

A Deliciously Decadent 'Dead City'

By PETER G. DAVIS

Erich Wolfgang Korngold's 1920 opera "Die tote Stadt" ("The Dead City") is a perfect example of what used to be called "movie music" but in the very best sense—a luminous symphonic sound, luscious romantic themes and explicitly suggestive musical effects that instantly define time, place and dramatic gesture.

And why not? For Korngold spent the latter period of his creative life, the 1930's and '40's, as the dean of Hollywood film composers. Between 1934 and 1947 he wrote 18 movie scores, two of which, "The Adventures of Robin Hood" and "Anthony Adverse," brought him Academy Awards.

Actually, "Die tote Stadt," which the City Opera is reviving Wednesday night, is a product of the 1920's, when Korngold was the wunderkind of Vienna's musical world. The City Opera's production will use films and projections instead of the customary scenery and backdrops to capture the deliciously decadent, hallucinatory tone of the plot—a singularly appropriate piece of poetic justice considering Korngold's unusual double career.

The scene of the opera is the Belgian town of Bruges towards the end of the 19th century. The central character is Paul, a young man whose wife, Marie, has recently died. Paul now lives alone in a gloomy studio brooding over her portrait and a lock of her hair that he has enshrined in a crystal box. One day, Paul encounters an amoral dancer, Marietta, who resembles Marie in every physical respect. He becomes obsessed with the girl and plunges into a weird fantasy life.

The portrait of his dead wife comes to life and she pleads with him to remain true to the memory of their love. But Paul only becomes more deeply involved in his tortured visions of Marietta until—in a moment of frenzy—he strangles her with the lock of Marie's hair ("Now they resemble each other ex-

actly," he gasps over Marietta's corpse). The grisly deed wrenches Paul back to reality—it was all quite literally a dream and, to the opera's smash-hit tune first heard in Act 1, he sings gratefully, "A dream has destroyed my dream," as he prepares to leave his "dead city," forget the past and build a new life. Exactly what that "new life" is going to be remains ambiguous. In Frank Corsaro's production for the City Opera there is reportedly little doubt that when Paul goes out the door he is intent on re-establishing a relationship with the real Marietta rather than the woman of his imagination.

Whatever else it may be, "Die tote Stadt" is a work of extraordinary precociousness, for Korngold was barely out of his teens and already a famous composer when he wrote the opera. Not only is the score astounding for its easy command of a complex post-romantic idiom, but for its success in conjuring up the perfect musical image to complement each lurid detail—for a boy of 20 to be as wise in the ways of necrophilial eroticism as he was in the latest techniques of early 20th-century composition is unsettling to say the least.

The music contains a little bit of everything *au courant* in 1920—Richard Strauss, Lehár, Puccini, Debussy—but Korngold makes it all work on his terms. Marietta's familiar Lute Song and the nostalgic *Tanzlied* are elegant examples of operetta kitsch at its most seductive, while the singing portrait and the duel between Paul and his friend Frank for the key to Marietta's apartment are straight out of "Tales of Hoffmann" but no less effective for that (the entire opera, in fact, owes a great deal to E.T.A. Hoffmann's special brand of grotesquerie). Echoes of Strauss are heard on almost every page: the quintet of Marietta's *commedia dell'arte* colleagues in Act 2 leans heavily on similar scenes in "Ariadne," Marietta's final dance of triumphs harks back to Salome and Elektra (not to mention Charpentier's Louise), and the opera's lush orchestral coloration would not have



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Maria Jeritza—she set Vienna on its ear in 1921

been possible without Strauss's extension of Wagnerian chromaticism.

For these reasons alone Strauss must have been particularly nettled by the triumph of "Die tote Stadt"

in Vienna. Not only that, Erich Korngold was the son of that city's most influential music critic, Julius Korngold, and Strauss, who had just assumed joint directorship of the Vienna State Opera with

the conductor Franz Schalk, had little choice but to stage a highly acclaimed new opera by the local young sensation if he wanted to keep on the good side of the press. Despite all the typical

Viennese backstage intrigues and charges of string-pulling, the opera's success was real enough—Korngold and his father were clever enough not to arrange the world premiere for Vienna, but on neutral ground at Hamburg and Cologne where "Die tote Stadt" could stand on its own merits. A wild success in both cities on December 4, 1920, the work came home a month after these initial performances with the protean Maria Jeritza setting the town on its ear in the dual role of Marie-Marietta, a part she later re-created at her Metropolitan Opera debut in the fall of 1921. (Jeritza, by the way, now makes her home in New Jersey and is expected to be on hand at the City Opera revival this week.) For the next ten years, the work was given over 80 different productions by companies all over the world before fading from the repertory altogether.

Well, not quite. "Die tote Stadt" does turn up every now and then in Vienna, most recently at the Volksoper in 1967. The bittersweet strains of Marietta's sensuous "Glück das mir verblieb" stopped the show once again and the young Korngold's innate gifts for wringing the juice out of a melodramatic situation as well as his sheer compositional know-how could still impress an audience.

And, then too, the opera is quintessentially Viennese. Paul's little moral before the final curtain points up the dangers of living in the past, dreaming of lost beauty and desperately trying to recapture what can never be again. In 1920, the war was over, the Austro-Hungarian Empire only a memory and economic depression a bitter reality. No wonder the Viennese responded so eagerly to an opera that told them gently to forget the past and at the same time made nostalgia so devilishly irresistible.

"I detest cheap sentiment," snaps Margo Channing in the film "All About Eve," obviously relishing every weepy note of Liszt's "Liebestraum." Korngold would have understood that situation, and even at the age of 20 exploited the essence of it with all the skill of a Puccini or Massenet. He never became a really great composer—perhaps because he had absorbed too much too quickly and unlike another boy wonder, Mozart, never rose above his own facility. Even so, "Die tote Stadt"—and the later film music as well—has its potent musical and theatrical attractions that can even make "cheap sentiment" seem like art, if only for a moment. ■