

Observations: Music made for Hollywood

By Jessica Duchen
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If you like Alfred Hitchcock, you'll adore Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*, which next week receives its UK premiere at the Royal Opera House. A psychological thriller, dating from 1920 – when its composer was only 23 – this astonishing opera has been enjoying a huge revival worldwide, with new productions springing up from New York to Moscow. It's notable for its apparently filmic qualities – Korngold later won two Oscars for his scores for Warner Brothers swashbucklers. No wonder directors are tempted to exploit *Die tote Stadt*'s similarity to Hitchcock's *Vertigo* – but the truth is that Korngold got there first.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold started out as a child prodigy in Mahler's Vienna and was internationally celebrated by the age of 14. Since he was Jewish, though, he would have faced certain death in a Nazi concentration camp if Hollywood had not saved his life. His works were banned under the Third Reich and dubbed degenerate; but later he was doubly condemned as "a Hollywood composer" when he tried to return to the concert hall.

Hollywood was not even a twinkle in Korngold's eye when he wrote *Die tote Stadt*. The opera captures the zeitgeist of the years following WW1. There's a Freudian dream sequence; a deep-seated nostalgia for a more beautiful past; intense mourning for a dead beloved. Korngold lost a favourite uncle and some close friends in the war, during which he began to draft this opera. He was just 18. The opera's renewed popularity today testifies to its compassion, humanity and magnetically beautiful score. And if it sounds like film music, that is simply because film music sounds like *Die tote Stadt*. This remarkable work is where Hollywood began.

'*Die tote Stadt*' opens at the Royal Opera House (020-7304 4000) on 27 January 2009.