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MUSIC REVIEW | 'DIE TOTE STADT'

## A Mystery Opera, Played Out on Both the Stage and the Screen

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

In the 1930's the Austrian-born composer [Erich Wolfgang Korngold](#), working in Hollywood, essentially invented the symphonic film score, thrilling audiences with his music for "Captain Blood," "The Adventures of Robin Hood" and other swashbuckling favorites.

You could say that it all started in Germany in 1920. Korngold, then 24, enjoyed an enormous success with his mystery opera "Die Tote Stadt." In recent decades this once-popular work has become something of a rarity. The [New York City Opera](#), though, believes in it. On Sunday afternoon the company revived its 1975 production by the director Frank Corsaro and the film and slide designer Ronald Chase, which uses scrim, projections and filmed scenes to convey the dreamlike story.

This production, last presented in 2001, should be seen if only to understand the opera career that might have been if Korngold had not remained in the United States after the Nazi Anschluss in Austria.

"Die Tote Stadt" ("The Dead City"), adapted from a novel by Georges Rodenbach, has a libretto by Paul Schott, actually the composer and his father, Julius Korngold, a powerful music critic, who used this name as a pseudonym. Set in 1895 in Bruges, Belgium, portrayed as a dying city, the story tells of Paul, a wealthy man mourning the death of his saintly young wife, Marie, for whom he maintains a veritable shrine in his home.

By chance Paul has met a coquettish dancer, Marietta, an eerie look-alike for Marie. The story follows Paul's inner struggle between fidelity to his wife's memory and attraction to Marietta. Except that in the final scene, all that has happened to Paul since meeting Marietta, including a fit of uncontrollable rage that drives him to strangle the defiant coquette, turns out, it would appear, to have been a bad dream.

Korngold's Straussian score is sumptuously lyrical, theatrically vivid and glitteringly orchestrated. No wonder he was a perfect fit for Hollywood. Clearly, Korngold was not a bit intrigued by the radical innovations of the Second Viennese School, though his tonally rooted harmonic language is spiked with out-of-focus chords and wayward inner voices to create exotic colors and emotional tension. The music conveys sensuality and breathless drama though not, for me, the mysterious and obsessive dimensions of the story.

Making his City Opera debut on Sunday, the lanky, ardent tenor Dan Chamandy sang the role of Paul. The dynamic soprano Susan B. Anthony was Marietta (and the voice of Marie). But these roles are vocally taxing, and neither artist seemed completely at ease. Mr. Chamandy's top range was tight, and his soft singing thin; Ms. Anthony's voice sounded patchy and strained in places. Still, they sang with intensity and keen dramatic involvement, and the cast, over all, was strong. George Manahan conducted a sweeping account of this rhapsodic music.

The projected images certainly created an appropriately cinematic look for the production, though I could have done without all the fog that was too often pumped onto the stage. Using projections meant that the action was continually played behind a scrim, which distanced the singers from the audience. We might as well have been watching a film. That may have been the point.

*“Die Tote Stadt” continues through Oct. 14 at the New York City Opera, Lincoln Center; (212) 870-5570.*

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