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John Wilson

Korngold and his World

Or perhaps the title 'Korngold and his Worlds' would be more appropriate – because this eminently un-pigeonholeable composer straddled the most unlikely of musical styles whilst working in the most contrasting of compositional spheres. What's remarkable is that Korngold's musical voice is consistent and unmistakable across the genres he worked in, and it's a voice which fifty years on from his death remains, in the words of the composer's biographer and long-time champion Jessica Duchon, 'warm, tender, regretful, idealistic and fully human.' 'Korngold', she continues, 'had it all'.

If the conservatism of Korngold's music-critic father can be seen at all in his music then perhaps it's in his harmonic language: they might not be atonal or overtly dissonant, but Korngold's harmonies are riveting and highly romanticised. The opening bars of his fourth opera *Das Wunder der Heliane* (1927) constitute the immediate opening of a door to another world, and as the score continues, Wagner, Puccini and Debussy are all recognisably present, alongside uncanny prophecies of the career of John Williams.

After visits to the USA in the early thirties Korngold was snapped up by Warner Brothers in 1934 (seven years after *Heliane*) with whom he signed a deal unprecedented for a world-renowned composer; a plethora of scores (and two Oscars) followed. Korngold was pioneering a new style of illustrative but independent film scoring that coloured the action on screen, whilst employing a cinematic answer to the Wagnerian concept of the 'leitmotif' (a musical theme associated with a dramatic one). For the studio, he was proving one hell of a catch.

But Korngold was straddling two worlds. He was desperate to retain his concert and operatic presence in Europe and after the Second World War turned his back on the studios to concentrate on chamber and orchestral works, for which he plundered his dozens of film scores for thematic material. He returned to Vienna in 1947, but was unprepared for the musical climate that awaited him – styles in the city had moved on. His return was a failure, and he died ten years later in Hollywood, believing himself forgotten in Europe.

Join us and you'll discover that Korngold's world is all his own – and what an alluring world it is.

Friday 2 November 2007 | 7.30pm

Korngold *The Sea Hawk Theme*
Steiner *Casablanca Suite*
Rozsa *The Love of the Princess from The Thief of Bagdad*
Stothart *The Wizard of Oz Suite*
Korngold *Escape Me Never Suite*
Newman *Street Scene Suite*
Korngold *The Adventures of Robin Hood Suite*
Waxman (arr. John Wilson) *The Philadelphia Story Suite*
Williams *Close Encounters of the Third Kind Suite*
Korngold *Tomorrow from The Constant Nymph*

Royal Festival Hall

John Wilson *conductor*
Anna Burford *mezzo soprano*
London Philharmonic Choir

When the bosses at Warner Brothers saw Erich Wolfgang Korngold sign on the dotted line to become their flagship house composer, they must have felt like the fat cats that got the cream. The composer's luscious scores delighted them all as did his charismatic presence and sharp wit. His gift to Hollywood was twenty-two hit scores, two Oscars and eight pianos ruined beyond repair by 'enthusiastic' night-long composing vigils. In return? Warner Brothers' persistent and ultimately successful pleas for Korngold to move from Vienna to California as Nazism took root probably saved the composer and his family's lives.

Francis Lowy (1938)



Korngold



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Nikolaj Znaider

Shostakovich for your diary

Wednesday 3 October 2007

Symphony 5

Wednesday 5 March 2008

Symphony 7

Wednesday 16 April 2008

Symphony 4

Wednesday 23 April 2008

Piano Concerto 1

The Importance of Shostakovich

If last year's Shostakovich centenary celebrations proved anything, it was that our appetite for the composer's music is near inexhaustible. There's a power and immediacy to Shostakovich's scores. His is an involving, honest and distinctive voice – the symphonic voice, one might say, of the twentieth century.

Shostakovich's life is talked about almost as much as his music is played, with disagreements and paradoxes at every turn. And it's easy to see why the discourse rages around his extraordinary catalogue of works: how could a man who was so profoundly depressed during his life produce the relentless flow of joyous ecstasy that is the final movement of the First Piano Concerto, for example?

The Fifth Symphony, a towering masterpiece in the composer's catalogue, has attracted more than its fair share of commentary. Is the suggested suppression of the symphony's climax intended to match that of the people? Or perhaps the work is more personal than that. There's a quote in there from Bizet's *Carmen*, a reference perhaps to the woman who had rejected Shostakovich in favour of a man of that name during the composer's writing of the symphony. Is the violins' two hundred and fifty times repeated note – 'A', representing 'me' in the Russian system of notation – a desperate plea from Shostakovich that we recognise his personal trauma?

The Seventh Symphony's statement is unequivocal and desperately powerful: a picture in sound of the suffering of the 3.2 million people trapped in Leningrad during the city's blockade at the hands of the German army during the Second World War. This is music of immense power and devotion, and an indescribable live concert experience. But what exactly did the composer mean by his lengthy *Boléro*-like march – the relentlessness of the Nazis or the indefatigable spirit of the people of Leningrad?

In the end, the one important answer is staring us in the face. Yes, the music is about Shostakovich the man, his times, his city. But it's also about us, whoever we are. It's about love, survival and joy, and that's probably why we'll never tire of Shostakovich's scores. Anti-West or anti-East? We can argue about it until the end of time – and so we should – but if we don't recognise the humanity and joy in Shostakovich's music, then we've really missed the point.

Wednesday 14 November 2007 | 7.30pm

Zemlinsky *Sinfonietta*

Korngold *Violin Concerto in D*

Shostakovich *Symphony 6 in B minor*

Royal Festival Hall

Vladimir Jurowski

conductor

Nikolaj Znaider *violin*



Between the epic Fifth and Seventh Symphonies came the Sixth, Shostakovich's deafeningly quiet warning. The 'purge' may have been officially halted in 1938, but the arrests continued – now behind the even thicker walls of the public's delusion; the victims' cries more inaudible than ever. Amongst his unsettlingly obtuse protests against these acts Shostakovich conjures a moment of complete calm: the oriental glance of the flute solo in the symphony's *Largo*. It is, for Vladimir Jurowski, 'the most peculiar music', and a meditative gesture at one with Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*.

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Christian Steiner



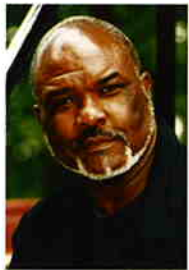
Patricia Racette



Michael Hendrick



Ursula Hesse von
den Steinen



Willard White

© BBC

Eric Richmond



Andrew Kennedy

6.00pm – 6.30pm

FREE Royal Festival Hall Auditorium

The life and works of Erich Wolfgang Korngold; a talk by writer and Korngold biographer Jessica Duchon.

Wednesday 21 November 2007 | 7.00pm

Korngold *Das Wunder der Heliane*

Sung in German with English surtitles

Royal Festival Hall

Vladimir Jurowski
conductor

The performance will last for
3 hours and 30 minutes including
two intervals.

Concert performance with:

Patricia Racette *Heliane*
Michael Hendrick *Stranger*
Andreas Schmidt *Ruler*
**Ursula Hesse von den
Steinen** *Messenger*
Willard White *Porter*
Robert Tear *Blind Judge*
Andrew Kennedy *Young Man*

