

Korngold and Shakespeare Reunited

By Kathrin Korngold Hubbard and John Hubbard

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There has been a great reverence for the works of William Shakespeare in my family for many generations. My father spent his career as a theater arts teacher, and in my parents' home, to this day, a complete collection of the works of Shakespeare is prominently displayed. In my own living room, a framed page of a Korngold song entitled "Mine Mistress' Eyes" hangs on the wall. It was at my father's suggestion that 'Papa' set this Shakespeare sonnet to music.

And it must be said that it was Shakespeare that first brought Korngold to the United States. In 1934, at the behest of the famed impresario Max Reinhardt, my grandfather came to Hollywood to arrange Mendelssohn's music for the Warner Bros. film production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream".

As is evidenced in his five operas, Korngold clearly had a remarkable gift for being able to pair instrumental and vocal tessitura, enabling both to shine equally. Despite lush and full orchestrations, the voices are always able to project through the dense textures of the instrumental music. During his Hollywood years at the Warner Bros. studios, Korngold would converse with the actors prior to composing his scores, listening to the timbre of their voices to insure that his orchestrations would not lie in the same range, covering their dialogue.

Attending this production at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts was particularly significant for two very different reasons. My husband, as it happens, is an alumnus of the school, so it was truly a trip down memory lane for him to return to campus for the first time since 1975. As a cellist, his initial foray into opera was performing in the pit of UNCSCA's Agnes de Mille Theater. And I, as a musician, have played the Much Ado About Nothing Suite for violin and piano many times over the years, most notably on the occasion of my parents' 50th wedding anniversary.

But I had never had the opportunity to hear the fully orchestrated version live, and it was a distinct pleasure to attend the premiere of this historic presentation. Korngold's underscoring only served to enhance the playwright's words. The impish woodland nymphs invited us into Shakespeare's world while the orchestral musicians, under the skillful direction of Maestro John Mauceri, serenaded us with music that I have been listening to since I was in the cradle. Each and every actor displayed complete professionalism, always staying in character, no matter how small the role. Lines were delivered with humor and sophistication. And the strains of Balthasar's sweet song remained with us long after the final curtain descended.

This production was so carefully and lovingly wrought, that it paid fitting tribute to the wonderful history of esteem for Shakespeare long held by the Korngold family.