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About Korngold and *Die tote Stadt*

### **Erich Korngold (1897-1957)**

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was born into a German-speaking Jewish family in Brünn, Moravia (now Brno in the Czech Republic). He achieved recognition at an early age as a pianist and composer. His first substantial work was the ballet, *Der Schneemann (The Snowman)* published when he was twelve. Two one-act operas followed soon after, but it was *Die tote Stadt* (1920) that really confirmed his status.

Another opera followed (*Das Wunder der Heliane*), as well as orchestral and chamber music. But by the early thirties Korngold had become disappointed with the critical response to his later work, and he was also of course concerned by the looming Nazi threat in Germany. So when the director Max Reinhardt invited him to come to Hollywood in 1934 to work on a film score for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he accepted readily. During the next few years he travelled back and forth between Vienna and Hollywood but following the German takeover of Austria in 1938 he was unable to return to Vienna and set up a permanent home in Los Angeles.

He went on to score some sixteen movies between the mid-thirties and mid-forties and became one of the leading composers in this genre. His finest scores were perhaps for the Errol Flynn vehicles *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *The Sea Hawk*. Music lovers can debate the merits of his move to Hollywood. Korngold's answer was simple, though perhaps not entirely convincing: "Music is music," he said, "whether it is for the stage, rostrum or cinema".

He returned to Europe in 1949 and spent two years in Vienna where despite popular acclaim the critics remained predominantly hostile. This pattern was repeated in 1954 when he came back to Europe for his final film project, *Magic Fire*, a bio-pic of Richard Wagner in which Korngold, as well as arranging Wagner's music, made an uncredited appearance as the conductor Hans Richter.

In the final ten years of his life he returned to writing for the concert hall. His violin concerto is the most notable product of these years and contains echoes of his film themes. His late-romantic compositions were no longer popular when he died in 1957 but in recent decades his works have finally been experiencing the revival they deserve.

### ***Die tote Stadt* (The Dead City)**

Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892) is the source for the plot. A libretto based on this was written secretly by Korngold and his father Julius, but using the pseudonym Paul Schott - "Paul" for the main character of the opera and "Schott" for the composer's publisher. (The secret was so well kept that it was not until well after Korngold's death that the truth of authorship was discovered.)

Although only 23, Korngold was already a respected opera composer by 1920 and there was competition among German opera houses to secure the premiere of *Die tote Stadt*. In fact it opened simultaneously in Hamburg and Cologne. It was an instant success and further productions followed in Germany and around the world. Among the great names associated with it were Otto Klemperer who conducted the Cologne premiere and George Szell, who conducted it in Berlin where the lead roles were taken by Lotte Lehmann and Richard Tauber.

It is a late-romantic masterpiece that delves deep into the impenetrable confusion of the subconscious mind, and it took the operatic world by storm. The tenor lead, Paul, is one of the most demanding in opera; requiring a warmth of expression despite its unrelentingly high tessitura.

The double role of Marie/Marietta offers great dramatic opportunities to the soprano and its vocal rewards include the enchanting “Gluck, das mir verblieb”, sung in duet with Paul, and undoubtedly the opera’s hit number.

It is, though, the orchestral writing that is the most distinctive feature of the work. It is easy to hear the influence of Richard Strauss in the vivid colours and rich textures, at times with an added manic urgency, notably in the thrilling prelude to Act 2 which depicts the impressions of the city of Bruges on Paul’s disturbed mind.

### **Useful Links**

Wikipedia

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich\\_Wolfgang\\_Korngold](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erich_Wolfgang_Korngold)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die\\_tote\\_Stadt](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Die_tote_Stadt)

Korngold Website

[www.korngold-society.org](http://www.korngold-society.org)

International Korngold Society

[www.korngold.com](http://www.korngold.com)

Korngold page on OREL Foundation site

[www.orelfoundation.org/composers/article/erich\\_wolfgang\\_korngold](http://www.orelfoundation.org/composers/article/erich_wolfgang_korngold)

From Forbidden Music, a blog by Micchael Haas. Some fascinating material here.

<https://forbiddenmusic.org/2015/07/18/the-false-myths-and-true-genius-of-erich-wolfgang-korngold/>

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