

OPERA NEWS

PUBLISHED BY THE METROPOLITAN OPERA GUILD

Recordings > Historical
February 2015 — Vol. 79, No. 8

KORNGOLD: *Die Tote Stadt*

□ Cunitz, Benningsen; Friedrich, Kusche, Braun; Bayerische Rundfunks Orchestra and Choir, Lehmann.
No text. MYTO 00318



Although now approaching the status of a repertory staple in opera houses all over the world, Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt* had temporarily slipped into obscurity when this recording was made, in 1952. Before World War II it had been one of the most-frequently performed of modern operas, but, labeled "degenerate" Jewish music by the Nazis, it was suppressed and then all but forgotten. This rare radio recording by the Bayerischen Rundfunks, under the direction of Fritz Lehmann, is mostly interesting for historical reasons as one of the opera's first major postwar performances. (Little information on this performance is available anywhere, and Myto's bare-bones packaging offers nothing more than a cast list and track list.)

The sound is surprisingly good for a monaural recording of that era. Korngold's kaleidoscopic score cries out for stereo, but one gets little sense of audio flatness or age here. Unfortunately, this is not a definitive version of the work in any way. Lehmann conducts the Bayerischen Rundfunks with a surprisingly heavy hand, his tempi often slowed-down and exaggerated. Moreover, some changes were made to the score. Gone are the haunting, humming voices that briefly enter Fritz's *Pierrotlied* in Act II. Act I leads into Act II with no discernible break — the orchestral moment at the end of Act I and the thrilling prelude to Act II are cut. Act III is also shorn of its brief prelude, starting *in media res* with Marietta's first lines.

Karl Friedrich (1905–81), a popular *lirico spinto* of his day, lends his strong, virile timbre to the leading role of Paul. What he misses is a real sense of the desperation that wracks the character. Soprano Maud Cunitz (1911–87) was forty-one at the time — she had made her debut in 1934 — and sounds many years older. In this most sensual and seductive of roles, Cunitz unfortunately sounds like a shrieking old woman, her crucial top notes spread and curdling. The supporting cast—Benno Kusche as Frank, Hans Braun as Fritz, and Lilian Benningsen as Brigitta — do well enough in their small roles without making a huge impression.

To any extent that this early radio performance may have helped spur the postwar revival of interest in *Die tote Stadt*, Korngold fans can be grateful. But the opera's true resurrection would be decades away. There have been far better and more complete versions of this work staged, recorded, and televised since then.

As a bonus, Mytos provides a 1959 radio performance of Marietta's Lute Song ("Glück, das mir verblieb") by soprano Erika Köth and tenor Rudolf Schock. Schock's sound is firm and warm; Köth's tremolo-throttled chirpiness has all the charm of a buzzsaw. □

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