

Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957)

Violin Concerto

A clear understanding of Erich Korngold comes magically into focus when one acknowledges the profound similarities with Gustav Mahler. This prolific prodigy, composer, arranger, and conductor, like Mahler before him, did it all. Korngold was born in *Brno*, in modern day Czechoslovakia - a German influenced city of the Austro-Hapsburg empire, much like near by *Iglau* had been for Mahler. Both of them were born into Jewish families, struggling with their familial roots and the confusing national identity of the region. The two are inextricably linked to this formative soil, and in the very rich artistic environment of 1875-1925. Though not exact contemporaries they did meet, a young Erich was introduced by his father to Gustav in 1906 – the latter at his zenith within Viennese music circles and the former being heralded as the next genius. The adopted Viennese pedigree of both composers permeates their world view and their music, but Korngold's acceptance in Vienna was much less complicated than Mahler's.

Dr. Julius Korngold, Erich's father had stepped into the shoes of the fabled Edouard Hanslick, the great critic of the *Neue Freie Press* (New Free Press). The ins and outs of Viennese musical circles were not a closed door at all – as they had been for Mahler. After being duly impressed with the young boy, Mahler suggested that Alexander von Zemlinsky be Korngold's teacher, which though there were other influences, remained the only official teacher/pupil relationship, and it didn't last very long. Julius, in his connected position was also able to privately publish three very early works in 1909 - with Erich at the ripe old age of 12. These works, a ballet called *Der Schneeman* (the Snowman), a sketch on 'Don Quixote' and a D minor Piano Sonata, were sent around to several musical luminaries, among them the great conductor, Arthur Nikisch; the great choral conductor and academic Hermann Kretzschmar; and the composers Engelbert Humperdinck and Richard Strauss. All of them found the works far advanced for a boy of twelve and Strauss commented on the bold use of harmony and assurance of style.

This kind of endorsement led, as one might think, to early and richly deserved glory. The Snowman was extremely successful and was produced by 1910. Arthur Nickisch had taken up the supportive mantle, conducting Korngold's *Schauspiel* Overture , and his Sinfonietta with the Leipzig Gewandhaus and his newly written Piano Trio was making the rounds and wildly impressing heavy weights like Arthur Schnabel, who also began to champion his music. By his 19th birthday in 1916 he had established himself as a fine opera composer, with two enormously successful 'one act' operas, the *Ring of Polycrates* and *Violanta*. Shortly after he turned his hand to a Shakespearian adaptation, *Much ado about nothing*, and followed it with one of his great triumphs, *Die Tote Stadt*.

Korngold became General Musikdirektor at the Stadttheater in Hamburg. Interestingly, Mahler had a spent a very formative stint in the same position, and both men gain immensely in their musical perspectives; their business and management sense of running a theatre; and immersing themselves in musical performances that could be stamped with their own personalities. In 1927 his *Wunder der Heliane*, considered one of his most important works, didn't receive the usual accolades from the Viennese public. Despite a stellar cast with Lotte Lehmann and Jan Kiepura in leading roles, the Viennese, fickle and searching for the newer fad, were opting for a different style which they found in

the music of Krenek. Undaunted, Korngold continued on, establishing himself as a professor in Vienna, and in 1929 collaborated on a new production of *Die Fledermaus* for Berlin, with none other than Max Reinhardt. This was to usher in an entirely new period in Korngold's life, and perhaps the one for which he is fêted and remembered the most, for it was Max Reinhardt who invited him to Hollywood to score *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, launching a spectacular association with the Hollywood Film Industry.

His original score for *Captain Blood* in 1935 helped launch the career of Errol Flynn, and 1936 brought an Oscar win for his score *Anthony Adverse*. The Nazi occupation of Austria in the 'Anschluss' took even the Viennese by surprise, but luckily for the Korngold's, the family was able to move to California, escaping the terror that was to ensue in Europe for prominent Jewish families. Korngold refused to write any major works or operas in this period, vowing to continue his self-imposed moratorium until Hitler was removed from power. For the next decade Korngold continued to write prolifically for the film industry, writing the scores for *The Prince and the Pauper*, *The Sea Hawk*, *The Sea Wolf*, *The Kings Row*, and *Deception*. All these scores are similar in nature, in that they reflect not only the composers keen sense of drama, but follow the Wagnerian precept of leitmotifs, often creating the drama in the film, and not just supporting it.

At the close of hostilities in 1945 the way was open for Korngold to return to writing, and the two works that emerge from this period are the Violin Concerto and the Cello Concerto. By contractual seal with Warner Bros., Korngold was bound to use motifs that had appeared in his film scores, and both concerti display not only those arching melodies, but are coupled with a sense of descriptive writing that follows on from that genre. The violin concerto was premiered by Jascha Heifetz on February 15, 1947 to great public acclaim in St. Louis, and then repeated that year in a recorded performance in Carnegie Hall with the New York Philharmonic. Korngold referred to his violin concerto as technically demanding, but also extremely melodic, requiring more of a Caruso touch than a Paganini. Commenting on the Heifetz rendition he wrote:

"...needless to say how delighted how I am to have my concerto performed by Caruso and Paganini in one person: Jascha Heifetz."

Heifetz's fine performance of the Violin Concerto and the accessibility of all the film scores, make them Korngold's most popular works to date, but closer review of other major works, show a prolific and masterly composer that deserves more recognition than the Hollywood stigma allows.

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