hemorrhoidal and, men as well as women, afflicted with menses. From this point of view, they are women, that is, inframen.”¹⁸ This charge continued into the fourteenth century with treatises such as Cecco d’Ascoli’s *De spaera* from (c.)1324 stating that “after the death of Christ all Jewish men, like women, suffer menstruation.”¹⁹ In the nineteenth century, the gendered history of the Jews became a further means to criticize the Jewish man. Femininity became the hallmark of male Jewish identity in the Austro-German context. This perspective was solidified by the founder of modern Orthodoxy in Germany, Samson Raphael Hirsch, and the Reform rabbi Adolf Jellinek, who claimed that Jewish culture and civilization was rooted in the feminine, and that Jewish manliness was formed, not through the mediums of war or political power apparent elsewhere in society, but through domestic and feminine virtues, with

¹⁶ Lerner, Baader, and Gillerman, *Jewish Masculinities*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Sander L. Gilman, *Jewish Self-Hatred Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Univ. Pr, 1990), pp. 74–75.

¹⁸ The relationship of this to Mahler’s own hemorrhoidal condition should not go unnoticed. The composer collapsed from a severe hemorrhoidal hemorrhage in February 1901 that made him aware and afraid of his own possible mortality. See, S. Hefling, ‘Aspects of Mahler’s Late Style,’ in: K. Painter, *Mahler and His World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 201 ; Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism* (trans. Richard Howard; 4 vols.; London: Elek Books, 1965), 1, 143. In: Irvn M. Resnick, ‘Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,’ *Harvard Theological Review* 93, no. 3 (2000): 241–63, p. 244.

¹⁹ Resnick, ‘Medieval Roots of the Myth of Jewish Male Menses,’ p. 244.

emphasis on the role of the family (*Familiensinn*).²⁰ Baader argues that Jellinek's perception of Jewish femininity was not something to be criticized but instead should be recognized as a show of strength: "For Jewish men to be different from other men because of their feminine hearts and their feminine modes of conduct is something to be proud of and constitutes an integral part of Jewish men's Jewishness."²¹ However, this positive portrayal of the male Jew's domesticity and femininity did not extend beyond the confines of the Jewish community. Criticism of degeneracy, physical appearance, and the "oriental" origins of Jewish individuals permeated public anti-Jewish discourses in the nineteenth century.

It was not until the early twentieth century that the stereotype of the effeminate Jewish male emerged in the antisemitic discourse of Austria and Germany. This gendered shift was sparked by Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* (1903), which reversed Hirsch's and Jellinek's figure of the gentle, domestic, and emotionally available Jewish family man into the image of an inferior, degrading, and weak form of male Jewish femininity.²² Simultaneously antifeminist and antisemitic, Weininger's text allowed for a reading of Jewish self-hatred that was deeply intertwined with issues of sexuality and masculinity. Weininger, a student at the University of Vienna during the *fin-de-Siècle*, was both Jewish by birth (he later became a Protestant) and a repressed homosexual—factors that contributed to the text's central themes of Jewish self-hatred and the insecurities of sex, sexuality, and gender. Following the revised publication of his text, he took his own life in the house in Vienna in which Beethoven had died and his work quickly gained posthumous popularity.²³ It became an instant best-seller and established Weininger as one of the leading voices in the discourse on gender and race at the *fin-de-Siècle*.²⁴ At its core, *Sex and Character* promoted the view that Jewishness was synonymous with femininity in the pejorative sense. As Sandor Gilman writes:

²⁰ Benjamin Maria Baader, 'Jewish Difference and the Feminine Spirit of Judaism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Germany,' in: Lerner, Baader, and Gillerman, *Jewish Masculinities*, p. 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²³ Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, p. 133.

²⁴ Sandor L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*, (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 78.

What *Sex and Character* did was to restate in a scientific, i.e. biological context Arthur Schopenhauer's views on women and simply extend the category of the feminine to the Jew. It argued, within the rhetoric of contemporary science, that there is a psychological scale which runs from the Jewish mind on one end to the Aryan at the other. This scale is parallel to another, the 'feminine' and the 'masculine.'²⁵

Weininger's view of Jewish femininity also became bound up with issues of exclusion and Jewish othering, as he claimed that Jewish men were "unworthy of exercising an entire range of masculine roles and privileges and unable to experience masculinity in its most genuine (i.e. Germanic) sense."²⁶ Pure masculinity for Weininger was inherently Germanic, and therefore the criteria for assimilation were not only religious or racial, but also deeply gendered.

This Germanic, Aryan, and Christian masculinity posited by Weininger was also informed by his experiences as a devout Wagnerian. He argued that Wagner's Siegfried was the epitome of both the male and the Aryan hero. He believed in the importance of a Wagnerian, *völkisch* authenticity embedded in the Germanic ideal, something that, due to heightened antisemitism and the Jews' innate femininity, was aspirational but unattainable for the male Jew.²⁷ Many of the central arguments posed in Wagner's essay "Judaism in Music" were revived in Weininger's text, namely the attribution of bodily deformities and degenerate character traits that supposedly plagued Jewish individuals. Wagner's view that the Jews have no music or identity of their own and therefore only steal the works of others also appears in Weininger's text through the medium of humor; Weininger argues that Jews are incapable of humor and therefore only mock or mimic others. This, he claims, is also a decidedly feminine trait as women are also incapable of the wit and intellect needed to create true humor.

²⁵ Gilman, *The Jew's Body*, pp. 133–134.

²⁶ John M. Hoberman, 'Otto Weininger and the Critique of Jewish Masculinity' in: Harrowitz ed. *Jews & Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*, pp. 142–143.

²⁷ Jacques Le Rider, 'The Otto Weininger Case Revisited,' in: Le Rider, Harrowitz ed. *Jews & Gender: Responses to Otto Weininger*, p. 29.

The question of humor in the form of irony commonly emerges in the scholarship on Mahler's works. Specifically, irony and mockery have been linked to his frequent allusions to and quotations of the works of other composers and of musical styles and genres. So plentiful were these allusions that in 1905 a Viennese cartoon by Theo Zasche showed Mahler dressed up as Beethoven, Liszt, Schubert, and Wagner. The cartoon makes a jest of Mahler's supposed inability to create original music and the accusation that he instead simply mocked and mimicked the works of others. Criticizing Mahler's Jewishness and unoriginality in one fell swoop, such cartoons cast Mahler's intertextual references as a primary means to signal his Jewishness. While these allusions and quotations have often been examined through the lens of Mahler's Jewishness,²⁸ they have not been acknowledged as contributing to a sense of inferior masculinity. In the context of Weininger's text and its impact on antisemitic discourse, Mahler's allusions become a means to further feminize him through Jewish stereotyping. Mahler's world becomes gendered as his irony becomes a symbol for the absence of humor, a twisted and misunderstood joke signaling his difference, his Jewishness, and his sharing in the unhumorous nature of women.

The equation of male Jews with women in their inability to be humorous was linked to the male Jewish body, specifically to circumcision. Fritz Wittels, a psychoanalyst and biographer of Freud, argued that a male Jew's inclination to mockery and absence of humor was a product of physical deformities resulting from circumcision. For Wittels, Jews mock others specifically because of this infirmity.²⁹ This is

²⁸ See for example, Micznik, 'Intertextuality in Mahler,' in *Mahler in Context*, ed. Charles Youmans, (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Henry Louis de La Grange, 'Music about Music in Mahler: Reminiscences, allusions or quotations?' In: Hefling S, ed. *Mahler studies* (New York: Cambridge University Press; 1997), 122–168; Robert Samuels, 'Mahler within Mahler: allusion as quotation, self-reference, and metareference,' in *Self-Reference in Literature and Other Media*, ed. Walter Bernhardt and Werner Wolf, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 33–50; Johnson, *Mahler's Voices*, (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009); Anna Stoll Knecht, 'Mahler's *Parsifal*,' *The Wagner Journal*, Vol.11, No.3 (Nov, 2017): 4–26; Matthews, 'Wagner, Lipiner, and the 'Purgatorio,' In: *The Mahler Companion*, ed. Donald Mitchell and Andrew Nicholson (Oxford University Press, 1999): 508–516.

²⁹ The issue of circumcision in the context of the male-female dynamic emerges in a contradictory essay of 1903 by Georg Groddeck, who argues that circumcision removes the feminine and that consequently what remains is the epitome of masculinity: . He states that "The foreskin is cut away in order to remove everything feminine from the

certainly not the only instance in which circumcision emerged in the anti-Jewish discourse, as it was also often used to promote the view of the Jewish male as deformed and degenerate. Moreover, as Ian Biddle notes, “In the Viennese raciological mind, the Jewish male body is imagined as a *proxy* for the feminine, and serves as a ‘physical’ demonstration of what can happen when the penis is ‘lost,’ this loss marked ‘clearly’ by the Jewish practice of male circumcision. . . Circumcision became linked with castration and therefore with the feminine, as the discourse of castration, linked metonymically . . . to circumcision, is a heterosexual discourse in which the fear of the removal of part of or the entire penis is generated by, and fundamentally linked to, *femininity*.”³⁰ This perspective was not confined to antisemites. Sigmund Freud drew on it in his case study of Little Hans: “If—says the child—I can be circumcised and made into a Jew, can I not also be castrated and made into a woman?”³¹ Circumcision therefore became a means not only to differentiate the Jewish body but also to emasculate it.

In addition to castration functioning as a means to feminize, the idea of castration as a physical deformity played into the wider trope of the deformed and misshapen Jewish body, which quickly became connected to cultural issues of degeneracy, masculinity, and difference. Max Nordau’s 1895 study *Degeneration* offered a commentary on aspects of *fin-de-Siècle* life that he felt would result in cultural degeneracy:

Degeneracy betrays itself among men in certain physical characteristics . . . deformities, multiple stunted growths in the first line of asymmetry, the unequal development of the two halves of the face and cranium . . . imperfection in the development of the external ear . . . squinted eyes, harelips, irregularities in the form and position of the teeth . . . [and] webbed or supernumerary fingers.³²

emblem of masculinity; for the foreskin is feminine, it is the vagina in which the masculine gland is hidden . . . when they cut away the foreskin . . . they take away the feminine characteristics of the masculine.” Quoted in Le Rider “The Otto Weininger Case Revisited,” *Jews & Gender*, p. 29.

³⁰ Ian Biddle, *Music, Masculinity and the Claims of History*, p. 162–163.

³¹ Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*, p. 77.

³² Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. George L. Mosse (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1968), pp. 16–17.

Nordau expands his argument to include mental traits of degeneracy that also became equated with issues of masculinity:

Another mental stigma of degenerates is their emotionalism ... he laughs until he sheds tears, or weeps copiously without adequate occasion; a commonplace line of poetry or prose sends a shudder down his back ... and music especially even the most insipid and least commendable arouses in him the most vehement emotions ... besides moral insanity and emotionalism, there is to be observed in the degenerate a condition of mental weakness and despondency which, according to the circumstances of his life, assumes the form of pessimism [and] a vague fear of all men.³³

Like Weininger, Nordau, Jewish himself, projected his views of degeneracy and physical and mental sickness onto Jewish individuals. Jews were predominantly city-dwellers who, according to physicians, suffered from a greater number of nervous and neurological disorders, and whose bodily shape and form was considered different from those of non-Jewish members of society. A leading Zionist, Nordau accordingly argued for the “recapturing of the dignity of the Jew,” who would be transformed through the values of manliness, dignity, and self-respect. The Jew “must be transformed from one who shared many characteristics of the degenerates to an ideal of manhood which exemplified society’s standards of looks, comportment and behavior.”³⁴ Even for Nordau, the view of the Jew as a “sickly intellectual” prone to forms of physical deviancy became quickly bound up with the deviancy of prostitutes, perverts, homosexuals, criminals, the insane, and bearers of physical illnesses.³⁵ The equation of weak bodies with weak minds was central to Nordau’s vision of unmanliness and degeneration, and he argued accordingly that Jewish manliness and regeneration could be achieved through the acquisition of a solid stomach and

³³ Ibid, pp. 19–20.

³⁴ George L. Mosse, ‘Max Nordau, Liberalism and the New Jew,’ *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.27, No.4, (October 1992): 565–581, pp. 567–8.

³⁵ Biddle, *Music, Masculinity and the Claims of History*, p. 158.

hard muscles. He stipulated that the Jew should attempt to conform to the bodily standards of masculinity promoted by the middle class, engaging in proper exercise to correct poor Jewish posture and promote more muscular, more masculine physiques. As these narratives entered into the antisemitic discourse of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Jewish individuals in the public eye began to experience backlash from the Viennese press for the inescapable bodily manifestations of their Jewishness. Mahler was no stranger to this corporeal scrutiny. He was subjected to a form of bodily criticism that not only demonstrated his Jewish difference but also threatened his embodiment of true masculinity.

GENDERING MAHLER'S JEWISH BODY:

Mahler was known and criticized for his physical form, and he gained a reputation for being a sickly person with a peculiar walk and fidgety manner.³⁶ Often labelled unattractive, physically weak, ugly, nervous, and puny, the composer's body was criticized in a way that conformed to the stereotypical representations of the Jewish body at the time.³⁷ Negative terms such as "thrashing," "snatching," "strangling," and "throttling" were used to describe his conducting style,³⁸ and there was an overwhelming focus on his apparent nervousness, fidgeting, jerking of the hands, and even "demonic" manner on the podium.³⁹ The Viennese critic Max Graf described him arriving on stage as a demon that emanated nervous energy and as a "small man with sharply chiseled features, pale and ascetic-looking. . . [who] would let his baton shoot forward suddenly, like the tongue of a poisonous serpent."⁴⁰ Even before he took up the post as conductor of the Vienna Court Opera (and despite his recent conversion to Catholicism) Mahler's Jewishness was signaled to the Viennese musical public. In April 1897 the *Reichspost* wrote of Mahler,

³⁶ See for example K. M. Knittel, *Seeing Mahler*.

³⁷ However, this was not an accurate portrayal of Mahler's physique and was instead informed by antisemitic stereotyping. This is discussed in more detail in the subsequent section, 'Purifying the Male Body.'

³⁸ K.M. "Ein hypermoderner Dirigent": Mahler and Anti-Semitism in "Fin-de-siècle" Vienna' *19th-Century Music*, Vol.18, No.3, (Spring 1995): 257–276, p. 268.

³⁹ Knittel, *Seeing Mahler*, p. 268.

⁴⁰ Max Graf, *Legend of a Musical City: The Story of Vienna*, (Philosophical Library, 2019), pp. 204–206.

We printed a note on the person of the newly appointed Opera Conductor, Mahler. At the time we already had an inkling of the origin of this celebrity and we therefore avoided publishing anything other than the bare facts about this unadulterated – Jew ... The Jews' press will see whether the panegyrics with which they plaster their idol at present do not become washed away by the rain of reality as soon as Herr Mahler starts spouting his Yiddish interpretations [*mauscheln*] from the podium.⁴¹

Although the slur is seemingly directed at language, Jens Maltes Fischer informs us that the term *Mauscheln* (to speak German with a Yiddish accent) in the Viennese press referred to a Jewish person's bodily characteristics—hair, bodily movements, even clothing—as a signal of their difference. The term was frequently used to describe Mahler's apparently fidgety or swaying manner on the podium, which became the foundation of numerous cartoons and caricatures.⁴² This corporeal difference prompted Max Graf to describe Mahler as a “wicked dwarf,” which K.M. Knittel has argued aligns the composer with Mime, the Jewish dwarf of Wagner's *Ring* Cycle. Her perspective is strengthened by Mahler's own observation that Wagner's Mime was intended to “ridicule the Jews” and that “I know only of one Mime and that is myself.”⁴³ This apparently Jewish style of conducting also became gendered in the mainstream criticism as, in stark contrast to that of his non-Jewish contemporaries, Mahler's style was described as “intense and impassioned” while conductors such as Hans Richter were described as “strong and manly.”⁴⁴ Impassioned, intense, and lacking the pure masculinity of his non-Jewish contemporaries, Mahler's Jewish body as it presented on the podium became a further means to promote a decidedly gendered antisemitic stereotype.

⁴¹ Jens Maltes Fisher, *Gustav Mahler*, (Yale University Press, 2003), p. 252.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 253.

⁴³ Paul Lawrence Rose, *Wagner: Race and Revolution* (New Haven, 1992), p. 71.

⁴⁴ Max Graf, *Wagner-Probleme und andere Studien* (Vienna, 1900), 124–26, in: Herta Blaukopf, *Mahler: His Life, Work and World*, trans. Paul Baker et al. (London, 1991), p. 132.

His physical appearance is also known to have been a concerning factor for Mahler's wife, as she recalled how she avoided him at first due to his being a "small, fidgety man with a fine head."⁴⁵ Alma's conformity to physical antisemitic stereotyping emerges frequently in her diaries. She described Jews as "the degenerate race" and complained at length about the unattractiveness of the Jewish voice, smell, body, and facial features. This kind of language extended beyond her discussion of Mahler to other Jewish men she encountered. She criticizes her friend, director, and playwright Max Burckhard for affiliating himself with Jewish people, writing that "the bad company he keeps is causing his pure, Aryan blood to semitify. He's even beginning to look Jewish."⁴⁶ When first meeting her composition teacher (and future lover) Alexander Zemlinsky, she commented on his "incredible ugliness, his smell."⁴⁷

Alma's view of Jewish men as ugly and degenerate is captured in her reflections on Mahler in the early stages of their relationship. She claims that "so much irritates me: his smell, the way he sings, the way he speaks..."⁴⁸ A criticism of smell had become a popular means to criticize Jewish individuals, both inside and outside of the Jewish community, and can be seen in anti-Jewish discourse as early as the Middle Ages. In traditional Jewish religious discourse, smell and good hygiene is of central importance. It became a means to distinguish between good and evil, the moral and the corrupt. A foul smell was equated with sexual promiscuity, was used to criticize those with no sexual morals, and associated with the sexual degeneracy of sex workers.⁴⁹ In antisemitic discourse, smell became a means to other and differentiate Jewish bodies. Gilman writes that the odor of the Jews was "linked with the sexualized image of the goat. For Jews, like the Devil, are horned like goats and have a goat's tail and goat's beard."⁵⁰ For Alma to criticize

⁴⁵ Alma Mahler, *Gustav Mahler: Memories and Letters*, trans. Basil Creighton, ed. Donald Mitchell and Knud Martner, 4th edn (London: Cardinal, 1990), p. 3.

⁴⁶ Mahler-Werfel, Beaumont, *Alma Mahler-Werfel Diaries, 1898–1902*, p. 345.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 366.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 449.

⁴⁹ Avraham Ofir Shemesh, 'The Scent of the Righteous vs. the Scent of the Wicked: Body Odor as a Social Indicator of Morality in Rabbinic Literature,' *The Review of Rabbinic Judaism*, (2020): 165–182, p. 166.

⁵⁰ Gilman, *Jewish Self-hatred*, p. 174.

Mahler's smell not only signals his Jewishness and difference, but also indicates sexual promiscuity, loose morals, and sexual degeneracy, factors which had become equated with female degeneracy.

However, it is clear that Alma's criticism of Mahler's smell is a product of antisemitic stereotyping rather than a true picture of Mahler's body. In contrast to Alma, Alfred Roller described Mahler as adhering to "strict cleanliness" and maintaining "health and good hygiene."⁵¹ But how Mahler may or may not have smelled is irrelevant, as the truth had become dwarfed by antisemitic public perception. As Peter Gay suggests, the point of Jewish caricatures and stereotypes was "not to sum up actual characteristics, but to identify a convenient target for inconvenient emotions."⁵² The same can be said for Alma's criticism of Mahler's voice, which similarly leans into gendered Jewish criticisms of the time. Often chided for its high register and "breaking" quality, the Jewish voice was quickly feminized and affiliated with degeneration and homosexuality, demonstrating an individual's "inability to speak in a masculine manner."⁵³ Alfred Roller commented on Mahler's voice by recalling its tendency to squeak and break into a higher register, and K.M. Knittel describes Mahler's impassioned voice as explicitly feminine and a further signal of his gendered Jewish difference.⁵⁴ Wagner's "Judaism in Music" had used the voice as a primary means to criticize and differentiate Jews: "The first thing that strikes our ear as quite outlandish and unpleasant in the Jew's production of voice sounds is a creaking, squeaking, buzzing snuffle ... The Jew speaks the language of a nation in whose midst he dwells from generation to generation, but he speaks it always as an alien."⁵⁵ This notion of a broken, squeaking Jewish voice also offers a clear parallel to the relationship between circumcision and castration, with physical infirmity and bodily deformity acting as a possible cause for such voicing. The prime example is the castrato, whose high voice became a mark of difference, deformity, and degeneration in the nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Mahler's supposedly Jewish voice, smell, and bodily deformity

⁵¹ Alfred Roller, *Die Bildnisse von Gustav Mahler*, (Leipzig and Vienna: E.P. Tal & Co., 1922), 17–18; in Knittel, *Seeing Mahler*, p. 32.

⁵² Peter Gay, *Freud, Jews and Other Germans: Masters and Victims in Modernist Culture* (New York, 1978), p. 20–21.

⁵³ Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender*, p. 164.

⁵⁴ Knittel, *Seeing Mahler*, p. 35.

⁵⁵ Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music*, trans. William Ashton Ellis, *Richard Wagner's Prose Works* Vol.3 (1984), p. 84.

⁵⁶ See 'Jewishness and Gender' for a discussion of the relationship between castration and circumcision.

therefore not only exemplified degrading antisemitic stereotypes but also worked to diminish his masculinity.

PURIFYING THE MALE BODY:

Accounts by those who knew him make it clear that these characterizations of Mahler's physically weak, fidgety, or feminine appearance are unfounded. A recollection from Alfred Roller in 1902 completely derails the argument of Mahler's small and inferior Jewish body, and instead promotes a view of the composer as the epitome of masculinity with the ideal male body:

I had the opportunity to study his naked body closely. It was very tidily formed and very masculine in its proportions. His shoulders were broader than one would imagine from seeing him in clothes, and perfectly symmetrical ... His chest stood out strongly with very little hair and well-defined musculature. ... I have seen a great many naked bodies of all types and can testify that at the age of forty Mahler had the perfect male torso, strong, slim, beautifully made ... The first time I saw him without clothes I could not refrain from expressing my surprise at such a fine display of muscle. Mahler laughed in amusement because he realized that I too had been misled by the general talk about his poor physical shape ... I could never set eyes on this superbly modelled, sun-tanned back without being reminded of a racehorse in peak condition.⁵⁷

Mahler's toned masculine physique would have undoubtedly been shaped by his engagement with the values of the *Körperkultur* [body culture] movement, which intended to provide an antidote to the impact of urban life on a man's body by promoting time spent in nature engaging in physical activity. The German terms *Nacktkultur* or *Freikörperkultur* refer to a network of clubs and organizations that promoted nudism and physical exercise to gain a closer connection to nature. The term *Nacktkultur* is originally thought to have been coined in 1903, but the behaviors encouraged by the movement seems to have appeared in the Austro-German context as early as the 1870s. In addition to promoting positive body image, health benefits,

⁵⁷ Alfred Roller, *Die Bildnisse von Gustav Mahler*, 154–155, In: Knittel, *Seeing Mahler*, p. 30.

and unification with nature, the movement reinforced the values of vegetarianism, social reform, and racial hygiene – the latter specifically in the context of antisemitic discourse.⁵⁸ Enthusiasm for the movement was established in large cities (Berlin provided one of the largest number of club members) due to the desires of city-dwellers to cleanse themselves of the increasing urbanization of the city and to embrace more *völkisch* and natural ways of living. Although physicality was at its center, the movement also provided a clearly gendered frame to the physical, offering men a chance to escape the increased feminization and urbanization of society and thus to become more authentically “masculine.” As Francesca Draughon writes, followers of the movement “exercised every morning, took long hikes, swam, cycled, and climbed – activities to harden, cleanse, and vitalize the body. The idealized body was male, healthy, lean, athletic, ascetic, and even asexual, as one should not contaminate oneself with the diseased body of women.”⁵⁹

These movements were closely linked to the *Männerbünde* organizations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which fostered “male bonding” in the countryside. According to Bernd Widdig, “The brotherhood [*Männerbunde*] becomes the dominating counter-concept to the family, which as a feminine stronghold prevents the youth from becoming a man and ultimately feminizes the whole culture”⁶⁰ The city of Vienna, from which Mahler escaped in the summertime, was regarded as the female counterpart to the more ‘masculine’ German cities.⁶¹ Men who had overcome the seductive charms of women were considered role models for the movement, following the examples of Christ and John the Baptist. As might be expected with such religious role models, the notion of cleansing and racial purity was also quickly infused into the body culture movements. Richard Ungewitter’s texts *Nacktheit und Moral* (1906) and *Nacktheit und Kultur* (1907) argued in particular that the communal nudity among men provided

⁵⁸ Karl Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and movement in German body culture, 1910-1935*, (University of California Press, 1997), p. 30.

⁵⁹ Draughon, ‘The Dance of Decadence,’ pp. 403–404.

⁶⁰ ‘Der Mannerbund wird zum beherrschenden Gegenkonzept zur Familie, die als Hort des Weiblichen dem Jüngling des Mann-Werdens verwehre und in einer Verweiblichung der gesamten Kultur ende.’ In: Bernd Widdig, *Männerbunde und Massen: Zur Krise männlicher Identität in der Literatur der Moderne* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1992), p. 38.

⁶¹ Draughon, ‘The Dance of Decadence,’ p. 404.

preparation for a stable married life and was also central to establishing racial purity, thus opening the way to the ideology of Aryanism and the aim of establishing pure Germanic racial and cultural superiority.⁶² A cult emerged around the Viennese journal *Die Ostara*, with members promoting “blond, heroic manliness” and a Christianity free from “feminine decadence,” which became synonymous with racial impurity.⁶³

Although never explicitly stating an interest in the movement, Mahler annually fled Vienna to compose in the Austrian countryside, escaping the increased modernization (and feminization) of the city. He was an avid cyclist and swimmer and he enjoyed long hikes in the mountains; Thomas Peattie observes that Mahler was “obsessed with walking” while Roller recalls that Mahler was an “avid walker [*leidenschaftlicher Fußgeher*], an outstanding swimmer [*vorzüglicher Schwimmer*], a powerful oarsman [*Ausdauernder Ruderer*], and an agile cyclist [*geschickter Radfahrer*].”⁶⁴ His active and healthy lifestyle, which Roller informs us resulted in a lean and masculine physique, allowed Mahler (albeit perhaps unknowingly) to follow Nordau’s advice for the degenerate Jewish man: his Jewishness could be transcended and his chances of assimilation increased by his achieving the toned and masculine physique attributed to the healthy, non-Jewish middle classes. In addition to his physical fitness, Mahler also followed the values of vegetarianism promoted by Wagner⁶⁵ and was very particular about his diet in a bid to maintain his physical health and wellbeing. Whether Mahler chose to engage actively in the all-male collective nudity promoted by the movement remains largely undocumented. However, Roller’s description of Mahler’s naked body implies that an occasion had occurred in which Mahler and Roller were naked together and thus that the values of the

⁶² Toepfer, *Empire of Ecstasy*, p. 37.

⁶³ Ibid, 38. For more information about the specific pamphlets see fn 3.

⁶⁴ Thomas Peattie, *Gustav Mahler's Symphonic Landscapes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2015), 163.

⁶⁵ ‘Ich bin seit einem Monat vollkommener Vegetarianer. Der moralische Wirkung dieser Lebensweise ist in Folge dieser freiwilligen Knechtung meines Leibes und der daraus erwachsenen Bedürfnislosigkeit eine immense. Du kannst Dir denken, wie ich davon durchdrungen bin, wenn ich eine Regeneration des Menschengeschlechtes davon erwarte.’ [‘I have been fully vegetarian for one month now. The moral impact of this lifestyle is immense, due to the voluntary subjugation of the flesh and absence of desires. You can imagine how steeped I am in this, when I am expecting it to result in the regeneration of mankind.’] Letter to Emil Freund (translation is my own), Wien, 1. Nov, 1880, in: Herta Blaukopf, ed. *Gustav Mahler Briefe: 1879-1911*, (Wien: Paul Zolansky Verlag, 1996), p. 40.

Körperkultur movement were being upheld, at least to some extent. Although Mahler was not a formal member of the movement, he was clearly sympathetic to some of the values it promoted.⁶⁶ His own form of body culture therefore enabled him to invest in his body in a way that might have helped him to establish a sense of true, pure masculinity freed from Jewish effeminacy.

Any consideration of Mahler's Jewishness and his attempt to transcend it would be incomplete without a brief discussion of his conversion to Catholicism. Particularly in the context of the *Körperkultur* movement and the aim of purifying the body from its Jewish origins, Mahler's conversion—although largely considered an act of convenience—also provides an opportunity for reflecting on his masculinity. The conversion took place in February of 1897 so that Mahler would be eligible to be considered for the position of Director at the Vienna Hofoper. Aware that he was likely to be excluded as a Jew, Mahler wrote a letter to Josef von Betsetzny, Intendant of the Hofoper, shortly after submitting his letter of application, stating, "Perhaps I should tell you that quite a while ago in pursuance of a long-standing resolution, I entered the Catholic faith."⁶⁷ It is clear that Mahler's conversion was not a result of some sudden divine intervention, but simply a means to help him acquire a prized position. As well as increasing his eligibility, Mahler's conversion offered an opportunity for establishing his freedom from Jewish effeminacy in the public eye. If, as the *Körperkultur* movement so openly posited, Christianity was central to achieving pure masculinity, conversion to Catholicism was an important step towards that goal. However, Mahler's attempt to assimilate through religious conversion may have in fact further feminized him in the eyes of the Jewish community. In abandoning the traditional religious practices of the Jewish faith, German-Jewish men gave up the foundation of masculinity and male privilege in Jewish culture.⁶⁸ Mahler's statement that he was thrice homeless therefore begins to take on even further significance, as he remains eternally homeless as

⁶⁶ This perspective is reinforced by Draughon in "The Dance of Decadence," pp.388–413.

⁶⁷ Michael Kennedy, *Mahler*, (Oxford University Press, 1974), 48.

⁶⁸ Benjamin Maria Baader, *Gender, Judaism, and Bourgeois Culture in Germany 1800-1860*, (Indiana University Press, 2006), 216.

an emasculated Jew in the eyes of both the Jewish community and the Christian majority. The crisis of Jewish masculinity, therefore, becomes an impossible problem to solve.

MAHLER AND *PARSIFAL* AS GENDERED RELIGIOUS PARABLE:

Despite this impossibility, Mahler continued to search for solutions to his racial, religious, and masculine difference. He was preoccupied with quasi-religious and philosophical notions of transcendence and salvation which permeated countless compositions. He was driven to seeking answers to existential questions; for example, writing to Alma in December 1901: “What now? What is this life of ours – and what is death? Is there a life beyond? Is everything just a deranged dream, or do life and death have a meaning? We must answer this question if we are to go on living.”⁶⁹ One of the avenues by which Mahler chose to seek answer to his eternal questions was his engagement with the Wagnerian movement and the student-run organizations and societies in Vienna that promoted Wagnerism, German literature and philosophy, and pan-German ideology.⁷⁰ William McGrath claims that the increased engagement with Wagner’s works across Vienna was in large part due to Wagner himself and the new approaches that he established in later life: “From the mid-1870s to his death in 1883 [Wagner] became increasingly involved in religious mysticism, which was paralleled by increasingly ambitious attempts to establish himself as the revered prophet of a new religion combining Schopenhauerian philosophy, musical theory, and Christian mysticism.”⁷¹ For Mahler (as for so many others), Wagner’s last opera, *Parsifal* was a particularly special work, which not only provided an allegorical tale of religious suffering and salvation but also demonstrated the importance of the symbol of chaste male Christian. Mahler first encountered the work at Bayreuth in

⁶⁹ La Grange & Weiß, *Ein Glück ohne Ruh.* ‘Die Briefe Gustav Mahlers an Alma,’ (Berlin, Siedler, 1995), 87. In and trans: Morten Solvik, ‘Mahler’s Untimely Modernism,’ J. Barham, ed, *Perspectives on Gustav Mahler* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 154.

⁷⁰ For more information, see William McGrath *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria* (Yale University Press, 1974), and William Weber, ‘Wagner, Wagnerism, and Musical Idealism,’ In: D.C. Large and W. Weber, eds, *Wagnerism in European Culture and Politics*, (London: Cornell University Press), 1984.

⁷¹ McGrath, *Dionysian Art and Populist Politics in Austria*, p. 89.

1883. After seeing it he wrote to Friedrich Löhr: “I can scarcely describe to you my present feelings. When I, incapable of speech, stepped out of the Festspielhaus, I knew that I had come to understand all that is greatest and most painful, and that I would bear it inviolate within me for the rest of my life.”⁷² He was so moved that he returned to Bayreuth to see further performances in 1889, 1891, and 1894.⁷³ Despite being a gifted Wagnerian conductor, he was never invited to perform the work at Bayreuth. However, he did perform sections of it in concert in Prague in 1886, in Leipzig in 1887, and in New York in 1910 and 1911.⁷⁴

Issues of gender and religion permeate the foundations of Wagner’s last drama, showcasing a “relentlessly masculine narrative” that provides a perfect embodiment of the chaste male hero who was the mark of pure masculinity in the late-nineteenth century.⁷⁵ The work is based Wolfram von Eschenbach’s text of the same title, which itself is modelled on Chrétien de Troyes’ stories of worship and rebirth in early mythology. In these two early texts, the wound that Amfortas suffers following sexual indiscretions with Kundry is itself directly sexual. In both texts, Amfortas’ wound does not appear in his chest (as it does in Wagner’s work) but rather in his genitals. In Chrétien de Troyes’ work the wound is identified as being “between his legs,” while in Wolfram von Eschenbach’s version it is inflicted by a poisoned lance piercing his scrotum. This wound, as James M McGlathery notes, not only causes Amfortas terrible pain but also renders him sexually impotent.⁷⁶ Linda and Michael Hutcheon argue that although Amfortas’ wound has been relocated in Wagner’s work to demonstrate a clearer parallel to Christ’s wound from a spear, the sexual

⁷² Gustav Mahler, Herta Blaukopf, *Mahler's Unknown Letters*. Ed. Herta Blaukopf, Trans. Richard Stokes, (London: Gollancz, 1986), p. 200.

⁷³ Matthews, ‘Mahler and *Parsifal*,’ p. 385.

⁷⁴ La Grange, *Mahler: A Biography*, Vol 1, (London: Gollancz, 1974), 140; Knud Martner, *Mahler's Concerts*, (New York, 2010), p. 301.

⁷⁵ Donald L. Hoffman, ‘Bearing the Grail,’ *Arthiriana*, Vol.18, No.1, (Spring 2008): 88–96, p. 89.

⁷⁶ James M McGlathery, ‘Erotic Love in *Perceval*, *Parzival*, and *Parsifal*,’ *A Companion to Wagner's Parsifal*, ed. Kinderman and Syer, (Camden House, 2005), p. 76.

origins of the injury cannot be ignored.⁷⁷ Amfortas's seduction by Kundry in Klingsor's garden shows him as weak, succumbing to the passions and the degenerate ways of women. For the entirety of the opera, he is plagued by the pain of the inflicted wound, which acts as a constant reminder of his sexual sin. Kramer views Amfortas' wound through the lens of psychoanalysis, arguing that the wound is Oedipal as it "marks the flaw that attends the transmission of spiritual and cultural authority from father to son – the road to which, like Parsifal's in the opera, is always crooked."⁷⁸ By drawing upon Freudian theories of the Ur-father (who is said to be violent and gripped by lust and desire and who consequently produces passive and sexually abstinent sons) Kramer establishes Amfortas as the Freudian Ur-father "turned inside-out," plagued by degeneracy and sin. Parsifal takes on the role of the chaste son to compensate for the father's suffering.⁷⁹

As well as being equated with women, the notion of sex, degeneracy and inferior masculinity in *Parsifal* quickly becomes coupled with Jewishness, with Klingsor and Kundry the prime examples. The question of whether Wagner's characters are simply excluded others or intentional representations of Jewish stereotypes is an often-debated subject in Wagner scholarship. In the 1880s Paul Lindau and Max Kalbeck labelled the work as antisemitic and the Viennese conductor Anton Siedel praised its "Aryan-blood symbolism."⁸⁰ However, as HKT Yan argues, Wagner's work is inherently exclusionary rather than openly

⁷⁷ L and M The Hutcheons also claim that a nineteenth-century audience would have viewed Amfortas' wound as the result of a syphilitic infection: a wound that won't heal, acquired through sexual contact, with increased pain at night, all primary symptoms of the disease. L and M Hutcheon, 'Syphilis, Sin, and the Social Order: Richard Wagner's "Parsifal"', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol.7, No.3, (Nov. 1995): 261–275, pp. 261–265.

⁷⁸ Lawrence Kramer, 'The Talking Wound and the Foolish Question: Symbolisation in *Parsifal*,' *The Opera Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.2: 208–229, p. 215. As Kramer notes, the situation is further complicated by Amfortas's relationship to his own father, Titirel.

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 215.

⁸⁰ Glenn Stanley, 'Parsifal: Redemption and Kunstreligion,' in: *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. T.S. Grey, (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 169.

antisemitic. For Yan, the opposition between enlightened Christians and unidentified, excluded others indirectly implies Jewishness rather than explicitly stating it.⁸¹

Klingsor's Jewish exclusion is reinforced by its gendered form. Following an unknown sin, Klingsor has been plagued by feelings of lust and desire which he is incapable of controlling. Because of these urges, he is rejected by the Knights of the Holy Grail and cast out from their pure, chaste, Christian community. Seeking to control his lustful urges, he castrates himself, which only further isolates him from the Grail community. Together with Kundry, he uses his power to corrupt the purity of the Grail Community and exploits the seductive passions of Kundry and the Flower Maidens to trap the Knights and lure them from their chaste Christian ways. As a result, Amfortas commands that no knights are to leave the Grail domain, for fear of being made vulnerable and degraded by the passions, as Amfortas was himself. Klingsor becomes a corrupting influence, a lustful and degenerate character who will forever remain excluded from the community of the Grail Knights. His castration further symbolizes his Jewishness by acting as a kind of circumcision, aligning him with both Jewish religious practices and the putative feminization of the male Jew through circumcision. As Wagner himself said, "The Jew has stood outside the pale of any such [Christian] community."⁸² Klingsor's Jewishness is therefore implied not only by his exclusion but also by his castration (ergo, his femininity) and his conformity to stereotypes of the Jew as lustful, corrupting, and degenerate.

Kundry's implied Jewishness is first signaled by her sin of laughing at Christ's suffering on the cross. Her actions mirror that of Ahasuerus, the wandering Jew, who was—like Kundry—cursed to roam the earth in search of redemption.⁸³ Benjamin Binder argues further that Kundry's Jewishness is established by her affiliation with the core themes of late-nineteenth century antisemitic discourse:

⁸¹ HKT Yan, 'The Jewish Question Revisited: Anti-Semitism and 'Race' in Wagner's *Parsifal*,' *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (2012): 343–363.

⁸² Wagner, *Judaism in Music*, p. 84.

⁸³ Benjamin Binder, 'Kundry and the Jewish Voice: Anti-Semitism and Musical Transcendence in Wagner's *Parsifal*,' *Current Musicology*, No.87, (Spring 2009): 47-131, p. 59.

Kundry ... demonstrates through her actions many of the features associated with Jews in anti-Semitic writings of the period, including those of Wagner. She is a sexual predator who threatens to corrupt the chaste holiness (and pure blood) of the Grail knights, and yet her very femininity (especially in association with Klingsor's *effeminacy*) also codes her as a Jew, in contrast to the noble, stoic masculinity that surrounds her.⁸⁴

From Binder's perspective, Kundry's femininity, hysteria, degeneracy, sexual desires, and even her "oriental overtones" provide clear parallels to the stereotyping of Jews in the late nineteenth century. Her sexuality and corrupting femininity are overt; she is an erotic and sexual force exploited by Klingsor to lure men to their demise. The classic *femme fatale* trope is played out in her attempted use of sexual temptation to destroy the men of the grail, Parsifal in particular. Robert Gutman calls her a "vampire who draws her nourishment from a destructive kind of sexual intercourse" and "a demonic prostitute, a true Art Nouveau *femme fatale*."⁸⁵ William Kinderman suggests that Kundry's difference and her seduction are also characterized musically, with the dense chromaticism of the *Zaubermotiv* that appears in association with both Klingsor and Kundry, and specifically at the moment of Kundry's kiss, which in this context is a symbol of her seductive powers. He claims that the composer himself said of the motif that "[it marks] a moment of demonic possession ... whereby the tragic motive of love's yearning acts as a snake-like poison."⁸⁶ The demonic hysteria is also asserted by Slavoj Žižek, who argues for a Lacanian approach in which "woman is a symptom of man." That is, woman exists only in the male gaze, which is why when Parsifal rejects Kundry's advances she is left mute and eventually dies.⁸⁷ However, Kramer argues that Parsifal derives neither pleasure nor disgust at the moment of Kundry's kiss. Instead, he claims, it is a revelatory moment in which Parsifal becomes aware of the pain of Amfortas' wound. In the moments directly following this seduction he does not react to Kundry but rather cries out, "Amfortas! The wound!

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 59.

⁸⁵ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind and His Music* (1968; rpt. New York, 1990), p. 43.

⁸⁶ William Kinderman, *Wagner's Parsifal*, (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 229.

⁸⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), p. 187.

The wound!”⁸⁸ Yet Parsifal’s reaction to Kundry is perhaps less important than what Kundry herself symbolizes. She is a projection of the anxieties of the nineteenth-century man, a wild and degenerate woman who teaches the male Wagnerian a lesson in the perils of affiliating oneself with the corrupt sexual ways of women.

It seems, too, that Kundry’s feminine hysteria and sexuality was not lost on the nineteenth-century audience. Following the premiere, Hermann Kretzschmar wrote of the work: “Wagner has given Kundry a series of ‘the most horrible screams’ and ‘dreadful laughs,’ whose all-too faithful execution we here note with some horror. It was as if one was in an operating theatre. The brutal realism of this scene did not just cause real physical suffering to the ladies, but to strong gentlemen too.”⁸⁹ Kretzschmar’s observation that even “strong gentlemen” were impacted by Kundry’s madness reinforces her power as a corrupting woman, as she not only attempts to upend the lives of men in the opera itself, but also in those who simply observe her. Her power extends beyond the plot and into the insecurities of the nineteenth-century man, threatening his strength and thus, his masculinity.

Similarly, another review complained that the work shows “a subtle pseudo-Christianity that uses holy figures and actions for the purposes of a masquerade. Its sensual gaudiness and intoxicating mysticism offer a religiosity that is calculated to make dizzy both hysterical ladies and smug men of the world.”⁹⁰ Again, Kundry’s sensuality and hysteria infiltrates the minds of her audience, and one can begin to wonder to what extent Mahler would have been impacted by Kundry’s character. His intimate knowledge of the plot, themes, and music of the opera—having not only attended multiple performances and conducted sections of it, but also having trained singers for their roles in the work in Bayreuth—he would have no doubt understood Kundry’s symbolism in the context of late-nineteenth century representations of Jews and gender. *Parsifal*, then, can function as much more than a religious allegory. It can be read as a symbolic account of the crushing power of men over women, equating those who live on the fringes of society, those

⁸⁸ Kramer, ‘The Talking Wound and the Foolish Question,’ p. 208.

⁸⁹ Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner’s Women*, trans. Chris Walton, (Boydell Press, 2011), p. 189.

⁹⁰ Rieger, *Richard Wagner’s Women*, 189. Ref. Wagner, Nike, ed., *Über Wagner: Von Musikern, Dichtern und Liebhabern. Eine Anthologie*, (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1995) 68; Grossmann- Vendrey, *Documentation*, vol. 2, (1977): 143f., p. 169.

considered to be Jewish, with the embodiment of lust, sex, and sin, and thus with the degeneracy of women. For Eva Rieger, “Parsifal is a messianic hero, the absolute opposite to Kundry. Wagner’s dramaturgy is driven by his tendency to view the world as a product of dualist conflicts, Jew versus Christian, good versus bad, spirituality versus sexuality, and woman versus man.”⁹¹ *Parsifal* reminds the viewer that if you are Jewish and (therefore) unable to resist your sexual urges, you will never achieve pure masculinity or experience assimilation or Christian community. The opera further informs us that women are naturally corrupting and sex-driven, and that it is the responsibility of men to reject their advances and demonstrate control and restraint. The work speaks to Mahler: there is only one way to become one of us. Mahler’s lifelong obsession with *Parsifal* therefore becomes a space for further enquiry. Not only a source of possible answers to Mahler’s terrible problems of life, the opera also provides a set of values and rules that a man can follow to achieve his longed-for salvation. The most pertinent of these rules are the practice of celibacy, the rejection of female advances, and the assertion of control over the urges of women.

MALE JEWISH SEXUALITY AND FEARING THE NEW WOMAN:

Mahler’s replication of the values of *Parsifal* and the model nineteenth-century man very clearly emerged in his marriage to Alma. In addition to the issues of impotence discussed at the opening of this article, Alma asserts that Mahler became celibate and disengaged from any physical forms of intimacy with her. As Alma recalled, “I loved the mind of Mahler [but] his body remained for me a shadow ... He was celibate and was afraid of women. His fear of ‘abasing himself’ was unbounded and he fled from life... which is to say, from women.”⁹² Alma’s testimony has often been challenged, with scholars such as La Grange and Beaumont labelling her as an unreliable source. It has been claimed that Alma may have exaggerated her husband’s sexual abstinence in order to justify her extramarital affair with Walter Gropius. Nancy Newman’s study reframing Alma through the lens of the #MeToo movement has sought to provide

⁹¹ Eva Rieger, ‘Kundry’s Kiss and the Fear of Female Desire: a Gender Perspective,’ *The Wagner Journal*, Vol.11, No.2, (2017): 34–43, p. 39.

⁹² Mahler-Werfel, *Mein Leben*, p. 40.

a counterweight to the misogynistic and dismissive approach to Alma's testimonies in Mahler scholarship.⁹³ Criticism of Alma extends beyond simply a dismissal of her recollections and also places the blame on her for Mahler's mental and physical illnesses, his lack of interest in sex, and his early death.

Despite Alma's recollection that she was overlooked and ignored for years by her husband, resulting in her affair, La Grange argues that her sexual appetite was "one of the various means by which she exercised power over the men she set out to conquer ... Alma, after all, cannot be regarded as a 'liberated' woman."⁹⁴ Describing her as jealous, frivolous, exacting, and flirtatious, La Grange and Beaumont both established an image of Alma as an untrustworthy and corrupting influence, framing her as the villain in Mahler's story. As Newman writes, "La Grange set out to discredit her ... his strategy was his undermining of the validity of Alma's perceptions, not just of Gustav and his music, but of herself."⁹⁵ Despite the blatant distrust of Alma's recollections in the scholarship, her reflections on Mahler's sexual withdrawal are corroborated by Freud following his psychotherapeutic session with the composer.⁹⁶ Rather than speak of celibacy per se, Freud described a withdrawal of Mahler's libido which is thought to have begun in 1905.⁹⁷ It seems more than coincidental that Mahler's withdrawal coincides with the increased popularity of Weininger's text and its promotion of sexual abstinence as a means to become purely masculine, and in particular and freed from Jewish effeminacy. This view was reinforced even outside of

⁹³ Nancy Newman, '#AlmaToo: The Art of Being Believed,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol.75, No.1, (2022): 39–79.

⁹⁴ Henry-Louis de La Grange, *Gustav Mahler Volume 4: A New Life Cut Short (1907–1911)*, (Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 851.

⁹⁵ Newman, '#AlmaToo,' p. 64.

⁹⁶ Following concerns about his relationship with his wife, in 1910 Mahler sought Freud's counsel. After three cancelled appointments (on Mahler's part), he met with Freud in Leyden, Holland in August 1910. Freud's biographer Ernest Jones recalls that Mahler and Freud 'spent four hours strolling through the town and conducting a sort of analysis.' See Ernest Jones, *Sigmund Freud: Life and Work, Vol. II*, (London, 1955), pp. 88–9.

⁹⁷ Stuart Feder, *Gustav Mahler: A life in crisis*, (Yale University Press, 2004), p. 233; Monahan, "I have tried to capture you...," p. 164, f.111.

the antisemitic discourse, as male sexual boundaries in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth century became increasingly rigid.

As Weininger, *Parsifal*, and the *Körperkultur* movement so clearly demonstrated, the model man was to be governed by reason and should reinforce these rigid boundaries. Kramer reminds us of the work of René Girard, for whom “social order traditionally depends on a system of differences governing role and status, [so] that when these differences break down the community is threatened by an eruption of indiscriminate violence.”⁹⁸ To adhere to clear gender boundaries, the ideal man was to be in control, exert restraint and willpower, and delay sexual gratification. This model acts as a counterweight to its eighteenth-century predecessor, which upheld the notion that sex and procreation resulting in as many children as possible was the ultimate display of virile masculinity. In contrast, the nineteenth-century man showcased his virility through restraint and a more reasonable (smaller) number of offspring.⁹⁹ The rigid boundaries that were formed around sexual intimacy also became a means to control female intimacy, sex, and pleasure. As Angus McLaren observes, in the nineteenth century a man’s primary role was to monitor and control women “who lacking masculine resolve were even more at risk of succumbing to the lure of the passions.”¹⁰⁰

Sexually, the dynamic of the active male and the passive female was established, with marriage manuals of the time arguing that, “as a general rule, a modest woman seldom desires any sexual gratification for herself. She submits to her husband, but only to please him.”¹⁰¹ Mahler’s celibacy therefore functions as a valuable tool for understanding the interrelationships of gender dynamics, race, and religion at the *fin-de-siècle*. For Weininger, Jews were like women in that they were lustful and therefore degenerate. Like women, the Jewish male has a strong desire for sex and is incapable of controlling his urges; he is “more

⁹⁸ Lawrence Kramer, ‘Fin-de-Siècle Fantasies: *Elektra* and the Culture of Supremacism,’ *Opera and Modern Culture*, (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 200–201.

⁹⁹ McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History*, p. 107.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 102.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p. 104.

lecherous, more lustful, than the Aryan man.”¹⁰² Weininger described women as governed by sex and desire; they want “as much sexual intercourse as possible, no matter by whom, where, and when.”¹⁰³ Rather than simply being obsessed with sex and their own sexuality, women for Weininger *are* sexuality. As such they are dangerous; their sexuality is even “related to murder” and a threat to the “true man’s very existence.”¹⁰⁴ Accordingly Weininger claims that chastity and celibacy constitute an “exclusively *male* ideal”¹⁰⁵ that may be achieved only by those who embody pure masculinity and who therefore cannot be Jewish. If measured by these standards, Mahler’s celibacy can be understood as an opportunity for him to transcend his inherent Jewish femininity and establish a sense of masculine control inside his marriage.

Mahler’s celibacy could have also emerged as a response to wider issues of sexual impotence and neurasthenia. From the middle of the nineteenth century, neurasthenia (weakness of the nerves) was diagnosed in men with increasing frequency, with the neurasthenic male described as suffering from weakness, loss of energy, and impotence.¹⁰⁶ By the end of the century, the overly sexual and demanding woman would be labelled as degenerate and would be blamed for her partner’s impotence. Female degeneracy and sexual tendencies were intimately linked, with many sexually interested women being treated medically for nervous disorders, hysteria, sickness, and perversions. The prime example of this degenerate woman was the prostitute, who Sander Gilman states was “the essential sexualized female in the perception of the nineteenth century ... the embodiment of sexuality and all that is associated with sexuality, disease,

¹⁰² Otto Weininger, *Sex and Character: An Investigation of Fundamental Principles*, trans. Ladislaus Löb, ed. Daniel Steuer with Laura Marcus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), p. 281.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 234.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 269.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 236.

¹⁰⁶ Marie-Luise Angerer, ‘The Discourse on Female Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Austria,’ *Austrian Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed. David F. Good, Mary Jo Jones, and Mary J Mayes, (Berghahn Books, 1996), p. 190.

as well as passion.¹⁰⁷ The arguments around the female body, female sexuality, and female degeneracy were developed as a reaction to masculine needs and insecurities – the woman became a projection of male anxieties.¹⁰⁸ As Freud said, “Perhaps this dread is based on the fact that woman is different from man, forever incomprehensible and mysterious, strange and therefore apparently hostile. The man is afraid of being weakened by the woman, infected with her femininity.”¹⁰⁹ Doctors argued that a woman’s heightened sexual appetite could overwhelm and threaten a man, resulting in this same crisis of masculinity and unstable sexual vitality.¹¹⁰ This view might explain why Mahler’s sexual restraint emerged only after his marriage to Alma and had not impacted his previous sexual encounters. Mahler’s sexual withdrawal could have been a response to the emerging discourse on women, female sexuality, and threatened masculinity after the turn of the century.

This perspective is substantiated when we consider that, prior to his marriage to Alma, Mahler had a rather more active sex life. In 1917, Mahler’s friend and former lover, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, wrote a letter detailing Mahler’s relationship with various women such as Marion von Weber, Anna von Mildenburg, Selma Kurz, and Bauer-Lechner herself.¹¹¹ In addition to detailing his “love of women,” Bauer-Lechner describes her own sexual experience with the composer in the attic of the house in Berchtesgaden as a “Scheherazade” in which their “psyche and physis melted into each other.”¹¹² Bauer-Lechner’s letter provides a depiction of Mahler as a passionate and loving partner and lover of women since approximately

¹⁰⁷ Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, (Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 94.

¹⁰⁸ Angerer, ‘The Discourse on Female Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Austria,’ p. 180.

¹⁰⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Taboo of Virginity,’ in *Standard Edition*, Vol. 11, ed. J. Strachey and A. Freud, (London, 1989), p. 218.

¹¹⁰ McLaren, *Impotence: A cultural history*, p. 109.

¹¹¹ Solvik and Hefling, ‘Natalie Bauer-Lechner on Mahler and Women: A Newly Discovered Document,’ p. 15.

¹¹² *Ibid*, p. 34.

1875.¹¹³ If Mahler had always maintained a distanced physical relationship with women, then perhaps it would be easier to lay claim to a simple sexual ambivalence or low sexual appetite. However, his turn towards chaste masculinity appears only after the turn of the twentieth century, the rise of the New Woman, and increased worry about the sexually aroused woman as a threat to masculinity. As Kramer observes, Weininger's text and its associated cultural impact promoted the idea that:

for humanity to succeed, men – particularly 'Aryan' men, who had not suffered a racial degeneracy that made the task impossible – must achieve the individualistic supremacy first revealed by Emmanuel Kant. In order to do this, they must both rid themselves of the femininity within them and reject their sexual desires for the women around them.¹¹⁴

When viewed with an understanding of the values of the *Körperkultur* movement and the increase in antisemitic discourse that feminized male Jews in the early stages of the twentieth century, Mahler's sexual withdrawal becomes a plea to transcend his innate Jewish femininity and establish the ultimate form of restraint and, consequently, the ultimate form of masculinity. Perhaps it even becomes possible to view Mahler and Alma as mirror images of Parsifal and Kundry: the wild seductress who succumbs to the lures of the passions and the pure chaste male who rejects her advances in order to achieve transcendence, community, and enlightenment. In Mahler's lifelong search for answers to the great questions of life, celibacy and chaste masculinity become a further attempt to grapple with his own inner religious and philosophical turmoil.

Contrary to the chaste ideal male, the New Woman of the early twentieth century was built with fresh values in mind. Described as educated, sexually independent, and even as a "woman warrior," the New Woman threatened the patriarchal construction of the nineteenth-century world and began to explore

¹¹³ Bauer-Lechner documented Mahler's first love: the daughter of the local postmaster of Iglau, with whom he developed a relationship during his vacations at home from the Vienna Conservatory, which he attended from 1875 to 1878.

¹¹⁴ Kramer, *Fin-de-Siècle Fantasies*, p. 190.

opportunities beyond the domestic.¹¹⁵ New information concerning female sexuality emerged; women were no longer expected to be passive, passionless, or sexually anaesthetized, and instead the capacity for female pleasure, heightened physical arousal, (multiple) orgasms, and the biological harmfulness of celibacy emerged into the public eye.¹¹⁶ Threatened by the possibility of a change in power, men in Vienna began to see “nationalistic, democratic, women’s rights, and modern artistic movements as attacks on their psychic inner space and their concrete public sphere.”¹¹⁷ Women’s desire for independence and autonomy in society was diagnosed by doctors as a nervous disorder or hysteria. Male doctors and scientists argued that increased ambition would lead to issues such as physical illnesses, sterility, and even racial degeneration.¹¹⁸ In response to an increased understanding of a woman’s capacity for sexual appetite and in fear of her sexual (and orgasmic) superiority, the Viennese surgeon and gynecologist Gustav Braun removed the vulvas and clitorises of young girls to prevent heightened sexual arousal and to prohibit masturbation.¹¹⁹

In musical Vienna, this heightened (and threatening) female sexuality emerged in the form of the Viennese Waltz, which was considered vulgar due to the dance’s physical closeness and its unleashing of female sensuality. For the Viennese critic Max Graf, the Viennese waltz was “a direct expression of sensuality.” Graf claims that the public was at first “highly shocked at the eroticism of this dance,”¹²⁰ which Gustave Flaubert described as having a decidedly threatening undertone due to its inherent expression of female sexuality.¹²¹ Francesca Draughon goes as far as to suggest that the sensuality of the waltz is present in its musical and rhythmic form, as the “waltz’s characteristic rhythmic gestures of an exaggerated accent on the first beat and the slight shift of accent on the second beat could be understood as a metaphor for a

¹¹⁵ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, pp. 38–39.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Angerer, ‘The Discourse on Female Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Austria,’ p. 190.

¹¹⁸ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 39.

¹¹⁹ Angerer, ‘The Discourse on Female Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Austria,’ p. 189.

¹²⁰ Max Graf, *Legend of a Musical City*, p. 49.

¹²¹ Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 126. See Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace: The Waltz, Sex, Steps and Sound*, pp. 8–9.

psychological and physiological increase of suspense and a heightened sensation of pleasure.”¹²² The dance was also argued to invert gender roles, leaving the men in a feminized position due to being seduced and intoxicated by their female partner. Men became prey rather than predator.¹²³

If there is one woman who encapsulates the seductive and sexually liberated New Woman, it is Alma Mahler. Her diary entries prior to meeting Mahler, and even afterwards, give the details of various love interests and possible affairs with well-known figures including Gustav Klimt and Alexander Zemlinsky.¹²⁴ Alma was one of the most beautiful, desirable, and seductive women in Vienna, but also one of the most independent. A gifted composer and draughtswoman, intelligent and critical thinker, and well-connected socialite, she functions as the epitome of the new, liberated, intellectual, and autonomous woman who threatened men such as Mahler. Mahler’s deeply nineteenth-century belief in dominant, restrained masculinity and submissive, obedient femininity manifested itself through both the sexual and the social for Alma. As Elizabeth Keathley notes, “Gustav maintained nineteenth-century ideals about the role of married women primarily as helpmates and sites of refuge for their husbands, with no intrinsic right to develop an independent career or personality.”¹²⁵

The most illuminating example of this attitude is found in the famous letter written December 19 1901, in which Mahler asked Alma to give up her aspirations as a composer and devote herself completely to him:

If, at a time when you should be attending to household duties or fetching me something I urgently needed... if at such a moment you were befallen by ‘inspiration; what then? ... You must surrender yourself to me unconditionally, make every detail of your future life completely dependent on my needs, [and] in return you must wish for nothing except my love! ... One thing is certain: if we are to be happy

¹²² F. Draughon, ‘The Dance of Decadence,’ p. 397.

¹²³ F. Draughon, ‘The Dance of Decadence,’ 398, and Yaraman, *Revolving Embrace: The Waltz, Sex, Steps and Sound*, *evolving Embrace: the Waltz as Sex, Steps, and Sound*, pp. 8–9.

¹²⁴ Mahler-Werfel, Beaumont, *Alma Mahler-Werfel: Diaries, 1898-1902*.

¹²⁵ E. Keathley and M. L. McCoy, ‘Introduction: A Music Friendship,’ *Schoenberg's Correspondence With Alma Mahler*, (Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 3.

together, you will have to be ‘as I need you’ – not my colleague, but my wife! If you were to abandon your music to take possession of mine, and also to be mine: would this sign off the end of life as you know it? ... From now on you have only one profession: to make me happy! ... The role of the ‘composer,’ the ‘bread-winner,’ is mine; yours is that of the loving partner, the sympathetic comrade.¹²⁶

This controlling behavior has become well-known in Mahler scholarship. Even now, Mahler continues to dominate and control the narrative, with scholarship disregarding Alma’s testimony and framing Mahler as the victim in their marriage. Mahler’s letter clearly demonstrates a desire for rigid and restrictive gender boundaries that give the illusion of control and, consequently, secure masculinity. However, the letter also acts as a privileged space for reflecting on Mahler’s effort to free himself from Jewish effeminacy. As Elaine Showalter tells us:

In periods of cultural insecurity, when there are fears of regression and degeneration, the longing for strict border controls around the definition of gender, as well as race, class, and nationality, becomes especially intense. If the different races can be kept in their place ... if men and women can be fixed in their separate spheres, many hope, apocalypse can be prevented and we can preserve a comforting sense of identity and permanence in the face of that relentless specter of millennial change.¹²⁷

If female independence and sexuality posed a threat to masculinity, Alma was a threat to Mahler’s. He adored her, but only a version of her that conformed to his ideals and posed no threat to his identity as man, as Jew, as husband, as composer.

CONCLUSION:

¹²⁶ December 19, *Gustav Mahler: Letters to His Wife*. Ed. Henry-Louis de La Grange, Günther Weiss, Knud Martner, Rev. and trans. Antony Beaumont (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 78–84.

¹²⁷ Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, p. 4.

A discussion of Mahler's relationship with Alma brings us back full circle to the sexual anecdote quoted at the beginning of this article. Commonly known but frequently overlooked, the opening story of Mahler's impotence opens up a formerly closed world of investigation. It functions as a symbol for a much larger narrative at play beneath the surface of this marriage, this composer, and his understanding of the ever-changing gender dynamics at the *fin-de-siècle*. A fleeting moment of sexual impotence becomes a symbol for insecure or inferior Jewish masculinity; antisemitic criticism of Mahler's conducting style becomes a tool for effeminizing and diminishing his masculinity; engagement with the values of the *Körperkultur* movement becomes a desperate attempt to reclaim masculinity through refining the body and purifying it of degeneracy by practicing celibacy; and Wagner's *Parsifal* provides the devout Wagnerian with a model for chaste Christian masculinity as a means to achieve transcendence. Sex, gender, masculinity, Jewishness, all come together in Mahler.

This article has sought to look beyond the dualisms of current scholarship and to explore the interconnected world of Mahler's crisis of Jewish masculinity, arguing that an understanding of Mahler's Jewishness is incomplete without a consideration of masculinity, and that an understanding of Mahler's masculinity is incomplete without a consideration of his Jewishness. However, many stones still remain unturned. In future, we can look beyond the biographical and consider more deeply the musical, constructing hermeneutic readings of Mahler's gendered Jewishness and exploring the issues of musical climax and representations (or lack thereof) of the erotic. We can examine more closely and critically Mahler's relationship with women prior to Alma or interrogate his psychotherapeutic counselling with Freud through a gendered Jewish lens. We must also look beyond Mahler and turn once more to Alma Mahler-Werfel. As well as being a gifted composer, Alma was a skilled pianist, writer, entrepreneur, and pioneer of the arts. Yet despite her proficiency and impact on the musical cultures of Austria, Germany, and the United States, scholarship has chosen to focus on her romantic relationships, framing her as a muse or *femme fatale*. In my forthcoming work I rewrite the story of Alma, reconceptualizing her not as an appendage to the period's more famous men, but rather as a crucial compositional, professional, and social figure. This article therefore marks just the beginning, opening up new realms of possibility for the examination of Jewishness, gender and sexuality in Mahler's world, and the problem of finding a place within it.

Abstract

The *fin-de-siècle* was a transformative period for gender identity in Austro-Germany. As women gained more social and sexual independence, many men began to suffer a crisis of masculinity. Gustav Mahler was no exception. Issues of gender identity, sex, and masculinity are woven into the composer's biography. Mahler's relationship with masculinity is further complicated when contextualized within his Jewish heritage. Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character* of 1903 chided Jewish men for their inherent femininity and added a new, gendered dimension to antisemitic criticism. Attempting to escape this presumed Jewish effeminacy, Mahler became celibate and adopted a lifestyle that mirrored the values of the *Körperkultur* movement which promoted pure, Christian masculinity to counter the rise of the new, sexually liberated Viennese woman. Musically, Mahler looked to works such as Wagner's *Parsifal*, which acted as a gendered religious parable for the triumph of chaste masculinity over the inherent corruption and degeneracy of women. Gustav Mahler therefore becomes a privileged space for the examination of gendered Jewishness in the rapidly changing landscape of *fin-de-Siècle* Vienna.

Keywords: Gustav Mahler, Masculinity, Gender Studies, Jewish Studies, *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.