

## **Erich Wolfgang Korngold – The Maestro of Hollywood**

*An examination of Korngold's first film assignment A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM and how he subsequently transformed motion picture scoring into an art form.*

**by Brendan G Carroll**  
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When Erich Wolfgang Korngold first arrived in Hollywood in October 1934, film music was relatively undeveloped. Although throughout the years of silent cinema, live musical accompaniment had always played an important role, few original scores were composed. By the 1920s, standard classical repertoire was ruthlessly mined in the creation of what amounted to suites, issued by the studios for important films and performed by symphony orchestras in the larger cinemas or a lone pianist in smaller, provincial houses.

With the coming of sound to motion pictures in late 1926, all of this changed. Musical scoring was initially deemed unnecessary – it was spoken dialogue that mattered. Only a brief musical introduction under the film's main titles was heard, partly because of the technical limitations of early film recording. The gradual development of original musical scoring for sound films only really began in late 1932 when it finally became possible to record music, dialogue and sound effects on separate optical tracks and combine them in a composite soundtrack.

**Max Steiner** (1888-1971) another Viennese émigré, is credited with writing the first genuine original film score – that for KING KONG (released March 1933) and even this came about almost by accident. The film's extraordinary fantasy scenes provoked laughter at its early previews and the producer David O Selznick asked Steiner to clarify the mood of certain scenes with music. Steiner had already begun scoring key scenes in earlier films like THE MOST DANGEROUS GAME and A BILL OF DIVORCEMENT and relished the chance to do a full score.

With KING KONG, he demonstrated conclusively what a powerful impact music could have on a film, even though in structural terms at least, his score was fairly simplistic in design and scope, comprising only three or four major themes. It was more in the *method* – in how he used this material to underscore the remarkable visuals on screen that makes this early work so important now.

Film music may well have remained in this somewhat basic, simplistic style were it not for the arrival of **Erich Wolfgang Korngold**, a musical genius who immediately grasped the potential of the medium, completely transformed it and, at a stroke, created the style and rhetoric of film music that endures to the present day. He was the first to compose in long, flowing lines and to conceive and construct truly symphonic scores that are contrapuntally developed throughout with a complex multi-thematic structure.

Korngold's interaction with cinema did not begin in America. He had already been approached by UFA, Germany's leading studio as early as 1930, to score musicals, chiefly as a result of his tremendous success in the field of operetta. Collaborations with Hubert Marischka in Vienna and Max Reinhardt in Berlin, Paris and London resulted in outstanding adaptations of works by Johann Strauss, Jacques Offenbach and Leo Fall as well as original stage works utilising the music of the Strauss family, most notably *Walzer aus Wien* which later became the international stage hit, *The Great Waltz*.

As a result of these successes, UFA approached Korngold with a number of projects, including Erich Pommer's famous musical *Der Kongress Tanzt* but Korngold was either too busy or not interested in scoring a film at the time and declined.

Yet it was Korngold's experience in theatre, and more importantly, of underscoring dialogue and dramatic action that would serve him so well later on, when he finally arrived in Hollywood. For example, when one examines his score for Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* composed for a Vienna stage production in 1918, the inspired facility of musically highlighting words and action is clearly already present. This innate understanding between music and action is obvious in an even earlier work – the piece that catapulted him to world fame as a child prodigy, the 2 act ballet-pantomime *Der Schneemann*, composed at the age of eleven and staged at the Wiener Hofoper on Oct 4 1910.

In this early score, the extraordinary *wunderkind* shows an effortless skill in character delineation, descriptive writing and pacing and it is remarkable how the mood and sound of this very first stage work resembles his later film scores. Although its orchestration was largely supervised by his teacher Alexander Zemlinsky, this was clearly a collaborative effort between them for it sounds exactly like Korngold, not

Zemlinsky. Just as he did in Hollywood, while working (due to pressured deadlines) with his preferred orchestrators Hugo Friedhofer and Ray Heindorf, Korngold achieved the sound he wanted in *Der Schneemann*. It was a *succès fou* and conquered thirty stages before WWII.

Korngold never worked for UFA or indeed any European film studio. It was Max Reinhardt who opened the door to a Hollywood career and it was to prove providential for the composer. Max Reinhardt's much-publicised arrival in Los Angeles in 1934, had been to produce and direct his lavish stage production of Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' at the Hollywood Bowl - a significant cultural event that acted as a catalyst, encouraging a great many other European talents to follow him to Los Angeles. His eminence also brought a credence and integrity to the movies, which the film world wanted at almost any cost.

Reinhardt agreed to a lucrative contract with Warner Brothers, to make an extravagant screen version of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' which, at Reinhardt's behest, would be almost entirely created by émigré talents. The Danish costume designer Max Ree, the Polish expressionist painter Anton Grot, the Russian choreographer Bronislawa Nijinska and above all, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, would collaborate on a darkly Teutonic conception of Shakespeare's comedy - with the help of several much-needed interpreters!

From the beginning, it was decided that Mendelssohn's original music would be used. For Reinhardt, Korngold was indispensable and his only choice as musical arranger for the film. This was to be Max Reinhardt's only completed sound film, a genuine cinematic *Gesamtkunstwerk* and one of the most extraordinary films of that era, perhaps the key example of an émigré creative project in the 1930s.

If European talent was behind the cameras, the stars of the film were to be all American. For his cast, Reinhardt was ultimately restricted to those already under contract to the Warner studio and thus, the film starred James Cagney (as Bottom) Ian Hunter (as Theseus) Dick Powell (as Lysander) Anita Louise (as Titania) Mickey Rooney (as Puck) and a very young Olivia de Havilland (as Hermia).

William (formerly Wilhelm) Dieterle (a former Reinhardt pupil in Germany, now an accomplished screen director) was appointed assistant

director to help Reinhardt with the film's technical requirements, and Henry "Heinz" Blanke, a former protégé of Ernst Lubitsch in Berlin, produced the film, with overall supervision from Hal B Wallis, Warner's formidable production chief.

Korngold had already worked with Reinhardt in Europe on highly successful adaptations of *Die Fledermaus* and *La Belle Helene*. When a telegram arrived from Reinhardt himself, inviting Korngold to Hollywood for "six to eight weeks work" adapting Mendelssohn's original score, he accepted, intrigued at the prospect. In fact, the project was to take almost half a year to complete and proved to be the most complex screen assignment of Korngold's career.

In spite of never having worked in films before, Korngold quickly adapted to the needs of the medium and, a born innovator, created his own style and procedure from the beginning.

Korngold arrived in Hollywood on October 31 1934 and immediately set to work. On being shown around the studio, he asked a technician how long one foot of film was; "Twelve inches" came the cynical reply. "No", Korngold insisted "...I mean, how long does it last in time on the screen?" Nobody had ever asked this before and someone went to find out. When the answer came - two thirds of a second - Korngold smiled and said "Ach...exactly the same length of time as the first two measures of Mendelssohn's *Scherzo!*". Already he was applying his incredible grasp of mathematics to film scoring.

Indeed, the technical challenge of working in films genuinely fascinated him. In an article published in 1940, he vividly recalled his unique approach to that challenge on this film:

*I had to make preliminary recordings - the so-called playbacks - of Mendelssohn's Scherzo and Nocturne, which were relayed over huge loudspeakers during the actual filming {of the ballet episodes}. Further, I conducted the orchestra on stage for complicated simultaneous "takes" and lastly, after the film was cut, I conducted a number of music pieces, which were inserted in the completed picture as background music. In addition, however, I had to invent a new method, which was a combination of all three techniques, for the music that accompanied the spoken word.*

*I wrote out the music in advance, conducted - without orchestra -*

*the actor on the stage in order to make him speak his lines in the required rhythm and then, sometimes weeks later, guided by earphones, I recorded the orchestral part....*

(from an article published in 'Music and Dance in California' June 1940)

From the beginning, his approach was operatic. Seeing this extraordinary film today one is struck by how much of the actual text is either sung or spoken rhythmically, to the musical score.

Korngold's recollections in 1940 were corroborated by actor Victor Jory who played Oberon. In 1975, he recalled how Korngold carefully rehearsed him in the precise rhythm he wanted for the famous speech which begins "I know a bank where the wild thyme grows....."

*When it came to the actual filming, Korngold lay on his stomach in the bushes, out of camera range and literally conducted my performance ....as though I was singing the dialogue. Reinhardt and Dieterle were in complete agreement with this - and it was the first and only time I ever recall that a composer's wishes superseded those of either the director or the actor. But then – I suppose he wasn't just any composer.....*

(Interview with the author; Sept 5 1975)

Mr Jory is not the only witness to Korngold's remarkable influence on the staging of the films on which he worked. The celebrated English actress, Dame Flora Robson remembered a similar phenomenon during the shooting of THE SEA HAWK in 1940 (in which she played Queen Elizabeth I). She remembered:

*I so well remember the big court procession scene... I remember Mr Korngold was there. He and Mr Curtiz [director Michael Curtiz] and the producer Henry Blanke spoke to each other only in German so I was not really aware of what was going on - but it seems that Korngold was most keen that we should all march in a particular tempo, presumably to match his music! I had never heard of a composer influencing a director before. I also remember Korngold seemed utterly fascinated by the little pet monkey that belonged to Errol Flynn in the story and spent a lot of time watching him. The monkey was a bit of a nuisance on set and was always getting away from his keeper, running about and making mischief. When I asked him why he was so interested in the creature, Mr Korngold smiled to me and said in his heavy German accent, "Oh ..I try to catch*

*his rrrrrhythm” – he always rolled his Rs like that....*

*Interview with the author October 1975 in Brighton, UK*

Such attention to detail was typical. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Korngold set a precedent and, in almost all of his film assignments, he would have *carte blanche* as to where music was to be placed in the film, would influence and on occasion, even write dialogue (if it concerned music) and would be present throughout on the set. He even controlled the cutting and editing of his films to fit in with his music - an unprecedented concession that no other composer for films has ever enjoyed.

In fact, Korngold established procedures on his very first film, which would influence the medium immediately and continue right up to the present day. Every composer working in films at that time copied him and many still do today. His mastery of the *genre* also made him indispensable to Warner Brothers and ensured him a second career in motion pictures.

After several weeks work on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Korngold had assumed his usual place of authority in a production, just as he would in the theatre. The studio chiefs and especially those in the music department were slightly in awe of him. He insisted that a lot of extra musicians were hired to augment the studio orchestra, which was still, at this time, only a glorified dance band. Steadily, he built it into a proper symphony orchestra and the standard of playing on the soundtrack - to say nothing of Korngold's vigorous, spirited conducting of the music and his thrilling tempi - is one of the most impressive aspects of the film today.

## **KORNGOLD'S ADAPTATION OF MENDELSSOHN'S SCORE**

Whereas Korngold's later original film scores have been subject to much examination, this very first assignment has been largely ignored by scholars. Yet here we can see, in embryonic form, how Korngold developed the scoring techniques of modern film music and in a manner far more sophisticated than anyone before or since.

It must be noted that the musical adaptation by Erich Wolfgang Korngold for this extraordinary motion picture was tailored to meet the special screen conceptualisation by Max Reinhardt and not the requirements of the original stage play.

Reinhardt emphasised the magical fantasy of Shakespeare's play in a way that would be impossible in the theatre and, just as he adapted Shakespeare's original concept, so he encouraged Korngold to develop and embellish Mendelssohn's music to fit the modern interpretation of a motion picture. Furthermore, the final film script offered less than half of the Shakespearean text.

Mendelssohn's approach is very much influenced by early 19th century romanticism, whereas Korngold's is almost post-romantic. Nevertheless, Korngold wished to remain true to Mendelssohn as much as possible. From the outset, however, it was clear that considerable adaptation and additional music would be necessary. Mendelssohn's Opus 61 incidental score contains no music for Act 1 and does not really begin until after the Scherzo which is really an Entr'acte between Acts 1 and 2. There are long stretches in the drama where little if any music is provided. Therefore, it quickly became clear that the original overture and incidental music by Mendelssohn would need to be considerably expanded to 'underpaint' (as Reinhardt had quaintly put it) the remarkable visual style of the film.

A lesser composer would have merely repeated the sections of the existing Mendelssohn music to fill in what was lacking. Korngold however, was a richly gifted, creative musician who could not resort to musical 'padding'. He was reluctant to compose new music of his own although some short sequences are indeed by him, as well as several bridging passages, all ingeniously cast in the style of Mendelssohn.

Korngold's main solution was to incorporate music from many other key works by Mendelssohn and to create a kind of Mendelssohnian symphonic poem. Therefore, themes and excerpts from the symphonies, chamber works, lieder and the famous 'Songs Without Words' are carefully woven into a complex musical fabric with enormous skill, to create a homogenous symphonic whole - a complete work.

Moreover, it is interesting to see how, in this very first film assignment, Korngold already thinks in operatic terms, adopting his practise of *leitmotifs* for individual characters and situations. Even the famous four

opening chords of the Overture are used in this manner, reappearing throughout in varied instrumentation and even altered harmony at key moments, reflecting changes of mood and acting almost as a thematic link.

A number of other creative problems presented themselves, in particular musical editing. The famous Overture, which Korngold had insisted must be used under the film titles, was far too lengthy for the purpose - the title sequence lasted less than three minutes.

Korngold made judicious cuts - always musical and always retaining the integrity and essence of the music. In the film, the title sequence segues immediately to the Palace Scenes and Korngold here uses typical fanfares (a hallmark of his style) to bridge to *Theseus' Hymn*. Both the fanfares and the hymn are based on the finale of Mendelssohn's Scottish Symphony. The rhythm and flow of music and image is superb and immediately, Korngold has grasped the rhetoric of cinema. The pace of a motion picture is much more rapid than a stage play. Korngold instinctively felt the rhythm of the film, switching from one theme or musical sequence to another, as the scene dictates.

From the outset, he created his own unique method of scoring a film where, in a special projection room equipped with a piano, he would have the reels of film run for him repeatedly, while he improvised his musical sequences on the piano to the running footage, and then later, he would complete a full, annotated piano score. In this way, he was able to catch the pace of screen action. In his later film assignments, when composing his own original music, this method became even more important for him. However, his skill in knowing when to score - and more importantly, what music to use - is present from this very first film. One would never guess that he was a novice in the film studio, such is his assurance and confidence in the medium.

The orchestration of those portions of Mendelssohn, used as written, was not 're-touched' by Korngold, but where a new adaptation occurs, Korngold expanded the orchestra to include saxophones, piano (always indispensable for Korngold to emphasise harmony and give added 'sweep'), guitar and most significantly, the vibraphone - an instrument Korngold discovered in America.

Extra percussion and harp is added and Korngold thickens Mendelssohn's textures, especially in the lower strings. This was undoubtedly to compensate for the limitations of the monaural sound recording, where



the altogether more delicate scoring of early 19th century orchestration would be lost. The additional instruments are used almost exclusively for the 'magical' effects which were necessary to match the exotic scenes on screen, achieved by the technical wizardry of the studio. A wordless chorus (for the Fairies) is also added to some scenes - a most effective and appropriate device.

Korngold's choice of repertoire for the score demonstrates his almost encyclopaedic knowledge of Mendelssohn's music. One is also struck by the operatic treatment of the music and the large number of vocal settings of the text. Korngold clearly already saw motion pictures as an extension of the operatic medium. Later he often referred to his films as 'operas without singing'. In this film, he created the blueprint for his approach.

To give an idea of the complex musical tapestry that Korngold wove from Mendelssohn's work, consider the following sequences. The **Nebeltanz** (The Fog Dance) as Titania and the fairies materialise from the mist in the forest, is based on music from the Overture Opus 21, (with added chorus) with Korngold embellishing the orchestration considerably (and wonderfully) to match the remarkable special effects on screen, as the fairies literally materialise out of the air and slide down a moonbeam! Titania's solo **Over Hill, Over Dale** is an adaptation of 'Neue Liebe', Opus 19, No.4 (transposed to E minor) and this is followed by the famous Scherzo from Opus 61. When Titania meets Oberon the music is based on two phrases from the *Lieder Ohne Worte* Opus 67, No 6 (in E) arranged for female chorus. Following this, the famous four opening chords of the overture are altered by Korngold to act as a bridge. Oberon's spoken dialogue "I know a bank where the wild thyme grows" (so well remembered by Victor Jory) is accompanied by a beautiful arrangement of the song *An die Entfernte* Opus 71, No.3.

Later, as the fairies prepare Titania for her marriage to Bottom, Korngold supplies a wonderful arrangement for girl's chorus of the famous 'Spinning Song' (*Lieder Ohne Worte* in C, Op 67, No 4), as the Fairies literally 'spin' Titania's bridal veil from cobwebs, while the **Hochzeitwalzer** that immediately follows it is a humorous adaptation of the Wedding March, now in three quarter time, newly and wittily orchestrated by Korngold; a trio of jazzy saxophones feature prominently to add to the surreal, 'other worldly' mood. **Titania's Wiegenlied** is an exquisite arrangement of the so-called 'Venetian Gondola's Song' from the *Lieder Ohne Worte* Opus 19, No 6. As dawn approaches and the forest scenes draw to a close, Korngold also made his own adaptation of the famous **Notturmo** transposed down a semitone into Eb major

(because, as Korngold remarked later, Reinhardt's conception was set in darkest night) and which he deftly (and imperceptibly) extends to match the memorable ballet sequence on the screen.

The **Notturmo** is an exceptional example of how ingeniously Korngold adapted Mendelssohn for the requirements of film. To Mendelssohn's original orchestration, a third horn is added along with two trumpets, a full trombone section, tuba, timpani and cymbals. The added instruments are used with great subtlety. Korngold's arrangement does not challenge Mendelssohn's original conception as much as it colours its timbral realisation. Thus, the opening horn solo is preserved, but is supplemented by the other two horns, the tuba and trombones, who play a hushed accompaniment.

The enlarged orchestration reinforces the altered key of Eb major as Korngold favours a darker sound to support Reinhardt's "darkest night" setting. Thus the opening bassoon parts are set lower in their *tessitura* and the cellos double the violin's melodic material in the *agitato* section, giving the melodic line a slightly sombre character. Throughout, Korngold crafts the music to fit the pacing of the visuals and even anticipates and prepares scene changes within the music.

The final pages of the score are also particularly effective. Korngold ingeniously blends motifs from the Overture and the Scherzo ('Through the house give glim'ring light') and - in a true masterstroke - he adds his own wistful orchestration (uncannily in Mendelssohn's style) of the lovely song to Heine's poem *Leise Zieht durch mein gemüt* (*Gruss* Op19, No 5) - now reset to Titania's famous lines 'Hand in hand, with fairy grace; will we bless this place; And the owner of it blest; ever shall in safety rest'. It is an inspired choice for this hauntingly nostalgic final scene and Korngold's scoring then seamlessly flows into the closing bars of Mendelssohn's own original incidental music, as Puck says the last words of the play ("If we shadows have offended..."). A single title - *Finis* - emerges from the spangled close-up of the palace door, as it closes like a theatre curtain, and Mendelssohn's final chords swell in crescendo, then die away.

My description barely does justice to Korngold's ingenious scoring, weaving themes and motifs in and out contrapuntally and perhaps most remarkable of all, overlaying his own musical personality on what is essentially a newly-created Mendelssohnian symphonic poem.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM was given a unique simultaneous

double premiere in New York and London on October 9 1935 (Hollywood followed on October 16) before going on general release on October 30, as a major road show attraction. It was screened in Austria in **November 1935** in a subtitled version, but banned in Germany owing to not only Reinhardt and Korngold being Jewish, but also Mendelssohn! Not until the late 1960s (when a badly dubbed version was released for television) was this film seen there. Regrettably, it is this version (with spoken German dubbing that completely obscures the music) that is still known in Austria and Germany today.

In 1936, critical response was mixed and Reinhardt never made another film. Korngold's contribution however was much praised and Warner Brothers, realising his worth, were desperate to sign him to an extended contract. The composer himself seems to have been inspired by the new medium of film. In a revealing interview he gave at the time, he said:

*An entirely new opus has been created – an opera spoken in rhythm, in which dialogue and music are closely connected. It required long preparation and it was probably the first time that a Hollywood picture was rehearsed for four weeks before the work on the set actually began.*

Korngold believed firmly that cinema offered a new artistic platform, even saying:

*....we no longer have to lean on Puccini, Verdi or Mascagni. Producers have realised that public taste has risen and we are now conducting a test which will eventually lead to the writing of entire modern operas for the screen. When that day comes, composers will accept the motion picture as a musical form equal to the opera or the symphony...*

from New York Times May 12 1935 "New Opera Form Created in Films"

Sadly, Korngold's extraordinary dream still awaits realisation.

Nevertheless, Korngold's first film assignment proved to be lucky for him. It resulted in a unique contract allowing him to spend each winter in California (until 1938) composing original music for prestige films, whereby he refined the techniques and methods he had invented for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and influenced everyone else working in the medium.

For *Anthony Adverse* in 1936 - an epic film based on a best selling novel by Hervey Allen - he won his first Academy Award and the score matched its colossal subject with over 40 separate themes in a massive symphonic composition lasting almost a hundred minutes.

Korngold's truly operatic approach, whereby characters on screen were accompanied by *leitmotifs* in the score, with orchestration and harmony varied according to mood and situation, following Wagner's model, was further developed with the rhythm of speech closely mimicked by the melodic writing. The orphan child of adversity - the hero of *Anthony Adverse* - is observed (while asleep) by his benefactor, who speaks the words "No Father, No Mother, No Name" and Korngold's hauntingly expressive theme with its curious diffuse harmony gently reflects the rhythm of the spoken phrase in one of the most sophisticated examples of film scoring of that era.

Later, when Bette Davis prays to the Blessed Virgin in the film *Juarez* Korngold scores the words of her spoken prayer exactly. There are numerous other examples throughout his work, whereby text and music are conjoined.

By March 1938, his ongoing relationship with Warner Brothers saved his life when the Nazis annexed Austria. At that time, he was fortuitously again in Hollywood, scoring *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. In this justly famous film, Korngold defined the style of the swashbuckler for generations to come.

The famous love scene between Errol Flynn (Robin) and Olivia de Havilland (Maid Marian) is notable not only for the beauty of its music but in the subtle manner in which Korngold ensures that when Robin speaks, it is the resonance of the cello we hear intoning his noble theme, whereas when Marian answers, a soaring violin answers.

Korngold took care in matters of pitch when scoring intimate scenes, so as not to interfere with that of the actors' voices.

*The Adventures of Robin Hood* won him his second Academy Award and until his death in 1957, Korngold always credited Max Reinhardt and Robin Hood with saving his life and indeed, the lives of his family.

Later this year, which marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Korngold's death, and some seventy two years since it was made, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* will be restored and issued complete on DVD for the first time in a special edition, as well as being screened in Vienna at a comprehensive film season at the Austrian Film Museum.

Reinhardt's film has achieved cult status and above all, its extraordinary

musical scoring and adaptation by Erich Wolfgang Korngold is now justifiably recognised as one of the most satisfying adaptations of classical music ever made for the cinema - a work of art that, by example, showed how music and film could become one.

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(Brendan G. Carroll is the President of the International Korngold Society and author of *The Last Prodigy* - the definitive biography of Korngold, published by Amadeus Press. He is collaborating with Michael Haas and the Jewish Museum, Vienna on a major exhibition focussing on Erich Wolfgang Korngold and his father, the critic, Dr Julius Korngold, which opens November 28 2007 and runs until May 2008. Numerous items from Korngold's film work will be on display for the first time.)

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