

Erich Korngold: The last romantic

Erich Korngold's lush film scores were an instant hit in 1930s Hollywood. But he could never win over the critics – even his father. Now, his 'serious' music is taking centre stage.

By Jessica Duchon

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Erich Wolfgang Korngold may just be the greatest composer you've never heard of. This year marks the 50th anniversary of his death. And the South Bank Centre is staging the biggest celebration of his works ever in the UK – music that spans an artistic galaxy from Mahler's Vienna to Errol Flynn's Hollywood.

The events begin on 27 October with Barrie Gavin's documentary *Adventures of a Wunderkind*, a round-table discussion and two concerts, respectively from the Nash Ensemble and Anne Sofie von Otter. In November, the London Philharmonic Orchestra gives three concerts of his music, culminating in the UK premiere of his biggest opera, *Das Wunder der Heliane*.

What's so special about Korngold? For a start, his music is gorgeous. It has a white-hot dramatic sweep and an overwhelming sense of atmosphere; his distinctive voice comprises rich harmony, soaring melody, a sinuous rhythmic flexibility and a deeply human spirit. He was a musical heir to Wagner, Mahler and Richard Strauss, a pupil of Zemlinsky, an admirer of Stravinsky – even, later in life, a friend of Schoenberg. But he refused to adapt his musically sweet tooth to his peer group's austere taste for modernism. When challenged over writing melodic music that was behind the times, he responded: "Don't expect apples from an apricot tree."

Korngold was born in Brno in 1897, the son of the music critic Julius Korngold. Erich was a child prodigy, inviting comparison with Mozart – but

having one of Vienna's most powerful critics for a father was a cruel twist that not even Hollywood could have devised. Over the years, Julius's poisonous intrigues around the Viennese music scene caused countless problems for the unfortunate Erich.

At 10, little Korngold played to Mahler, who declared him a genius. When he was 13, his ballet-pantomime *Der Schneemann* was presented at the Vienna Hofoper in front of Belgian royalty. In his mid-teens, he wrote a double bill of one-act dramas, *Der Ring des Polykrates* and *Violanta*, which showed him champing eagerly at the operatic bit.

His first full-length opera, *Die tote Stadt*, was premiered to huge international acclaim in 1920; and it has been at the forefront of Korngold's international revival, attracting enthusiastic audiences with its Straussian musical language and Hitchcock-like plot. It has only been performed once in the UK, in concert, although Covent Garden is planning its British stage premiere for 2009.

Das Wunder der Heliane, however, is Korngold's most ambitious work, and the one he regarded as his greatest. Its UK premiere on 21 November has a strong cast and will be conducted by Vladimir Jurowski. With a complex libretto, a massive orchestra, extremely demanding roles and a musical language that's a melting pot of tonal lyricism and no-holds-barred expressionism, the opera celebrates the death-defying power of love. Korngold dedicated it to his new wife, Luzi von Sonnenthal – of whom his father, of course, disapproved.

When *Heliane* was premiered in 1927, Korngold, now 30, was still enduring spats with luminaries such as Strauss and Schoenberg, induced by his father's vituperative pen. He hoped that *Heliane* would show he was his own man once and for all. But when another new opera, the jazzy *Jonny spielt auf* by Ernst Krenek, threatened to overshadow *Heliane*, Julius went to ridiculous lengths to rubbish it. The Jewish critic even found an unlikely ally in a Nazi broadsheet, which had its own reasons for trashing the rival. His efforts backfired – inspiring the opposite reaction among audiences.

The operatic duel caught the imagination of musical Vienna, but Julius was clearly in the wrong and *Heliane* itself was eclipsed by the scandal. It certainly had no chance of revival later, following the ban on music of Jewish composers in Germany after 1933. Admittedly, the opera had not been an outright failure, but its reception was far from the runaway success Korngold wanted. The experience left him feeling psychologically battered; and it drove him towards alternative musical employment, both for financial reasons and to escape from his father's pernicious meddling.

He accepted a post arranging and conducting operetta in the Theater an der Wien; here he met the director Max Reinhardt, who became a close friend. When Reinhardt left for America after Hitler came to power, he took the first opportunity to invite Korngold to follow him to Hollywood.

Korngold arrived there in 1934, commissioned to arrange Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* incidental music for Reinhardt's movie. He had a fine instinct for fitting music to film, as well as for evoking atmosphere and character. Warner Brothers snapped him up to compose original scores, with a lavish contract that gave him a status unprecedented among film composers.

For years, Korngold commuted between Vienna and Hollywood, scoring *Captain Blood*, which launched the careers of Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, and *Anthony Adverse*, which won him his first Oscar in 1936. It was sheer luck that he was in Hollywood to compose *The Adventures of Robin Hood* when Hitler marched into Austria in 1938. He managed to rescue his family, just in time; and he credited Reinhardt and Jack Warner evermore for saving their lives.

During his enforced exile, Korngold went on to write scores for *The Sea Hawk*, *The Prince and the Pauper* and many more. But he was depressed, overweight and ill. He suffered a heart attack in his forties; and even then, he was still under his father's thumb. Julius, who was living in retirement nearby, scribbled countless hysterical letters to his son, berating him for his neglect of high art (and much more). After Julius died in 1945, Erich – remorseful, but also jaded by the understanding that when his films disappeared, so did his music – decided to return to composing concert works. When a journalist asked why he was giving up films, he quipped: "When I first came to Hollywood, I could not understand the dialogue. Now I can."

His Violin Concerto was premiered by Jascha Heifetz in 1947; other works from the post-war years included a *Symphonic Serenade* for strings, and a gritty, somewhat tortured-sounding *Symphony in F sharp*. He often recycled his film music in these works, eager to preserve the best material. But this induced the accusation that Korngold was merely "a Hollywood composer".

Korngold may sound like film music – but more accurately, it is film music that sounds like Korngold. He was a founding father of film music as an art in its own right, and, in Hollywood, he remained a towering presence whose legacy can still be heard in the music of such composers as Elmer Bernstein and John Williams. This vital element of his work will be celebrated in an LPO concert on 2 November.

Korngold died aged only 60 in 1957, believing himself forgotten. But amends are being made at last. In November, his grandchildren will travel to Vienna, where the mayor is to make a formal apology to the family for its wartime fate. And perhaps the musical Establishment owes not only Korngold, but also his audiences, an apology – for snubbing a composer who, in the darkest years of the 20th century, wrote music that dared to be beautiful.

A day of events celebrating Korngold will take place at the South Bank Centre, London SE1, on 27 October; LPO concerts of his music will take place on 2, 14 and 21 November (0871 663 2500)