

## ***Die tote Stadt*, Munich 1955**

With a disappointing world premiere of his *Symphony in F-sharp*, poor reviews of his *Die stumme Serenade* effectively consigning his operetta to oblivion, and his efforts at scoring the film *Magic Fire* literally cut to pieces when the final cut version was trimmed from 150 minutes to only 93 minutes for general release, Erich Wolfgang Korngold found his second return trip to Europe rather disastrous. Yet in the end he was treated to a quite unexpected moment of tremendous joy when the Munich Opera staged a premiere performance of his opera *Die tote Stadt* at the Prinzregententheater in spring 1955.

The production was lavish on all fronts: superb singers, highly rated conductors, and a directorship that put together the best staging and framework they could manage. By all accounts the public was overwhelmed:

*“After Marietta’s ‘Lautenlied’, spontaneous applause and stamping of feet erupted for a full three minutes – something that had never happened before. At the end of the first act, the audience gave a standing ovation...”* (Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, Amadeus Press, 1997, p. 356)

Yet even though the eight performances were sold out to enthusiastic crowds, the critics felt it necessary to decry the opera.

Just recently, though, a previously unreleased letter from the famous German musical director and opera expert Dr. Hugo Strelitzer (1896-1981) to his close friend, the composer Erich Zeisl, was made available by the Zeisl-Schoenberg estate for publication.<sup>1</sup> This letter provides a first-hand account of the incredible public success of the Munich production of *Die tote Stadt*, even in the musical “modern world” of post-war Germany of the 1950s. Dr. Strelitzer’s observations confirm the overwhelming success of the production, in opposition to the critical reviews of the time. Further, his views on the opinions of contemporary critics seem particularly insightful.

I was recently requested to render a translation of this important letter, and it follows here for anyone who may be interested in its contents.

Troy O. Dixon  
June 2009

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<sup>1</sup> Wagner, Karin, ed. “...Es Grüsst Dich Erichisrael”: Briefe von und an Eric Zeisl, Hilde Spiel, Richard Stöhr, Ernst Toch, Hans Kafka u.a.. Vienna: Czernin Verlag 2008.

Translator notes:

1. Bracketed texts are inserts by the translator not contained in the original letter.
2. The printed letter consistently has the title “Die tote Stadt” with capitalization or spellings that would be incorrect for standard German. This may be a transcription error by the publisher, by Strelitzer, or someone else.

## HUGO STRELITZER TO ERIC ZEISL (Typescript)

Munich, 15 May 1955

My dear Eric,

So now *die Tote Stadt* has been on the stage of the Munich Opera. [Let me] say about it upfront: it was a public success on a huge scale, such as I have seldom experienced in my life. After *Marietta's Lied* in the first Act, a storm of applause began that just would not subside, the same thing [happening] in the second Act with *Pierrot's Lied*. At the close of the work Korngold took countless curtain calls.

It was also really a splendid success, and the director's office spared no expense to give the work a worthy scope<sup>1</sup>. The orchestra under Heger sounded intoxicating, the production under Otto Erhard had moments of breathtaking beauty and insistence<sup>2</sup>, the singers – above all Marianne Schech and Hans Hopf – were first-rate – in a word it was a production that rarely happens on an opera stage.

The work made a big impression on me. I heard it at the dress rehearsal, was at the premiere, and at the second production was a guest in Korngold's box – and I must say, that I liked it more each and every time. It has moments of exquisite beauty – quite apart from its superb melodic ideas – so that the end of the first Act really tugs at one's heartstrings. How often can one say that about the works of our so-called “Modern Age”? I love the powerful Prelude to the second Act and the releasing<sup>3</sup>, tender and so quiet end-of-the-work, that has something stirring<sup>4</sup>. No, that was written by someone who has a heart and the courage to pour it out.

The orchestration is of course like everything else by Korngold, the work of a master. As a work of a nineteen-year-old (the 1897-born Korngold composed the opera in 1920, and was therefore already older) it is a “test-of-talent”<sup>5</sup> on an already almost frighteningly large scale.

And it was to be expected that the press would rip it to shreds. This is the city of Orff and Egk – here one must really write “interestingly” and “differently” to be accepted as a contemporary composer. Today one is allowed to criticize everything and much is a matter of personal taste. I can imagine someone who loves Grecco and van Gogh, and who does not appreciate the overflowing and opulent sensuality of Rubens. And yet Rubens was a grand master and one cannot easily dismiss him when saying: I don't like the carnality and sensuality of his paintings. Korngold's orchestral language is the expression of a time in which the imagination of the composer was fired by overrefined-sophisticated soundscapes – one can disapprove of this language and must still admit, that Korngold here had achieved mastery.

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<sup>1</sup> Trans. note: the German word ‘Rahmen’ translates literally as “frame”, which could be the most appropriate translation here, but the words ‘scope’, ‘appearance’, ‘look’, or perhaps even ‘scale’ could also serve here.

<sup>2</sup> Trans. note: the German word used carries the meanings of “insistence”, “urgency”, and “vividness”.

<sup>3</sup> This derives from the German verb which means “to liberate”.

<sup>4</sup> The last phrase is suggesting something “transcendent”.

<sup>5</sup> The actual translation of “Talentprobe” is “audition”, but the literal meaning of the two parts of this larger word is “talent” and “test/examination/trial”. In this sentence, “audition” is not quite the correct word, so I have opted for the literal break down.

So what did the critics really desire? They admit, that *die Tote Stadt* is a huge “test of talent” – and still they wish to deny the work the right to life. Is then talent alone not already enough to justify the right to exist? Does one expect a new Figaro or Don Giovanni every 20 years, a new Fidelio and a new Tristan? Should one not be happy that between such crowning achievements of the biggest geniuses a talent such as Korngold lives and speaks to us? “Test of talent” – the critics say it so scornfully<sup>6</sup> and they don’t realize how rare talent like Korngold’s is. And they don’t like one who has the courage for tonality, the courage for melody, and who writes a music that appeals to the heart and senses.

But there’s nothing to be done [about it] at all: the critics want to damn something or throw it to heaven, fairly or unfairly: [yet] the public will always be the last judge that determines the death or life of a work. And the Munich public had decided in favor of Korngold, in an unequivocal manner, with a true emotional outburst that neither made, nor was the expression of, a cold courteousness. And once again it became clear to me that operas live through the biggest emotional outbursts of the human voice, through the largest melodic ideas, and become viable through them first above all. Only through them can one reach a public, not with musical mental acrobatics and cold knowledge of art. And because of that all these “Kreneks” are condemned to death, because they have no melody, because it does not sing<sup>7</sup> within them.

I am sincerely pleased by Korngold’s success – and also have suffered again with him, as I myself read these criticisms. What a sad lot it is, to be a composer! And how you already know that,<sup>8</sup> my dear friend. One must be a “dead” composer to be appreciated, as Korngold had said to me a few days ago with bitter irony. But I believe, that these Tote-Stadt-productions were a wonderful ending for him on his successful tour of Germany. Now he will tell you much more about it in person. He is already on the way to Hollywood and should be there again by the beginning of June.

Marilynn was, by the way, with me at the *Toten Stadt* premiere and was very impressed with the work. She is much younger than we are and with much understanding of the “modern”<sup>9</sup>, she believed Korngold’s music to be completely modern, up-to-date. She hopes one day she might be able to sing the role of Marietta.

Farewell, my good friend. Hopefully you didn’t get an upset stomach from your birthday banquet.

Sincerely,  
Your Hugo

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<sup>6</sup> Or “contemptuously”.

<sup>7</sup> An alternate translation of “it does not sing” might be “there is no song”.

<sup>8</sup> An alternate translation of “you already know that” might be “right you are”.

<sup>9</sup> Or “contemporary”.