



## Alma & Gustav Mahler: Lieder

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BBC Music Magazine (David Nice - 2003.03.01)

Was Alma Mahler the victim, as this booklet note would have it, “of a deeply rooted sexism in cultural life and musical research” or simply a composer of modest means? The truth lies somewhere in between. Certainly no wife should be compelled, as Alma was by Gustav just before their wedding, to sacrifice her creative gift on the matrimonial altar, and we would be the poorer if all her songs had been destroyed (even so, only 16 out of possibly hundreds have survived).

The selection chosen by Sabine Ritterbusch and her pioneering pianist Heidi Kommerell is anything but conventional. Instead, sprawling turn-of-the-century purple poetry meets harmonic meanderings - embarrassing in “Kennst du meine Nächte?”, where the anonymous poet is very likely Alma herself - and a reluctance to repeat that verges on the tricky. After that, her husband’s gift to be simple, at least on the surface, comes as healing balm.

Ritterbusch may not have the peaches-and-cream tone for the more voluptuous numbers, though the lyric soprano temporarily hints at a dramatic, Wagner-Wesendonk vein in “Lobesgesang”. Elsewhere her delivery is engagingly fresh and she scales down to a haunting sliver of sound for Alma’s more elliptical songs and Gustav’s greater mysteries. Sadly, it doesn’t quite come off for his two best known Rückert settings, but it serves her well up to that point.