Biographer’s Gold: Louise Talma, Thornton Wilder, and Their Opera, *The Alcestiad*

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**Abstract:**

Although maligned through the ages, the art of biography generously bestows normally unavailable insights into the lives of others. Even while based on archival documents, biographies contain the bias of the author. That said, the inevitable inequity of the relationship between Louise Talma and Thornton Wilder is portrayed in their correspondence; but so too is Wilder’s careful and compassionate encouragement of Talma, who worked for years on her magnum opus, an adaptation of Wilder’s play *The Alcestiad* as an opera, while also holding down a teaching job at Hunter College (though she had many sabbaticals and breaks). The delight of these two creative artists in their shared craft—and also in each other—is just one of the gifts apparent in their correspondence. This is not to say that there were no complications, but this article about the letters they exchanged reveals the gold biographers crave.

**Keywords:** Louise Talma | *The Alcestiad* | biography | correspondence | opera | women composers | serial composition | creative relationships

**Article:**

In her introduction to *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (2001), Nancy Milford writes: “To be a biographer is a somewhat peculiar endeavor . . . it requires not only the tact, patience, and thoroughness of a scholar but the stamina of a horse. Virginia Woolf called it ‘donkeywork’—for who but a domesticated ass would harness herself to what is recoverable of the past and call it A Life? Isn’t there something curious, not to say questionable, about this appetite for other people’s mail, called *Letters*?” (xii).

Perhaps there is something questionable in the pursuit of biographical research, but as the biographer of a largely unknown composer, Louise Talma, my building blocks for this “donkeywork” were found in her letters. Archival mail tends to be a collection of one-sided conversations. When I was finally able to access both sides of this rich correspondence between Louise Talma and Thornton Wilder, in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale,¹

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¹ Because there was talk of publishing their letters, Talma numbered and footnoted her copies of Wilder’s letters. Their correspondence is contained in the Louise Talma Papers in the Yale Collection of American Literature (YCAL), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (http://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.talma) and in the
I found the key to understanding the genesis of *The Alcestiad*. It was a resurrection of an old project for Wilder and a new one for Talma, who had written for voice all her life, but never had composed a full opera. These quirky, erudite, and humorous exchanges over twenty years reveal an intense, at times bumpy, association between two engaged and intense artists of the mid-twentieth century. Their personalities come across through their handwriting: Talma’s appears controlled and tense with her tidy cursive; Wilder’s reveals a whimsical, creative philosopher, sometimes including colors and drawings along with a scratchy script. This article chronicles their decades of collaboration and reveals the nuances of their artistic relationship through a close reading of their letters.2

Talma was a pianist, composer, pedagogue, and truly a musical pioneer. In addition to working in the male-dominated field of musical composition, she could claim many firsts. She was the first woman to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in composition twice (1946 and 1947). She was the first female composer to be elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1974). Talma was also the first American woman to have a major work staged in a European opera house—which was, of course, *The Alcestiad*, her three-act grand opera with libretto by Thornton Wilder, staged in Germany in 1962. The value of her story goes beyond her particular tale, for she was breaking ground in a field that continues to reject women (Fig. 1).

**FIGURE 1 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT**

*Fig 1.* Louise Talma at The MacDowell Colony, March 1947. Photo Credit: Bernice Perry. Courtesy of The MacDowell Colony. Louis Talma Papers, Music Division, Library of Congress.

Talma was educated at the Institute of Musical Art (which later became Juilliard), New York University (1931), and Columbia University (1933), and she spent summers at the Conservatoire Américain at Fontainebleau in France with famed musical pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. She was an instructor at the Manhattan School of Music before moving to Hunter College, where she taught for more than fifty years (1928–79). Talma was raised as a Protestant, became an atheist, and then, inspired by Boulanger’s example, converted to Catholicism in 1935.

Talma was not only a pianist, educator, and composer, she was also an avid reader, art lover, lifelong learner, and well-rounded renaissance woman. During her years at Hunter, she never stopped taking classes. She knew eight languages. She was studying Russian long after her degrees were finished—so she could enjoy Chekhov in the original. She read voraciously and, like a good New York mensch, sent both the *New York Times* and the *New Yorker* letters of correction when she found mistakes. Because Talma was in tune with the cultural world Wilder inhabited, it is not surprising that their letters are full of commentary on music, art, and literature.

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2 These thousands of pages of letters also inform the Wilder chapter of the biography I am writing about Louise Talma. This article is based on a talk given at the Third International Thornton Wilder Conference in Peterborough, New Hampshire, in July 2018.
Their story starts with the piece of music that convinced Wilder to ask Talma to write an opera with him. Wilder was at a piano recital in New Haven. He was a skilled amateur musician who played both violin and piano and frequented concerts wherever he was in the world—and he had his opinions. Wilder was getting ready to leave the concert, because it was about to rain and he wanted to avoid the deluge. The last piece was by an unknown, Louise Talma, so there was no need for him to stay. But before he could depart, the piece had started and he was hooked (Rice E9). It is understandable, because this five-minute piece, *Alleluia*, although it starts with a slow introduction, hardly stops for air once the playful, jazzy toccata takes over.

In an interview from 1976, Talma reminisced about this 1952 occasion: “I was told that Mr. Wilder wanted to meet me. I couldn’t understand why, or even how he knew of me, and I was flabbergasted because I’d always been in such awe of this man and his work. As it turned out, he had heard a little five-minute piano piece of mine entitled ‘Alleluia’ and had decided that I was the one to collaborate with him on an opera. Though I was terribly flattered, I declined” (Emerson). It took Wilder a year to convince her.

Think about it: a relatively unknown female composer in the mid-twentieth century at age forty-six being approached by the famous fifty-five-year-old, three-time Pulitzer–Prize-winning author. Composers Aaron Copland and Paul Hindemith had already contacted Wilder about adapting one of his works as an opera, and he had turned them down. Wilder decided to reach into the unknown with Talma; it is no wonder she was skeptical.

Early on in their correspondence, Louise exclaimed in a 19 March 1954 letter:

> How my mother must be enjoying all this! You see, I was literally born into the world of opera. She was a singer who sang much opera all over Europe and in this country. One of my earliest recollections, from my fourth year, is of being the baby to her friend Cornelia Fabricotti’s Butterfly. Then when I learned to play the piano I accompanied mother in all the lyric soprano repertoire. Later, in adolescence, with the usual revolt of one generation from the preceding one, I turned to other pursuits and finally to the making of music in other forms, and would have none of this operatic nonsense. And now here I am, back at the beginning, full circle turned, wanting nothing so much as to write precisely this nonsense. Life is strange, isn’t it?

Finally, in the spring of 1954, it was decided that they would collaborate. The original topic was not what they later decided upon. Initially, Wilder asked Talma to write an opera set in Saratoga Springs, New York. It was going to be a love story between Perry and Patty. Was it going to be a comedy? These names suggest that possibility. Wilder fondly remembers the “old” Saratoga in letters to Talma—grand hotels that by the 1950s were either gone completely or renovated for other uses. He was attached to the town and wanted to do an *Our Town* for Saratoga Springs (Grover’s Corners in that play having been loosely based on Peterborough, New Hampshire, where the MacDowell Colony is located). As he reported on 23 March 1954, “here I am for three days in Saratoga Springs. They have torn down the second and last of those two vast droll perfect hotels, but I remember them. A scene of our work is laid in The Grand Union Hotel.”
The plot was growing as Talma and Wilder wrote letters back and forth during the next year. It was going to be some kind of allegory on enlightenment and love. One of the characters was going to find out what love is all about. Talma hoped in an 11 April 1954 letter that it was Patty. Wilder agreed with her; as he put it in a 5 April 1954 letter: “Surely, the central action of a piece like this should be a girl awakened into song and not a man.” He added, “exploration of this symbol that singing = ‘believing’ hence, ‘opera’ = believing.” And, “talking in the opera = lethargy; singing = spirit.”

There is buoyancy and lightness in these early letters as Talma and Wilder were getting to know each other and enjoying the process. Both polyglots, they had French and German in common, so the letters were peppered with quotes and idioms from those languages. They also had music in common. Wilder played Talma’s music on the piano (what he could) and shared her work with his musician friends; he reported to her on 10 March 1954 that his friend and Yale classmate, Bruce Simmonds, who was a classical pianist and dean of the Yale School of Music, “sight-read to us both the étude and Alleluia. . . . He was excited by both pieces and plans to give the Alleluia to his master class and offer it to them for their ‘graduate recital’ programs.”

Early on, in a 5 April 1954 letter, Wilder cautioned Talma, “When the time comes, however, be prepared to be bossy with me; insist on what you feel to be your way, your needs. Reject clamorously. Dig your heels in.” And later in the same letter: “But everything must confirm in you that the music is the important thing, the preeminent thing, and that you are not ‘serving a text’ or ‘setting a text’ but that you are king, captain, boss. Practice daily thinking that—I shall try to make a viable libretto.” Replying on 11 April, Talma reassured him: “You needn’t be afraid that I won’t assert myself. People who have known me for a long time say that’s one of the things the matter with me—that I’m too assertive, that I always say what I think, and that anyhow my face is always a dead giveaway of what really gives. They say that when I am doubtful about something my left eyebrow goes up. I am not aware of this, nor can I consciously do it. So you’ll always know when you see my left eyebrow going up that something’s the matter.”

Naturally, she was intimidated by this famous author whose work she had read and admired for years. Being a wise man, Wilder understood the great imbalance in this working relationship and spent time in his letters encouraging her to speak her mind. Gradually she became more comfortable with the legendary author and opened up. Her letters to him have an almost confessional tone. His generous words and their shared excitement for the project buoyed her. This was an equilibrium that worked for both of them for some time. Later during the process of bringing the opera to the public, this balance began to crumble. Under pre-production stresses, she asserted herself, became “bossy,” and they disagreed. But at the beginning, they were enjoying the glow of their new creative relationship.

The plans for portraying Perry and Patty in Saratoga were scrapped when Talma heard Wilder reading from his play The Alcestiad in May 1955; she knew this was to be the basis of their collaboration. His reading and the power of the Greek myth spoke to her. Wilder had actually been working on this myth for decades. It was a project that held more than a casual interest for him (I. Wilder). Talma was supposed to go to Edinburgh to see it staged, but she decided that his
reading was more elemental and inspiring. As she wrote on 31 May 1954, proposing that their opera be based on *The Alcestiad*,

this beautiful and so deeply moving play! All the characters so alive, and everything they say opening vista upon vista of thought and feeling. … Last night as I was coming home from the lecture, I had one of those moments, of which I have not had many, in which one hears perfectly clearly the music one would have for a certain thing. In fact it’s the first time I’ve experienced the phenomenon Hindemith describes of hearing the totality of a work in a kind of flash. It’s a very strange sensation, but I know now what he means. . . . even as I write this it goes on becoming clearer and clearer.

A play based on the Alcestis myth was a project that was close to Wilder’s heart. In her foreword to the play, Wilder’s sister Isabel has described her brother’s long history with the project, including the fact that he lost a portion of an early version while soldiering in World War II. Because singing words takes twice as long as speaking them, Wilder had to slash his text (he told Talma on 7 October 1956 that he was performing “strophendectomies”) to make it into a workable libretto; nonetheless, the opera is three hours long.

In his comments on the play, Wilder wrote: “On one level, my play recounts the life of a woman—of many women—from bewildered bride to sorely tested wife to overburdened old age. On another level it is a wildly romantic story of gods and men, of death and hell and resurrection, of great loves and great trials, of usurpation and revenge. On another level, however, it is a comedy about a very serious matter” (T. Wilder, “Notes” 168). A brief synopsis: Location: Thessaly. Act 1: The god Apollo and the personification of Death set the stage, elevating the discourse above the mortals. Alcestis wrestles with a decision. Should she devote herself to Apollo or marry the king? She realizes her path is to wed King Admetus. Act 2: Twelve years pass: Admetus is deathly ill. Alcestis agrees to die in his place. Hercules rescues her from Hades. Act 3: Twelve years pass: The Plague has descended upon Thessaly. The tyrant King Agis is hiding in the palace. Apollo and Death once again quarrel over Alcestis. Her son Epimenes comes to kill the king, but Alcestis discourages the violence.

Mary C. English’s article on *The Alcestiad* is a delightful meditation on the “incommensurability” of divine and human love and how *The Alcestiad* reveals some of Wilder’s nuanced interpretations of the myth:

Wilder approaches Euripides’s play from a different angle and focuses not on why Alcestis chooses to die for her husband and why she is restored to life but on why Alcestis and Admetus are faced with such an excruciating decision. . . . [Wilder] examines why Alcestis willingly sacrifices her life: some combination of her affection for Admetus and her religious devotion to Apollo drives her to undertake such a heroic gesture. Instead of exploring her possible motivations for this act, Wilder focuses on Alcestis’s relationship with the divine Apollo, and whether she, as a mortal, could ever pinpoint the presence of a god or be certain of his role in her life. The ambiguity of Alcestis now lies in the fact that she is not a skeptic, but a woman who strains to deepen and to understand more completely her devotion to the divine.
English adds that, while doing this, Wilder also “explores how the inability of individuals to communicate their love for one another is analogous to their inability to connect with the divine or even to ascertain the existence of the divine in mortal affairs” (337).

I suspect that Talma’s resonance with Alcestis was entwined with just these issues. Wilder was able to return to a beloved myth yet again, and Talma was excited to dive into it for the first time. When Talma was asked in Frankfurt after the premiere what had attracted her to Alcestis, she explained: “Well it’s more than her figure as a woman because as one might paraphrase a sentence that she says in one of the arias, ‘there are women by the score,’ but there are very few of the quality of Alcestis who was torn between devoting herself to something larger than just the circumscribed circle of a family life and it was this that particularly attracted me” (Talma, Interview). As a biographer, I realized that I needed to examine this opera from a more personal point of view, because I believe Louise identified with Alcestis.

Raimund Borgmeier quotes Kate Hamburger’s statement that Wilder’s The Alcestiad is “the most significant and famous adaptation of the Alcestis theme in world literature.” Borgmeier adds that “Alcestis is no longer a tragic figure in Wilder’s play, and the tragedy has become a proto-Christian parable about human life, about love, suffering and death” (362). This affirmation of the Christian elements of Wilder’s Alcestis agrees with an earlier article by Rhea B. Miller in which she posits a “Christ-like” Alcestis: “her ‘death,’ when it finally comes, is actually a release into eternity because of the perfection of her love, and the rescue from Hades which initially made it possible (paralleling the Redemption), she has been freed from the crucifixion of time” (156).

Because she was a devout Catholic, Talma may not have overtly endorsed this radical concept of Alcestis as Christ, but she, who was always trying to do the “right” thing, might have been drawn to a heroine with subtle Christ-like undertones. Perhaps Talma’s attraction to Wilder’s version of Alcestis lies in the ability of Alcestis to suffer and nonetheless adapt to her fate because of the divinity to which Alcestis and Talma aspired. It certainly would have been a myth familiar to Talma and Wilder who were both music historians aware of earlier operas on Alcestis and consumers of Greek myth.3

The epistolary communication between Wilder and Talma is captivating. His letters were often enhanced with fanciful colors, drawings, and swooping calligraphy; it appears that he was having some fun. Louise’s letters were more down to earth and practical. It took her three years to compose the opera and two to orchestrate it. She was not a fast composer. She needed encouragement and support which, fortunately, Wilder was able to give her.

Talma worked on Act 1 while she was in Rome on a Fulbright in 1955 and 1956. Wilder frequently supported her impulse when she questioned him about possible changes to his text, writing on 21 March 1956, “I love it when Madame Talma wants modifications. NEVER hesitate. Trust your instinct; I do,” and similarly on 1 August 1956: “Not only do I approve of

3 The Alcestis myth is more present in music history than in literary history. There are five operas and one ballet [composer (librettist)]; P. A. Ziani (Aureli): 1674; Jean-Baptiste Lully (Quinault): 1727; Handel (Aureli): 1767; Christoph Willibald Gluck (Calzabigi): 1773; Anton Schweitzer (Christoph Martin Wieland): 1773. Also, Vivian Fine wrote a ballet, Alcestis, for Martha Graham in 1960 (see J. Rice).
your moving sentences around but I’m positively exhilarated by it,” and on 2 June 1956: “Oh, madame, manipulate, manipulate that text in any way you see fit.”

Wilder had visited Talma in December of 1955 in Rome, heard part of Act 1, loved it, and started quoting his praise of her to others, exclaiming to her on 26 May 1956, “There was also idiotic egotism in my reaction, which I have repeated to so many others including Elliott Carter on Thursday: ‘God damn it! How well I chose!’ I must have proceeded by some level of intuition for I didn’t know then a small part of what I know now: that your ur-musikalität\(^4\) belongs to that genus which is closest to the human cry. You are formidably brainy, but first and last you are lyric and dramatic.” In that same letter, Wilder reported at length about an afternoon tea with Alma Mahler. He sets the scene for Talma: As introduction he gives background on Mahler’s stance about music that was dedicated to her (including \textit{Wozzek} by Alban Berg and works of Webern—both twelve-tone composers). She fought for them to be performed and published, “but she didn’t admire them because they sprang from tortured and pathological negativism. She expressed contempt for Buchiner’s\([sic]\) play (here I contradicted her severely and had to be quieted with some more champagne.).” He could not resist playing up his defense of the librettist, but then: “When I told her you were employing the ‘system’ for an opera seria with themes of elevation and of unshakable divine and human love, of reconciliation between the puzzling contradictions of the human and divine, she paused and stared at me. ‘In the manner of Schoenberg?’ she said. . . . ‘Oh yes’ I said. And she let her breath out slowly, and replied with a mixture of wonder and hope: ‘That is hard!’”

I suspect that Wilder felt that Talma would be complimented that he was discussing her with Mahler. Mahler’s understanding of what Talma was doing was deeper than most, however mixed her opinion may have been. In the same letter, Wilder went on to answer the difficulty of writing an opera seria using the “system” with: “Nothing could spare you the hardness of it, dear Louise, but oh, I wish you could recover daily the intoxication and challenge and adventure of it. You had it, and when you saw my excitement and my joyous amazement at hearing what you played me, you understood what I was going through.” And he capped it off with an extremely optimistic observation, one that in the heat of the moment, he himself believed: “Oh, Angela [one of his many names for Louise], sure it’s hard because you are both creating and exemplifying and advancing a style where thousands will follow you—where the sensibility of the world will follow you.”

Talma took Wilder’s letter to heart, reassuring him on 2 June 1956 that she was still high on the presumption of what they were creating together and would not speak her fears going forward (a promise she was unable to keep, of course): “Your letter re-affirming your belief in me is here and touches me greatly. Don’t think for a minute that I’ve lost ‘the intoxication and challenge and adventure of it.’ It’s all there more than ever. It’s just that the magnitude of the thing overpowers me. But I will be good from now on and not speak my fears any more.” This shows that, now and again, while still working on Act 1 of the opera, Talma saw the long road ahead and understood that it would take more time than she initially expected.

Wilder’s hard work of propping Talma up from afar was rewarded. She wrote on 26 July 1956, “If everyone read my music with such attention and understanding as you I’d have nothing to

\(^4\) Tr: primal musicality.
fear. Then I’d know that anything that didn’t register was the fault of the music and not, as it so frequently is, the fault of the listener who doesn’t take the trouble to find out what’s in the music. I’m always dumbfounded at the way you grasp everything that’s on the page—and of course I’m the proudest woman in the world over your praise and approval of it.”

One of the differences in their approaches to the collaboration was how they each dealt with a block or a slump. Wilder’s response on 21 March 1956 to Talma’s question about this was light-hearted: “I’m shying like a wild horse from approaching the halter. I encircle my desk as though it has a snake on it. Yet I know how to conquer this: you sit down and write, write anything, write rubbish, and then gradually the solution presents itself.” Her reply on 27 March expressed surprise at his technique: “Your way of getting out of an impasse is certainly very different from mine. When I get stuck I either sleep, or read a detective story, or look at the things coming up out of the earth—anything to get away from sound. Then when I go back usually I can find a solution.”

Wilder lightened the mood again by inviting her into his daydream about rehearsals before the premiere when she would have issues, of course, with incorrect tempos and slow singers. His solution, he explained on 2 June 1956, was to insist that they have champagne after every day’s work, and he continued: “Let’s count our chickens before they hatch. Would you prefer an opening in Hamburg or Zürich or the Salzburg Festival? Certainly, it should be abroad. The ears are readier. There’s too much cliquism and Schadenfreude in ‘advanced’ musical circles over here. Are you superstitious, etc. I think it is fun to write one’s reviews in advance…. But you’ll get mad at me if I fall into my old penchant of describing people to themselves.” Wilder was prescient, for Frankfurt was where the opera ultimately premiered.

Talma was cajoled out of her early insecurities by Wilder’s encouraging and positive letters. After they had spent some time at the MacDowell Colony working together, he wrote on 29 November 1956:

Dear Louisa,
Well, an unforgettable time. The French have a phrase for it: Toujours égale à elle-même [true to form]. You may have each morning’s panic for yourself, but I won’t be a party to it.

Do remember—you who are so often victimized by self-doubts—that the achievements of any given moment are not that moment’s sudden taking hold of strength, but are the results of a lifetime’s choices and rejections, a lifetime’s discipline, a lifetime’s adherence to what one admires and what one relegates. You are still haunted by some notion that each good idea is a haphazard descent from the skies—yes, it is also that—but in addition to gratitude to the skies one has the legitimate expectation that all the dedicated work of one’s previous years are also there as support and incitement. This is the popular misunderstanding of the word “inspiration”: all work is breath from without, but it is also the reward of being ready—for years—for hundreds of previous inbreathings. You are a wonderful composer because you were an unobstructed listener to just such promptings in the past.
This encouragement was comprehensive in that it not only addressed her challenges but it also alluded to themes that were presented in the opera: the contrast/divide between the human and the divine. Her “divine” inspirations are that, but more. They are evidence of readiness thanks to years of work and she should take courage in them. She was so deeply moved by this letter that she kept it with her at all times, as she told him on 2 December 1956.

Later, on 21 February 1957, when the trials of working on this monumental endeavor challenged her, Wilder, writing from Sanibel Island, Florida, again waxed poetic about the process and his reaction to her work:

Yes, beside the sea I fell into a meditation about you and deep realization of what a strength of mind and spirit you bring to the work—above and beyond the glorious music-making itself. How you grasped the resolution of so extended a work; how you held the grasp through so many contrary accidents and through so many factors in the future as would discourage the strongest hearts; as you saw all your colleagues setting themselves to short operas or to quasi-operettas that could be played 8 times a week; as you saw the difficulties of obtaining congenial working conditions and sufficient time for uninterrupted work—all this on the top of problems within the task itself: your fears, for a while, (now allayed, Lord be praised!) of unity of style, for instance.

Oh, you have a soul of oak.

Simply watching you and—privilege indeed—working with you is NEWS OF THE SPIRIT. Not least among the difficulties is the lack of true colleagues in your art and especially in this province of opera-making = to the right and left of you all those less than 100% pure dedications—the one-eye-on-the-easier-applause of Menotti and Bernstein and Foss; or the gloating amateurism of Hollywood and Miss Pamela Hyphenated-Name [LT footnote: Peggy Glanville-Hicks].—Nobody for Louise in the studio hours to “challenge”—to straighten her shoulders against. . . . Even if you weren’t the soul of tact and generosity it would give you know[sic] bracing sensation to turn over in your mind your opinion of the works of the composers I have named.

So there is an element of the solitary about your working above and beyond that of all artistic creation. Yet how separately you move within it.

Talma responded on 23 February: “Heavens! What a glowing and shining letter to get on the very day I finish Act 1! Much too good for me, though. You don’t know in what a turbulent inner state of rebellion I am most of the time against the austerity and the solitariness, neither of which, outside of working hours, has any charms for me” (Fig. 2).

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**Fig 2.** Talma and Wilder at Wilder’s house in Hamden, CT, at the first playing of Act 1 of *The Alcestiad* opera. Photo Credit: Matthew Wysocki. Louise Talma Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Occasionally, Talma would burst forth enthusiastically when composing went more easily than usual, as on 11 June 1957: “I’m just wild with excitement, joy, delight! Today—the whole of the sailor’s song!⁵ And just what I wanted—very simple, yet entirely within the stylistic framework

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⁵ A children’s song.
of the rest of the work. Now isn’t that a truly Pentecostal gift, for me who labor painfully over my four measures daily to be given a whole piece in one day! I consider that a direct answer to prayer, for I wondered how I was going to make it sound like a song for singing to children and yet keep it in the twelve tone scheme. . . . But when I started to work this morning the rhythm of your words. . . .”

Even as she worked on the last act, she continued to ask his permission to make changes to the text, which elicited a humorous response from Wilder on 6 September 1957: “Dear Louise, Oh what a struggle on my part—whether to be furious at you or to die laughing. You ask (in the tones of a lamb to the butcher): could you change a comma in the text? Angel, if your instinct spoke to you and you wanted to insert a quotation from the Wall Street Journal set to a Rhumba, I’d reply: Dear, YOU know best. I’ve reread the passage you quote and of course you are right.” He offered another poetic reassurance for her on 14 June 1958: “Santa Cecilia, in person. Now do be the saint you are and not the self-doubting Luischen⁶ you sometimes are. The second act is a glory (have I forgotten the first act?!) Now I’m playing a Brandenburg and I don’t feel a change of weather. Schlafé wohl.”⁷

After three years, Talma finally finished the score in December of 1958, but it took another two years to orchestrate it. On 19 December 1960, toward the end of orchestrating, she wrote:

I am enjoying these last pages now that I know that I’m coming out all right. For six years I’ve been scared. Now that I’m not scared anymore, and I don’t think anything will ever seem as difficult again. It was great fun piling up the orchestra when the chorus sings “The plague. The plague. The plague.” All the heavy artillery comes on: screaming woodwinds including three piccolos flutter tonguing in terror, thundering drums, wailing brass and strings, xylophone and glockenspiel shaking (i.e. tremoloing) with fear. The thing I am pleased about is that the music holds up. After all these years it still seems good to me.

After this, the task of deciding where the premiere would take place was upon them. Because of Wilder’s fame, there were a number of offers. Some schools showed interest, including Brandeis, UCLA, and Peabody, as well as the Aspen Music Festival. European venues such as Zurich and Barcelona; and American venues such as New York’s City Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the Metropolitan Opera Company were all mentioned. The possibility of the Met was especially exciting for both of them; they would have loved nothing better than a premiere at Lincoln Center (which was to open soon).

In March 1960, Wilder was invited to have lunch with Rudolf Bing, manager of the Metropolitan Opera. He realized that because Talma was not invited, the answer would be no. Preparing Talma for this negative outcome, he wrote to her at length on 20 March: “You know me by now: that I don’t give a damn about the disfavor of this group or that. I glory in the opera and have the serenest confidence that it’ll be heard innumerable times. Nor am I crazy about the Met with its aroma of opera-grind and star-adulation. Nor about City Center whose public is being crammed

⁶ One of his German nicknames for her, shared by a number of her friends.
⁷ Schlafé wohl literally means “sleep well.” Perhaps Wilder was invoking the final movement of Bach’s Johannes Passion, “Ruht Wohl” [rest well] a well-loved Bach choral lullaby.
with subsidized patriotism-inspired mediocrity. Where is both joy and dedication? Where is hushed listening?” (Selected Letters 565).

But, in spite of his attempts to allay her disappointment, the fact that only Wilder was invited to meet with Bing did create some tension. Louise clarified for Wilder what it was like to endure the misogyny she encountered daily, writing to him on 22 March:

The last thing in the world I want to do is to make you nervous or to talk in circles. . . . But you must remember that Europeans like Bing, Leinsdorf, Boehm, Reiner, etc. have no use whatever for women in the arts—they think they’re good only for Kinder, Kuche and Kirche⁸—and that Bing is probably as much annoyed by this as by the fact that there is no previous stage work on which to base a judgement (neither was there for Berg, Debussy and Beethoven, but at least they were men—and geniuses). I’m sorry you’re having all the unpleasantness. Now if you had chosen Copland or Hindemith the work would be number one on everybody’s list, but you went and picked an unknown composer—and a woman at that. Quelle folie!

Wilder countered the next day with: “Quelle folie, Quelle gloriose folie! I’m prouder and happier for having chosen you—as you put it—than anything I’ve done. And I did actually evade the other two you name [LT note: Copland and Hindemith]. How wisely.”

Later that year, the Lyric Opera in Chicago became a possibility, and Talma flew to Chicago to speak with them. At the same time, Wilder was in contact with Harry Buckwitz of the Frankfurt Opera, and they finally settled on Frankfurt. Wilder was popular in Germany (something that continued to surprise him). This of course meant that the libretto had to be translated into German, which was a source of tension between them, because Wilder’s German translator Herberth Herlitschka had never worked with music. When Wilder tried to reassure Talma that Herlitschka was a wonderful translator, Talma disagreed on 3 May 1961: “Maybe he is for prose, but I can assure you he isn’t for music. He completely ruined the climax of the first act by eliminating not only your words but the caesura of the musical phrase without which it makes no sense.”

Talma’s frustrations with the clumsy German translation were exacerbated by the multitude of other tasks that were necessary to get the mammoth work ready for performance. She was overworked, edgy, and at her wit’s end. She was teaching more than she ever had at Hunter (five classes), juggling the creation of the orchestral parts that needed correcting (they had been copied out from the score in Japan), trying to fix the awful German translation (luckily she was fluent), and making tapes (playing the piano and singing all the parts, she lost her voice) for the opera company in Frankfurt so they could start preparing the music. She and Wilder also were deciding who would publish the score. This was another source of conflict because Wilder was leaning toward a publisher more experienced in musical theater and Talma was negotiating with classical music publishers. She was trying to be bossy about who should publish it and he would not listen to her. Their hitherto smooth communication was breaking down.

⁸ Tr: children, kitchen, and church.
During 1961, the year before the premiere, Talma was trying to take care of the overwhelming preparations, but she was unable to contain herself when she discovered that Wilder had started negotiations with German composer Paul Hindemith for a chamber opera based on his one-act play *The Long Christmas Dinner*. She was afraid that it would come out before their opera (which it did, by a few months). Because Hindemith was revered in Germany, she feared that it would upstage *The Alcestiad* right before their premiere. Talma was irate, and Wilder needed more than ever to exercise his compassion and seemingly magical charm to calm her down, as he did on 25 July 1961: “I have never wavered from my conviction that it is superb music making and—after this newest reading—an extraordinary grasp of the art of music in the theatre. I kept singling out ever new clarifications of mood and motivation and accent and timing. As everyone will soon know.” Despite his attempts to reassure her, nothing could save her from the grueling schedule and work that had to be done, as she explained on 7 October 1961, “Nowadays the composer has to make the fair copy unless he has a stable of boys like Menotti who not only make the fair copy but do the orchestration too. Now must return to the present corvée of correcting the parts. That, too, Verdi did not have to do.”

Finally, the time came for the opening. Talma went to Frankfurt a couple of weeks before the premiere. It was exhilarating; she was hearing her music everywhere in the opera house as she described to Wilder on 2 February 1962: “There are Alcestiad rehearsals going on all over the place—orchestra in one place, chorus in another, soloists elsewhere, the ensemble on the big stage or upstairs on a rehearsal stage. I wander through all this like Alice in Wonderland. I just can’t believe that it’s happening.” From across the ocean, Wilder reveled in her letters about the preparations before he and Isabel arrived for the performance.

On 1 March 1962, *Die Alcestiade* premiered with soprano Inge Borkh in the title role. Opening night was a resounding success, with the *New York Times* reporting “a twenty-minute ovation” (Moor). *Time* described how, “[a]t opera’s end, bespectacled Composer Talma took her bows while the audience shouted, ‘Louise, Louise!’” Though it came as no shock to an audience accustomed to Berg and Henze, the score nevertheless surprised and delighted some listeners who had not expected, in the words of one German critic, to find ‘an American lady of Miss Talma’s generation writing music more modern than Hindemith’” (“Singing Greeks”). But, after the first night, the reviews were not so positive. In the *Frankfurter Algemeine Zeitung*, Ernst Thomas asserted: “She has learned from Stravinsky, Schoenberg, and Hindemith but does little more than link scenes together lightly” (qtd. in Blank 95).

Writing to Cass Canfield, his friend and publisher, before leaving Frankfurt after the premiere, Wilder summed up the two responses:

An odd thing happened at our opera-première here . . . unprecedented ovation . . . curtain calls for 19 minutes. The composer Louise Talma naturally elated . . . then in the next few days the critics’ reviews: none denied her mastery of means, but all but two have been severe. These things don’t affect me (an old battered ship) but it is especially hard for Louise with her first large work and coming after that undoubted appreciation by the audience. (*Selected Letters* 595)

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9 Tr: chore.
Wilder was aware of the toll this took on Louise. She became sick in Frankfurt and he called in a doctor to see to her more than once. The reviews were not as positive as the wild reaction to the first performance would have led one to expect. The opera was three hours of serial music that German ears could appreciate, but the critics were harsh. There were nine performances in Frankfurt. Despite their many efforts to sell the opera to companies in the United States and elsewhere, it has yet to be performed again or in English.

After the premiere, Talma started getting requests for shorter, more affordable works for the stage. She tried to convince Wilder to write a short libretto for her. But he was working on his novel *The Eighth Day* and did not have time for anything else. He actually asked her to help him edit his last two novels, *The Eighth Day* and *Theophilus North*. As he wrote to her on 6 December 1966, “I know you have the eyes of a hawk—though more beautiful.” He thanked her for reading and for her “douceur10 for being—for the 100th time—kind and helpful at just the right moment.” Talma would do anything for him and loved spending time with him. They continued corresponding and visiting for years.

Eventually, Wilder convinced her to write her own libretto. Talma finished a twenty-five-minute chamber opera a decade after *The Alcestiad*; it was her only composition for which she also wrote the text. It is scored for three voices and nine instruments. I believe it is her credo. The title is (awkwardly) *Have You Heard? Do You Know?* It is a rhapsody to nature as a solution to our hectic, modern life—a topic that remains very pertinent today. It reveals her deep affinity for the earth and for the environmental movement. Her support of a multiplicity of environmental causes from Central Park to Save the Redwoods is documented in the tax records in her collection at the Library of Congress. The Talma archive reveals her support of virtually all environmental organizations in existence at the time.

Wilder not only gave Talma the most challenging and rewarding musical experience of her life, but he was also a cherished friend and mentor. She valued his intellectual companionship and was honored to be copyeditor to the man who inspired her to trust her own voice, to set her own words to music. Talma treasured the connection and proudly wore gifts from Wilder (notably a topaz ring11 and pendant) long after his death. This biographer is grateful to the archives for preserving the essence of this artistic collaboration.

**SARAH B. DORSEY** is a biographer, music librarian, resister, and sustainability nut. She has a contract with the University of Illinois Press for her biography of composer, pianist, and pedagogue, Louise Talma: *“I am NOT a Woman Composer”: The Life and Music of Louise Talma (1906–1996)*. Numerous University of North Carolina Greensboro grants (Faculty First Award, WGS Linda Arnold Carlisle Award, and UNCG international travel grants) and residencies (VCCA, VSC, and Wildacres) have facilitated work on the Talma biography. Dorsey is head of the Harold Schiffman Music Library at UNC Greensboro and believes we are all on this spaceship together.

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10 Tr: sweetness.

11 From an interview at VCCA (Virginia Center for the Creative Arts) with composer Judith Shatin by the author, May 2018. Talma proudly declared to Shatin (when they were both in residence at VCCA in the 1980s) that Wilder was the source of the ring she wore every day.
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