



Jessica's talk at Birmingham

CITY OF BIRMINGHAM
SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

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A symphony awakens

A number of you have written to me asking to read my talk about Korngold and his Symphony in F sharp, given the other day for the CBSO, so I'm posting it below. But don't forget that for the price of two large coffees you can still get my entire book on the composer, which took me three years to write amid some pretty serious life traumas in the mid 1990s.

Script for talk given at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, on 28 January 2015

Yesterday was Holocaust Memorial Day and it is very fitting today to spend a little time exploring the life and music of a composer who escaped the Nazis, but not their long-term legacy.

The story of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's life and his works is not only one of the strangest histories of its type, but also one of the most emblematic of its time. His path took him from an astonishing start as a remarkable child prodigy composer – his talent dumbfounded Richard Strauss, Engelbert Humperdinck and Arthur Nikisch, among many more – to a career in Hollywood sparked by forced exile in the 1930s. There he became one of the founding fathers of film music as an art-form in its own right.

Though his legacy involves music of powerful appeal – a lavish late romanticism bearing the influence of Strauss, Mahler, Puccini, early Stravinsky and more – his attempts to rehabilitate his career in the concert

hall after 1950 came to little. Korngold never saw any need to stop being himself: he had started out in the era of dying romanticism and burgeoning expressionism, and writing in a way that was not his natural idiom was anathema to him. “Don’t expect apples from an apricot tree,” he once remarked.

But such was the resistance in a musical world dominated by atonality and serialism to anything remotely associated with something as tawdry as the cinema that Korngold was cold-shouldered and critically reviled. This, tragically, was the fate of innumerable composers of that time, and not only those who found themselves able to make a living in film music: if they did not evolve according to the latest fashion or the latest party line to toe, they faced an uncertain and miserable future. From Sibelius, who sat in isolation in Finland failing to write more great symphonies, to Prokofiev, who made the mistake of going back to Soviet Russia, to Andrzej Panufnik, who escaped hideous Communist directives about musical style in Poland only to find himself facing a different type of cultural fascism in the west, this era skewed the fate of classical music and its most gifted creators to a degree that we are only just beginning to understand fully today.

For decades after Korngold’s death his music virtually vanished from the repertoire – with the occasional exception of his Violin Concerto, which won occasional champions among soloists. In the past 20 years or so, as his story has become better known and recordings of his music featured in the surge of interest in unjustly neglected music and especially that of 20th-century Jewish composers whose works were banned by the Nazis, he has started to win increasing recognition. Several key works have become part of the standard repertoire, including his opera *Die tote Stadt* and, increasingly, the *Symphony in F Sharp* – his most important orchestral work, which we hear tonight.

It’s interesting to see this upsurge of interest. Nicky Benedetti, who recorded the violin concerto on her CD *The Silver Violin* and sent Korngold soaring into the pop charts, told me that she thinks Korngold literally went viral. The support for that work has come largely from people who are simply itching to play it! Violinists adore it. It’s so easy these days to hear interesting music online that more and more young soloists, lacking the stylistic prejudices of the past, have come across it and want to play it. I’ve even been able to do a Radio 3 Building A Library on it, because there are now more than 20 recordings in existence. I hope that the same may be starting to happen for the *Symphony*, which you may remember was heard at the Proms last summer.

I started researching my biography of Korngold back in 1993. I was lucky to have heard of him at all. An American musicologist friend of mine had been scandalised when I said “Korngold? Who’s he?” and promptly played me the *Pierrot Tanzlied* from *Die tote Stadt*. I loved it so much that I ran out and bought the LPs of the whole opera, then cried all the way through, so amazed was I that such fabulous music was lying around unknown. I’ve always loved his music for its overwhelmingly generous and positive spirit, its melodic richness, its strength of personality and everything it represents about the lost

world it sprang from. This music's energy, sweetness, exuberance and greatness of heart does represent Korngold's own personality; he loved his food and had a sweet tooth, and he was also an exceptionally generous man. In fact, during the Second World War when he was in America, he signed so many affidavits vouching support for fellow refugee immigrants from Europe that eventually the authorities stopped accepting his signature! I'm fascinated by his life story, which saw him bridge what you'd have thought would be a massive gulf between Mahler and Errol Flynn.

Back in 1993, you hardly ever heard his music. Those who remembered him did so almost solely for his role in the film world. There, his influence was simply towering. For example, you can hear it echoed very directly in the works of John Williams, including Star Wars, Jurassic Park and even Harry Potter. Elsewhere, though, he was deeply out of fashion. I was truly shocked by some of the patronising, sometimes cruel responses I received when I mentioned his name and even dared to praise his music. This still happens. When the London Philharmonic performed his biggest opera *Das Wunder der Heliane* on the 50th anniversary of his death a few years ago, one critic declared that the Nazis were right to ban it because it was "degenerate". Yes, actually condemning the work of an exile from the Nazis with Nazi terminology in the year 2007.

Korngold was born in 1897, in Brno, now the Czech Republic. His family moved to Vienna when he was four years old, when his music critic father, Julius Korngold, was appointed to a position on the influential newspaper *Die neue freie Presse*, where his boss was the notoriously crotchety critic Eduard Hanslick. Julius modelled himself very much after Hanslick, and espoused similar, very conservative views. Brahms was a friend; Mahler was adulated; Strauss was criticised; the Second Viennese School was The Enemy.

When Hanslick died, Julius got his job, becoming the most powerful music critic in the city that was the centre of the musical world. Today concert reviews are lucky to get into a newspaper at all, certainly in this country, but a hundred years ago music was so significant a force in Viennese life that Julius's reviews were often plastered across the front page and ran on into the second, third and sometimes the fourth pages too.

So he was not just any old critic. And the appositely named Erich Wolfgang was not just a talented child. He was one of the most extraordinary composing prodigies who ever lived, certainly the best since Mendelssohn. Julius's musical connections were valuable in securing a fine start for him: aged nine, Erich played to Mahler, who declared him a genius and advised Julius to send him to Zemlinsky for lessons.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's childhood works aren't often very interesting and Mendelssohn was sixteen before he wrote his Octet. But Korngold was writing highly sophisticated full-length works by the time he was 12. The New York Times critic heard his Opus 1 Piano Trio and was outraged: he wrote, "If we had a little boy of twelve who preferred writing this sort of music to hearing a

good folk tune or going out and playing in the park, we should consult a specialist”.

As little Korngold made the headlines, Julius's opinionated stances won many enemies, and sometimes sparked scandals that rebounded against the unfortunate wunderkind. Some people accused the father of praising only those musicians who performed his son's works. Others accused Julius of writing the pieces himself – to which Julius pithily retorted, “If I could write such music, I would not be a critic.” What was certain, though, was that Julius's deeply conservative musical outlook largely formed Erich's own artistic persona; he squashed as hard as he could all of Erich's early inclinations towards the avant-garde and tried particularly hard to keep him away from Schoenberg and co.

Korngold spent the interwar years increasingly preoccupied with stage works. His most successful opera, *Die tote Stadt*, was begun during the first world war and captures much of the aching nostalgia and sorrow of the time. He followed that with an even more ambitious score, *Das Wunder der Heliane*, which is so demanding of its soloists and involves such as massive orchestra and has such a convoluted story that performances of it, I fear, will remain few and far between. But to earn a crust, having lost all his savings in the inflation that followed the first world war, Korngold took a job arranging and conducting operettas at the Theater an der Wien, and this was how he met the great theatre director Max Reinhardt, who became a great friend. When the Nazis came to power Reinhardt quickly left Germany for America and it was on his invitation that Korngold first went to Hollywood to arrange Mendelssohn's music for a massive new film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

As a craftsman he proved highly adaptable, and when Warner Brothers realised he was perfect for them and offered him an extremely generous contract, he proved he had an extraordinary instinct for the correlation of music, drama and timing. This enabled him to compose his film scores by improvising at the piano while a patient projectionist ran the finished film for him time and again, often overnight. For a few years he commuted between Vienna and California, but he was lucky enough to be in Hollywood scoring *The Adventures of Robin Hood* when Hitler annexed Austria in March 1938.

The relationship between Korngold's film music and his concert works looks to us more complicated than it should. To Korngold himself, it was simple. “Music is music,” he said, “whether it is for the stage, rostrum or cinema. Form may change, the manner of writing may vary, but the composer needs to make no concessions whatever to what he conceives to be his own musical ideology.” So while critics carped that his concert works were full of film music, in fact the reverse was also true; and the whole picture was a delicious hotpot. Korngold kept notebooks in which he would scribble down musical ideas for future reference; therefore a theme that appears in film guise might have pre-existed many years earlier in a Vienna sketch intended for a concerto or symphonic piece. The composer soon twigged that when films disappeared from the cinema, so did his scores; his contract –unusually for

Hollywood – allowed him to use his film music in other contexts, and - like Vivaldi and Handel long before him - he became an enthusiastic recycler.

The Symphony in F sharp first began to germinate in 1947, soon after the premiere by Jascha Heifetz of the Violin Concerto. After the war, also after the death of his father, Korngold decided to leave the film studio and attempt a comeback in the concert and opera world. He was 50 that year. “Fifty is old for a child prodigy,” he remarked; he felt had to make that move now or never. Besides, he was cheesed off with Hollywood and its cheesiness; his later scores were attached to films that were not good enough for the music he wrote them. He was famous for his dry wit, and when a journalist asked him why he was leaving, he responded: “When I first came to Hollywood, I could not understand the dialogue. Now I can.” He may have felt extra urgency because that spring, he had begun to suffer heart problems.

For his health, he agreed to take a short holiday in Canada. The spectacular scenery seems to have inspired him into starting the symphony; work on it, however, had to be put off when he suffered a full blown heart attack that September.

Once he had recovered, he decided, first, to try and go back to Vienna for the first time since 1938. The experience was not happy. The destruction of the Vienna State Opera House, the fight to get back his house (which had been taken over by the Nazis after the Anschluss) and the death of Richard Strauss all moved him deeply and left him sensing the rapid passing of time and the almost unrecognisable nature of the postwar world. The long-delayed premiere in Vienna of his 1938 opera *Die Kathrin* was a flop with the critics. And generally he felt less than welcome: the words “Ah Korngold, you’re back,” were sometimes followed by, “When are you leaving?” Gradually it’s been emerging that many ex-Nazis went on to hold important positions in postwar administrations, not least in Vienna and its cultural echelons. If Korngold could find no foothold, this may be no coincidence.

Eventually in 1951 Korngold resigned himself to a return to the States. Back in his Toluca Lake home, he threw himself into writing the much-postponed symphony, completing it the following year and scoring it for an orchestra of much-expanded capacity, including a hefty percussion section involving piano, celesta and marimba.

Describing the work in the third person, he wrote: “The composer characterizes his new symphony as a work of pure, absolute music with no program whatsoever, in spite of his experience that many people – after the first hearing – read into the first movement the terror and horrors of the years 1933-1945, and into the Adagio the sorrows and suffering of the victims of that time.” Nevertheless, that has never stopped anyone from feeling that the sometimes funereal slow movement might be effectively a threnody for the victims of the Nazi era. The work’s dedication makes grateful reference to the memory of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president of the USA at the time that Korngold had taken US citizenship.

Whether or not Korngold conceived it as a mourning for a lost world, the piece could hardly fail to be marked by his state of mind, which was of course deeply affected by everything he had been through and continued to go through.

The Symphony's structure is the classic four-movement format with opening sonata form allegro, scherzo and trio, adagio and finale. Its somewhat unwieldy key of F sharp happens to have been Korngold's personal favourite, but he does not specify whether it is F sharp major or F sharp minor – and the music in that respect is often ambiguous. This isn't the first time Korngold went for such ambiguity – his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand, written for Paul Wittgenstein as Ravel's was, around 1925, was in C sharp, neither major nor minor.

While the work's atmosphere seems to contain much of Korngold's bitterness, much of the material has origins quite distant from this time. The main theme of the first movement –stated by the clarinet with terse accompaniment and featuring a distinctive rising seventh - turned out to have been conceived as early as 1919. If you listen to the opening, you can tell it's not all that far from the Vienna of, for instance, Alban Berg.

The second subject is an old idea as well – it's based on a melody he had written around the same time for a close friend whose home, a villa named 'La Lirodou', he had made the subject of a wordplay. In his prodigy days he invented a personal musical signature which he called "the motif of the cheerful heart". In the Symphony it is upside down, introducing this second subject on the flute.

After that comes the scherzo, fleet-footed and brimming over with colourful effects on percussion and horns. It is, however, in the Adagio that the spectre of Korngold's film music appears in earnest: the heavy-hearted main theme, sounding within a cushion of string tone, is a vital theme in the film score *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, in which Bette Davis, as Queen Elizabeth I, must condemn her beloved Earl of Essex to execution. Further themes in the movement are based on ideas that appeared in two further scores, *Captain Blood* and *Anthony Adverse*. Korngold termed the movement's end an 'ecstatic Abgesang' (farewell).

I'd like to show you a little of how Korngold transferred the same ideas between film and concert platform. There is a motif in *Essex's March* which Korngold adapts extensively as a leitmotif as the film goes along... [In Birmingham I played the audience an extract of the *Essex March*, but here, from Youtube, is the original trailer for the film, in vivid HD...you can hear the motif in question towards the end of it...]

When Essex is condemned to death, that theme acquires a new guise altogether. And it sounds very much like the start of our Symphony's adagio, the heart of the whole work (you can hear it at the start of this post).

It's perhaps the most tragic music Korngold ever composed and critics who like Bruckner more than I do have compared it favourably to his great symphonic adagios; for example, the way the basic thematic material is very simple, yet the composer builds it up into something vastly bigger than the sum of its parts. In the final movement Korngold attempts to assert optimism and a bit of cyclic fun with themes from earlier in the work – but I can't help feeling there's a hollowness lurking behind the lot after he's shown us the depths of his heart in the adagio.

Korngold's optimism, his "cheerful heart" and his prodigious gifts brought him little joy later in life: the twin blows of exile and artistic rejection proved hard to withstand. He died in Hollywood, a very disappointed man, at the age of only 60, feeling – as his son told me – as if his child prodigy days had all happened to somebody else.

Korngold wrote in 1952 to a German admirer that he thought "my new Symphony will prove to the World that monotony and 'modernism' at the cost of abandoning invention, form, expression, beauty, melody – in short, all things connected with the despised 'romanticism' – which after all has produced some not so negligible masterpieces! – will ultimately result in disaster for the art of music."

Today, with the benefit of hindsight, we must assess for ourselves whether or not he was right. In the meantime, the Symphony is gradually becoming, at long last, a force to be reckoned with on concert platforms around the world. I hope you love it as much as I do. Enjoy the concert and thank you for listening.