



Composer of the Week is broadcast on BBC Radio 3 weekdays at 12 noon-1pm and repeated at 8.45pm-9.45pm

COMPOSER OF THE MONTH

ERICH KORNGOLD

POST-ROMANTIC
FILM MUSIC PIONEER**ATMOSPHERE AND ACTION**

Korngold's instinct for portraying narrative in music, replete with atmosphere and action, was evident when he was only 11, writing his enchanting *Don Quixote Character Pieces* for piano. His rhythmic flexibility, observant eye and gift for capturing personality paid off in Hollywood.

AMBITION AND CONTROL

Korngold's music can sometimes seem almost too ambitious for its own good. He applies dense textures, complex flights of chromaticism and polytonality and changes of time signature. The latter are often part of his eager bid for control and often amount to written-out rubatos.

THE MOTIF OF THE CHEERFUL HEART

As a teenager, Korngold invented a signature tune for himself which he named 'The Motif of the Cheerful Heart'. It is based on two interlocking, rising fourths and a rising fifth and appears as early as his *Märchenbilder* for solo piano (1910). In 1937, when he scored a turkey of a movie called *Another Dawn*, he transformed the motif with an aching, homesick tritone instead of the fifth; the melody, reused to open his Violin Concerto, is now world famous.

NEVER SHY OF SENTIMENT

While the 20th century reacted against Romanticism by refuting overt emotion in music, Korngold's big heart and generous nature often found him wearing his heart on both sleeves at once. His fondness for lyrical, operetta-like melody sometimes mingled with his distinctly futuristic over-ambition to startling effect, notably in *Das Wunder der Heliane*.

As a child prodigy, Korngold looked set to become one of Austria's most prized composers, but that was before he crossed the Atlantic to find success in Hollywood instead, as **Jessica Duchen** explains

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was long remembered chiefly as the man who took Mahler's lush style to the cinema. He was one of the principal composers who, during the 1930s and '40s, made film music an integral part of a movie, replete with the techniques of the great German Romantics. But there was far more to Korngold - as proved by a tremendous recent surge of interest in his concert works and operas, culminating in occasions from London to Australia this year to mark the 50th anniversary of his death.

Korngold's life story reads rather like a film script itself. First, it falls into a neat three-act scenario, each involving a compelling setting: turn-of-the-century Vienna, the Golden Age of Hollywood and the arid disappointments of post-war Europe and America. Next, conflict abounds, with two world wars, the antagonism between Korngold and his impossible father, and Korngold's inner conflicts as he grew from child prodigy phenomenon to controversial superstar and thence to depressive, overweight exile. Add Korngold's rapid-firing wit, instinct for musical timing, long love story with his wife, Luzi, and a supporting cast that included Mahler, Strauss, Maria Jeritza and Errol Flynn, and the stage is set, the cameras ready to roll.

Korngold was born in Brno in 1897, the young son of Julius Korngold, an eminent music critic who had been helped into his first post by Brahms. When Erich was four, Julius became second-in-command to Eduard Hanslick at the *Neue Freie Presse* and moved his family to Vienna. As snake-tongued in print as his boss, whose job he later inherited - thus becoming the most powerful music critic in the city - Julius shared Hanslick's conservative outlook. Mesmerised by Mahler, snide about Strauss and utterly outraged by the Second Viennese School, his anti-progressive stance would hobble his gifted son for the rest of his life.

By the time Erich was ten, his talent was so evident that Julius took him to play to Mahler. On the great man's advice, Korngold became the pupil of Zemlinsky who could hardly believe the flair with which his young charge completed his *Schauspiel Overture*, premiered when he was only 14. His ballet-pantomime *Der Schneemann* (The Snowman), which Zemlinsky orchestrated, had already been performed at the Vienna Hofoper and musicians such as the Arthurs Nikisch and Schnabel were gladly taking on his works. Influences on Korngold ranged from Mahler to Puccini and Stravinsky. Interestingly, at first his music was distinctly in touch with its times.





ILLUSTRATION: RISKO



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His first full-length stage work, *Die tote Stadt*, could only have come from the Viennese melting pot of late Romanticism and burgeoning Expressionism. Premiered in 1920, it was based on a violent novella by the Belgian Symbolist poet Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, and the opera's extended dream sequence and final catharsis - the inventions of the librettist 'Paul Schott', a pseudonym for Julius and Erich working together - betray awareness of Freud. The opera was widely performed in the interwar years: its atmosphere of doomed nostalgia matched the Zeitgeist.

Korngold's next and most ambitious opera, *Das Wunder der Heliane*, was the work he always regarded as his greatest. Dedicated to his bride, Luzi, whom he married after a long, fraught courtship hampered by his father's disapproval, it's a heady extravaganza celebrating the transcendental power of love, mingling the futurism of Lang's *Metropolis* with the Romantic excesses of Wagner's 'Liebestod'. *Heliane* was its composer's greatest hope, but became his greatest tragedy, largely because of his father. Ernst Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* - a jazzy fantasy opera about a black violinist - was scheduled for premiere at the same time, autumn 1927, threatening to make *Heliane* look outdated. Julius promptly wrote the kind of tirades against *Jonny* that could only produce the opposite effect. *Jonny* sold out; *Heliane* bore the backlash.

In the tough economic climate of the late 1920s, Korngold had a young family to feed. To his father's disappointment, he took a job at the Theater an der Wien, arranging and conducting operettas - he revered

Johann Strauss as much as Richard. Through this, he met the great director Max Reinhardt, who became one of his closest friends. With the rise of the Nazis in Germany, the Jewish Korngold ran into problems: his music was banned there after Hitler took power in 1933, and his German publishers were evasive about his opera, *Die Kathrin*, which originally concerned a romance between a German girl and a French soldier (Korngold attempted to skirt the awkwardness by making Kathrin Swiss). In 1933, Reinhardt left for America; the following year, making a film of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Warner Brothers, he invited Korngold to join him to arrange Mendelssohn's music for the project.

Korngold's unerring instinct for the relationship of time, sound and vision made him the perfect film composer. Offered unprecedented privileges by Jack Warner, head of the studio, Korngold commuted between Europe and Hollywood until the Anschluss

(Union) of March 1938, when he was fortuitously in America composing the score for *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. He brought his family to safety—including Julius—but is said to have vowed to compose no more serious music until Hitler had been defeated.

At first, Korngold was idealistic about films, treating them as if they were operas and envisaging a day when entire operas would be written specially for the screen. He won Oscars for *Anthony Adverse* (1936) and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). But in time, as the novelty wore off and the moralising Hayes Commission wrecked plotline after plotline, the quality of the films Korngold was assigned began to decline. His fellow immigrant Max Steiner, who scored



SAILING TO SAFETY: Korngold arrives in New York with his family in 1936

King Kong and *Gone With the Wind* among others, remarked: 'Erich, since you came to Hollywood, your music has got worse and mine has got better. How do you account for that?' 'That's easy,' quipped Korngold: 'you've been stealing from me and I've been stealing from you!' In 1949, after recovering from a heart attack, Korngold returned to Vienna for the first time. 'When I first came

to Hollywood, I couldn't understand the dialogue. Now I can,' he told an American journalist.

Julius died in 1945. He had never ceased berating his son for abandoning high art and, in a piece of typically questionable advice, he had pointed out that when Korngold's films vanished, so did the music; perhaps Korngold should recycle the best

THE LIFE & TIMES A quick guide to the main events in the life of Erich Wolfgang Korngold

THE LIFE



1897 The second son of leading music critic Julius Korngold and Josefine, daughter of a spirits manufacturer, he is born on 29 May in Brünn (now Brno), Moravia. In 1901 the family moves to Vienna.

1906 After precociously composing a cantata (*Gold*) aged 11, he is declared a 'genius' by Mahler who suggests he studies with Zemlinsky. The Vienna Court Opera stages his pantomime *The Snowman* in 1910.

1920 Audiences flock to his operatic thriller **DIE TOTE STADT** (*The Dead City*) and take to his Piano Concerto for the Left Hand (1923). In 1924 he marries his sweetheart Luzi von Sonnenthal.



1927 With a growing family to support, he earns a living arranging operettas as well as teaching at the Vienna Staatsakademie. His mystical *Das Wunder der Heliane*, perhaps his greatest opera, is overshadowed by Ernst Krenek's jazz-influenced **JONNY SPIELT AUF**.



1897

THE TIMES

1905 Supplied with fresh milk from the surrounding dairy farmlands of Pennsylvania, Milton S Hershey opens the world's largest chocolate-manufacturing plant. Korngold becomes a chocolate fanatic in later life, stashing supplies away in a music cupboard.



1910-12 Although famed (some would say notorious) for his explicit and erotic paintings of nudes, Viennese Expressionist artist Egon Schiele paints a striking series of landscapes entitled **DIE TOTE STADT** during the dying years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.



the Empire is broken up and Austria becomes a republic.

1914 The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the imperial throne, sparks World War I. After the war, during which Korngold serves as musical director of an infantry regiment, the



1924 Three-cushion billiards becomes so popular in the US that 'balkline' champion **WILLIE HOPPE** and 'pocket billiards' champion Ralph Greenleaf hold a much-publicised exhibition match, battling it out over a period of several days. Korngold is a keen billiards fan, and even owns his own antique Biedermeier table.

of those scores in concert works. Korngold obeyed. His Violin Concerto, premiered by Jascha Heifetz in 1947, was based on music from *Another Dawn*, *The Prince and the Pauper* and others; his Symphony in F sharp, his last major work, also drew on film scores, notably *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*. But critics were disgusted by the idea of bringing Hollywood to the concert hall. One of them just had to say, 'More corn than gold'-a preconception that has dogged his reputation ever since.

Nor did Korngold encounter much joy in Vienna, which proved a catalogue of disappointments. Promised performances never materialised; old acquaintances greeted him with comments like, 'Ah, you're back. When are you leaving?' While he continued to write in his own style with his own voice, the world around him had changed beyond recognition. Korngold, guilty only of being true to himself, died of a brain

haemorrhage- and, perhaps, grief - back in Hollywood, aged only 60.

Today, film music is regarded as an art and Korngold has proved ripe for reassessment. With a flood of new recordings and a major celebration at the Southbank Centre this autumn, *The Adventures of Erich Wolfgang Korngold* is set to continue. •

The London Philharmonic Orchestra performs works by Korngold at London's Royal Festival Hall on 2, 14 and 21 November

RADIO  *Radio 3's Composer of the Week programme is broadcast at 12 noon*

Monday to Friday and then repeated at 8.45pm each day.

November's Composers of the Week are:

- 5-9 November Purcell's Contemporaries*
- 12-16 November Ireland*
- 19-23 November Rameau*
- 26-30 November Korngold and Rózsa*

KORNGOLD RECOMMENDED DISCS



DIE TOTE STADT

Carole Neblett (Marietta), René Kollo (Paul), Hermann Prey (Franz/Pierrot); Munich Radio Symphony Orchestra/Erich Leinsdorf
RCA Cold Seal CD 87767 £17.99
A feast of melody, fantasy and high emotion.



VIOLIN CONCERTO

Jascha Heifetz (violin)
RCA Gold Seal 0902661752-2 £9.99
Authenticity from the violinist who premiered this robust and deeply felt concerto.



DAS WUNDER DER HELIANE

Anna Tomowa-Sintow (Heliane), John David de Haan (Stranger), Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra/John Mauceri.
Decca 4758271 £22.99
The only complete disc of this magnum opus.



ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD: ADVENTURES OF A WUNDERKIND (DVD)

Directed by Barrie Gavin
Arthaus Musik 100362 £18.99
Superb documentary introduction to Korngold.

• To order these discs see page 96



1934 His arrangement of music for a film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in **HOLLYWOOD** starts a new career, bringing Korngold to the forefront in composing symphonic film music (*Captain Blood*, 1935). *Anthony Adverse* wins the studio music department an Oscar in 1936.

1938 The Korngold family leave Nazi-threatened Austria for the US where Erich produces high-class scores for Technicolor movies *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* and *The Sea Hawk*, all with **ERROL FLYNN**.



1945 On returning to concert music with works such as the Violin Concerto (1945), Korngold finds his late Romantic style is no longer in demand; he is derided by the music critics ('more corn than gold' sniped one). His lifelong addiction to sweets and **CAKES** hastens a major heart attack in 1947.



1957 An attempt to return to Vienna in 1950 proves disillusioning; audiences fail to appreciate his music and his deeply felt Symphony in F sharp major (1952) is mostly ignored. After spending his latter months partially disabled by a stroke, he dies on 29 November 1957 in Hollywood. He is buried in Hollywood Forever Cemetery, Los Angeles.

1927 The first feature-length movie with music and dialogue, **THE JAZZ SINGER**, breaks box-office records, ushering in the Golden Age of Hollywood and creating work for composers outside of the concert hall. The first all-colour, all-talking film, *On with the Show*, follows in 1929.



1930 **SIGMUND FREUD** explores destructiveness as a manifestation of the death instinct in *Civilization and its Discontents*, seeing aggression arising from the restriction of instincts. His lucid writing style wins him the Goethe Prize for literature that year.



1938 Under Hitler's orders, German troops march into Austria to enforce an Anschluss (Union). Although the Korngold family escapes to America just weeks beforehand, many fellow Jews are promptly arrested, imprisoned, and their property is confiscated.

1952 At Johns Hopkins University, C Walt Lillehei pioneers **OPEN-HEART SURGERY** using induced hypothermia. He later develops and implements the first wearable external pacemaker and trains a new generation of surgeons.

