

# *"He had a singular voice"*

James Conlon

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In an age of show business, popular art, and the commercialisation of classical art, many serious artists' voices are lost in a sea of noise. Exactly a century ago, on the eve of the First World War and the disintegration of the European world order, it was very different. High art still enjoyed an exalted status, and although artists still competed with each other, it was with the seriousness characteristic of its time.

Alexander Zemlinsky was born into that environment, lived and developed in it, but he spent the last part of his life exiled from it. He wrote his music, practiced his multidimensional art, and lived his life. The fact that his music met with less public success than that of others rests as much with his personality as with the confused and turbulent times. He was ignored after the Second World War because of the massive destruction perpetrated by the Third Reich.

I recount my experiences with Zemlinsky's music, not in the spirit of autobiography, but to offer some insight into the phenomenon of forgotten music. My knowledge of the composer's music started at zero, like the - majority of musicians and music lovers. I had spent my entire student years and approximately the first two decades of my professional life knowing only his name and, initially, having a vague notion of his proximity to Mahler and later to Schönberg. Never having heard any of his music, he meant no more than any other unknown figure from the past. Now, as I look back, it is a part of the tragedy of this lost music that, even I, as a practicing musician, who had spent every day since the age of eleven learning the most diverse music, from Bach to contemporary, had never heard his music nor even met a person who suggested studying it. Mine is a common experience amongst both musicians and the listening public.

Toward the late eighties and early nineties, I heard Zemlinsky's name more often, especially in Germany. I noted the name, but nothing more.

And then, by a lucky accident, after a performance at the Cologne Opera I switched on my car radio while driving home. I was so struck by the beauty and opulence of what I heard that I was afraid to turn it off for fear of not learning what the piece was; its loss would have haunted me like the lost chord. The announcement was to impact the next decades of my professional

life: *Die Seejungfrau* by Alexander Zemlinsky!

So, I thought, that is Zemlinsky. I began poring over his scores, mesmerised, fascinated. When the recording label EMI asked me what I might want to record, *Die Seejungfrau* was my first suggestion. The *Sinfonietta* was next: the length was perfect and the balance between an early and a late work ideal. I then focused on *Der Zwerg*.

Three live performances and two “patch” sessions later, the CD was ready. It was released and very well received. EMI then decided to record the entire output of orchestral works and as many operas as possible. At the end of my thirteen-year tenure in Cologne, all of the orchestral works (including lieder and choral music) were done, as well as three of the eight operas. What happened to me, delving deeply into Zemlinsky’s music, could happen to anyone. His music so permeated me that I needed to hear more, the way I did with Mozart, Mahler and Wagner. It fulfilled at least two of the most important elements of what, in my mind, constitutes any classical art: it had transcended its time, and its acquaintance bred a desire to hear it again.

For the musician, difficult pieces present an interesting challenge. Mastering them provides great satisfaction and then raises an important question. Is the piece still interesting in such a way that one thinks, “Now I really begin?” Or is deciphering the mechanism and structure the end of the process? The answer is a matter of personal preference. For me, Zemlinsky’s music deserved more than occasional performances, it deserved regular ones.

This last point is important. Classical musical institutions that depend on selling concert tickets with well-known music consistently resist unknown music. Zemlinsky, like others, fell victim to the marketplace and clichés of our time: “If you haven’t heard of it, it can’t be good” (or, worse) “There are no lost masterpieces.”, etc.

Nonsense. Although it is an axiom of our market-oriented society to assume that the best product will always rise to the top, it simply does not apply to art. I invite anyone who thinks that there are no lost masterpieces to meditate on the ravages of war: culture and humanity destroyed together. Would they propose, for example, that the Pre-Columbian art that we happen to know is better than that of which we are deprived? There are no lost masterpieces?

Unplayed music is the equivalent of lost art. That a manuscript exists, or a score is published, is irrelevant if the music is not heard. Music lives in performance and grows with repeated hearings. Zemlinsky was a significant figure in his time, equally adept as a composer, conductor, pianist and teacher.

He struggled for recognition as a composer. He did not always get it, and his reticence, or indifference to self-promotion, contributed to his difficulties. But throughout history the “struggling artist” has been the norm rather than the exception. The intrinsic value of the music should be our only criterion for judgment, and this requires its acquaintance through performance.

*“Zemlinsky passionately loved the human voice.”*

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Why did Zemlinsky’s music meet resistance? Reductionism and categorisation played a powerful role in the twentieth century, and his music was hard to categorise. He had a singular voice, to which he remained obstinately faithful. Too modern for conservatives, too resistant to the avant-garde, he did not fit into convenient categories. No artist or work of art is obliged to conform; the only requirement is to be consistent with its essence. If that is confusing to others, so be it. Judging a category of works, or judging a work by its category, is to do a fundamental injustice.

Zemlinsky passionately loved the human voice and the marriage of word and music. His works reflect this. When one counts the lieder, the operas, the choral works, the orchestral song cycles, one sees that apart from the string quartets (which are among his greatest works), little remains. He paid a price. His music could not be used as a vehicle for success. He wrote no piano literature, no concerti, and few pieces for orchestra without singers. The *Lyrische Symphonie*, his masterpiece, requires two great soloists, which might have discouraged some conductors from performing it. His publishers urged him to produce a work for orchestra alone so that, in their words, “conductors too vain to share the stage with others might champion him.” The resulting *Sinfonietta*, the only work performed and broadcast in America during his lifetime, was performed by Dimitri Mitropoulos and the New York Philharmonic in Carnegie Hall. By then, unfortunately, the composer was too ill to attend the performance.

Certain great twentieth-century composers were virtually unknown except for one or two pieces. Sibelius was, for many, the composer of *Finlandia*. His

name and music travelled the world with the violinists who played his concerto. More than half the century had passed before his prolific output was universally recognised. Had Zemlinsky written a concerto, his story might have been different. Had he written more symphonies or orchestral pieces, it might have been different. Had he had a better business sense, or talent for self-promotion, it might have been different.

One thing is sure; the Nazi regime's suppression of Jewish composers finished him. The post-war years, for a variety of reasons, did not revive his music.

For musicians and musicologists, the complexity of Zemlinsky's music, its technical structure and motivic development, are worthy of study. Like his Viennese contemporaries Schönberg, Berg, Schreker and, in their different ways, Mahler and Strauss, he threaded the needle of the Brahms/Wagner polemics with his own synthesis. The compositional discipline of Brahms and the harmonic, theatrical and dramatic aspects of Wagner's genius were in no way lost on him. Schönberg himself, towards the end of his life, stated that Zemlinsky understood musical theatre better than anyone else in the twentieth century.

I admire and love the richness of his music, as I do his honesty and courage in refusing to conform. He was avant-garde at the time it was consistent with his nature. But when the avant-garde turned one way, he went another. It is not that he couldn't continue in the same direction as Schönberg (he certainly had the compositional mastery to do so); he would not. He was to pay for his convictions, both in his lifetime and, above all, in the post-war period of compositional orthodoxies.

Those post-war prejudices are past. Now is the time to hear Zemlinsky's music. With its deep humanity, passion, eroticism, fearless portrayal of ugliness and beauty, it captures the seismic (Adorno's metaphor) turbulence of his times and renders it meaningful today. Judgments, if they must be made, should be based on a deep knowledge of his works, not on superficial acquaintance, a casual hearing or a priori opinions. Tokenistic performances of his works are useless. Passionate, committed ones will eventually make the point.

Mahler's famous remark, that his "time will come," is echoed by Schönberg's assessment of Zemlinsky. I am convinced that, though it may take another generation, his music will gain the position it deserves. Greater familiarity with his vocabulary will facilitate this. In my experience, certain works (*Lyrische Symphonie*, *Die Seejungfrau* and, above all, *Der Zwerg*), make their point powerfully, even on a first hearing. My mission is to beat the Zemlinsky

drum and help rescue his music from the wreckage of the twentieth century. His admirers are multiplying as the movement gains momentum. To the skeptical, I answer Schönberg and Berg deeply admired Zemlinsky; it is only a matter of time before the classical music world catches up to them.



This essay is adapted from James Conlon's Afterword in the book, *Alexander Zemlinsky: A Lyric Symphony* by Marc D. Moskowitz, published by Boydell Press, August 2010. James Conlon is Music Director of the Los Angeles Opera, the Ravinia Festival and the Cincinnati May Festival.