

# The Premiere of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's String Quartet #3 in D Major, Op. 34

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## *Abstract*

*Publications and biographies of Erich Wolfgang Korngold list the world premiere of his third and last string quartet as occurring in 1946 at Royce Hall on the UCLA campus. Completed in 1945, the quartet's premiere one year later would indeed seem most reasonable, given that Korngold's previous chamber works were most often premiered shortly after their completion, and usually by major performers. However, recent research has proven the presumed 1946 premiere is incorrect. The present paper addresses this error and correctly identifies the premiere as occurring in 1949, just before Korngold's first return to Europe following the war.*

## **Preface**

“Premiered in 1946 by the Roth Quartet at Royce Hall,” or similar statements were always written authoritatively enough in the various lists of his compositions and in album and CD liner notes, that in all likelihood no doubts about the premiere of Korngold's String Quartet #3 in D Major, op. 34 were ever raised. However, the two most recent CD releases of Korngold's complete string quartets – one on the CPO label by the Aron Quartet (2009), and one on the Chandos label by the Doric Quartet (2010) – contained a curiously new phrase, “...although the precise date is as yet, unknown,”<sup>1</sup> which raised an important question: sixty years later, how could we not know the precise date?

Recognizing that sometimes recordings can be in production for a year or more before public release, a quick note to Brendan G. Carroll – Korngold's primary biographer – seemed appropriate. His confirmation that the exact date was indeed still unknown by Korngold researchers set me on a path: somehow it must be possible to find the exact date. During recent research of my own on other Korngold-related subjects I had stumbled across an oblique reference to the Roth Quartet at Royce Hall. With that as a starting point I wagered I could probably find the correct premiere date.

What follows is a summary of research done in the last two weeks of August 2010, with additional information revealed in mid-September, and further information discovered in November at the Library of Congress. In addition to the simple facts about the premiere, I have attempted to give an overview of the broader context in which this premiere took place. I have always believed that looking at history with peripheral vision rather than focusing one's eyes on just the topic at hand is considerably more illuminating, and brings the primary topic to life by placing it into a larger picture. Exhaustive discussion of the peripheral subjects is unwarranted, of course, but the brief tangents included here will hopefully provide a broader framework for appreciating the composition's place in history.

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Baltimore, MD*

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll, Brendan G. Liner notes for Aron Quartet. *Korngold: String Quartets and Piano Quintet*. CPO, 2010. CD #777 436-2.

## Background

In 1938 after the start of his forced exile from Europe, and after the political changes began occurring in his native Austria, Korngold grew increasingly pessimistic. He had to stay out of the lands he grew up in; out of his beloved childhood city of Vienna. Performances of his compositions were banned by the growing Nazi government. These factors alone would effectively keep him from being able to premiere any new compositions in the cities that had formerly looked favorably upon his concert works, and cities that he called home. He saw no point in composing new concert works as long as the Nazis were in power. Thus began a self-imposed silence that lasted until 1944, when he started becoming more and more disenchanted with his film work that filled in these intervening years. The diminishing quality of films offered him and his father's declining health – and probably other factors as well – induced him to begin composing absolute music again. The first of these new works was to be the String Quartet No. 3 in D Major, op. 34.

Composition of the work began in secret in 1944. So secretly that when he presented the sketches to his wife as a Christmas present in 1944, she was completely surprised: "I had suspected nothing about the quartet; he had avoided the subject, and had not struck even a single note on the piano."<sup>2</sup> Korngold completed composition of the work the following summer, the manuscript having been dated 31 July 1945 by the composer. But when was the premiere of the work?

Several factors most likely contribute to the confusion surrounding the premiere of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's String Quartet #3. In the Korngold estate's collection of papers at the Library of Congress, there are no references to its premiere in any letters, no newspaper clippings, no concert programs or advertisements – no information anywhere in the collection that appears to concern the premiere. Korngold himself does not appear to have attended the premiere either – something that on the surface seems rather unusual.

Oblique references to the Third Quartet do exist in the researched correspondence, references that strongly suggest Korngold was proud of, or at least pleased enough about composing absolute music again. A couple of letters suggest that Korngold showed or discussed his new work with friends and acquaintances. We might even infer from one letter that he played the quartet on the piano for Alma Mahler, a childhood acquaintance also living in Los Angeles at the time.

It is known that the Roth Quartet gave a series of concerts at Royce Hall on the UCLA campus in 1946. One of these performances included the premiere of a string quartet by Erich Korngold. As the Third String Quartet was completed the summer before, and given the historical precedent of major performers and conductors standing in line to premiere the next work of the former child prodigy, assuming this must have been the work's world premiere is completely reasonable. But in this case it was a mistaken assumption.

The Roth Quartet did indeed give a premiere of one of Korngold's string quartets. It did indeed perform at Royce Hall at UCLA, and it was in the summer of 1946. But this was the US premiere of Korngold's Second String Quartet, not the world premiere of the Third. The Third Quartet would not be premiered until 1949.

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<sup>2</sup> Korngold, Luzi. Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Vienna: Verlag Elisabeth Lafite, 1967, p. 85, trans. by T.O. Dixon.

**String Quartet #2 in E-flat Major****World Premiere: 16 March 1934, Vienna; Rosé Quartet****U.S. Premiere: 21 June 1946, Los Angeles; Roth Quartet**

Feri Roth (18 July 1899 – 07 May 1969) – graduate of the Royal Hungarian Academy of Music in Budapest and concertmaster of both the Budapest Opera (1919-1920) and Berlin Volksoper (1921-1922) – founded the Roth Quartet in 1922. The quartet debuted in Paris in 1924, then toured Europe and Africa. Reorganized in 1928 to include Jenó Antal (violin), Ferenc Molnár (viola), and János Scholz (cello), the Roth Quartet came to the United States, and subsequently concertized throughout the US, Canada and Mexico. In 1937, the quartet joined the faculty of Westminster Choir College at Princeton University. Feri Roth resigned from the college in 1939, and assembled a new group consisting of former members of the Manhattan String Quartet: Rachmael Weinstock, Julius Shaier, and Oliver Edel. In 1947, Roth began his long association with UCLA, joining the Department of Music as Lecturer.

In March 1946, a new organization called the “University Friends of Music” was formed at UCLA. Established by assistant professor of French, Dr. L. Gardner Miller, and Dr. Clarence Dykstra, the group’s aim was “...to bring well-known chamber music groups to campus...,” and, “...to sponsor frequent performances by musicians who live in Southern California in smaller meeting places for music on the campus or in suitable music rooms in residences.”<sup>3</sup> The first concerts sponsored by University Friends of Music took place in June 1946, featuring the Roth Quartet in a series of four recitals.

These concerts were held in Royce Hall Auditorium on the UCLA campus on successive Fridays of the month beginning on 07 June and ending on 28 June, and presented a wide range of chamber music (see concert list below). For this concert series Feri Roth re-established the “original” quartet of Antal, Molnár and Scholz. It was this specific group that was recognized by Isabel Morse Jones of the LA Times as impeccable:

*“...it became evident that for unison of tone and timing this group is virtually unsurpassed.”*  
- 08 June 1946

*“It is no wonder that when for 20 years such superb players have worked together, what comes forth from them is well nigh miraculous.”*  
- 08 June 1946

*“...four artists whose pulse beats are precisely the same.”*  
-15 June 1946

Based on this praise, Korngold could not have asked for a better group of musicians for this US premiere of his second string quartet. Ms. Jones’ review on 24 June 1946 of the premiere performance was positive:

*Eric [sic] Korngold, European musician and Hollywood film scorer, was heard to advantage Friday night when the Roth Quartet played his early string quartet, Op. 26 in E Flat Major, for the first time in this country.*

*The University of California at Los Angeles was well represented by faculty and students at this third chamber music program of the series in Royce Hall, sponsored by the University Friends of Music. The audience was large and especially interested in the light and entertaining Korngold.*

*It is good theater, having a dramatic first Allegro with an emphatic beat comparable to an American work song, a gay Intermezzo that drew handclapping from listeners, a melodious third*

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<sup>3</sup> Jones, Isabel Morse. “Aid Proffered to Chamber Music Here.” LA Times. 24 March 1946: B1, B5.

*movement that is not particularly original and tapers off into an ecclesiastical mood and a romantic Viennese waltz for the finale.*

- Jones, Isabel Morse. "Korngold Quartet Offered." LA Times 24 Jun 1946.

Research to date yields no other references in the LA Times to the Roth Quartet playing compositions by Korngold at Royce Hall. Any previous references to them premiering the Third Quartet are therefore presumed to be incorrect.

Concert Programs (works listed in sequence according to LA Times reviews)		
All programs were apparently 8:30 p.m. performances		
07 June 1946	Haydn Debussy Schubert	Quartet in D Major, Op. 75 [76?], No. 5 Quartet in g minor, op. 10 Quartet #14 in d minor, D. 810 "Death and the Maiden"
14 June 1946	Mozart Dvorak Beethoven	Quartet in G Major [#14, K. 387 assumed from context] Quartet #12 in F Major, Op. 96, "American" Quartet in a minor, Op. 132
21 June 1946	Beethoven Korngold Brahms	Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, No.1 String Quartet #2 in E-flat Major, Op. 26 <b>US Premiere</b> Quartet #2 in a minor, Op. 51, No. 2
28 June 1946	Tschaikowsky John Vincent Schumann	[unspecified] String Quartet Piano Quintet in E-flat Major, Op. 44 <i>with George McManus, head UCLA piano department</i>

#### Sources for the Second Quartet essay

"Sharps and Flats." Los Angeles Times 26 May 1946: B5.

"Sharps and Flats: Roth Four Will Be Heard Friday." Los Angeles Times 16 Jun 1946: B5.

C.S.H. "Roth Quartet Presents Outstanding Program." Los Angeles Times 08 Jun 1946: A5.

Jones, Isabel Morse. "Aid Proffered to Chamber Music Here." Los Angeles Times 24 Mar 1946: B1.

---. "Korngold Quartet Offered." Los Angeles Times 24 Jun 1946: 9.

---. "Quartet Concludes Series." Los Angeles Times 01 Jul 1946: 9.

---. "Roth Group Plays as One." Los Angeles Times 15 Jun 1946: A5.

**String Quartet #3 in D Major****World Premiere: Monday, 03 January 1949, (concert start time: 8:30 p.m.)****Los Angeles; New Art Quartet<sup>4</sup>****European (Private) Premiere: 26 June 1949, Vienna; Swoboda Quartet<sup>5</sup>****European (Concert) Premiere: 14 March 1951, Vienna<sup>6</sup>**

Having established that the Roth Quartet premiere at Royce Hall in 1946 was not the premiere of Korngold's Quartet #3, we must look elsewhere for the Third's first performance. We find it not quite three years later in rather notable circumstances. To establish a snapshot of the social and musical environment in Los Angeles in which the premiere took place, presented below are the backgrounds of three subjects intimately related to the premiere and also to each other: an important concert series, a famous venue, and the performers themselves.

Evenings on the Roof<sup>7</sup>

*"For the pleasure of the performers; played regardless of audience."*

Los Angeles was isolated, both geographically and musically. Musical tastes were conservative, with concerts limited to the staid and most popular classical music, and audiences and musicians alike "...largely unaware of modernity in music beyond the works of Debussy."<sup>8</sup> Despite the large number of talented musicians arriving at the start of the Depression, the musical scene outside the film and radio studios was dismal.

*"The general public in Los Angeles had little interest in the sophistication and more intellectual appeal of chamber music. Symphonic music, as lush as the film scores of the period, was the preferred medium to express the extravagance and glamour demanded by southern Californian consumer culture in the wake of the depression. But studio and Philharmonic musicians were hungry for chamber music, which would give them the chance to shine outside the anonymous ranks of their professional organizations."<sup>9</sup>*

To overcome this dearth of both chamber music opportunities and contemporary and underplayed music, a man named Peter Yates developed a concept to broaden the musical scene in Los Angeles. His idea was to establish a series of chamber music concerts in his home where a small group of musicians could come and play whatever music they wanted simply for the enjoyment of those present.

Peter B. Yates (1909 – 1976), music critic, author, teacher, and poet, was born in Toronto to parents of U.S. citizenship. He attended Ridley and Union colleges in New York State, and received his B.A. from Princeton University in 1931. Yates married the pianist Frances Mullen in 1932 and by 1937 the pair had already migrated to Los Angeles. He was involved in many music-related activities in LA, including serving as music critic for the magazine *Arts and Architecture*, and presenting numerous lectures on musical subjects. Yates inspired his audiences to approach music from new perspectives, and championed the cause of contemporary music, arranging many concerts of the works of living composers throughout his lifetime. He died in Buffalo, NY.

<sup>4</sup> Special thanks to Peter Yates, Jr., son of the founder of "Evenings on the Roof", for providing a copy of the concert syllabus/outline for the 1948-49 season of "Evenings" which lists "Quartet No. 3, Op. 34, D major // Erich Korngold // (*First performance anywhere*)," performed by the New Art Quartet.

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, Brendan G. *The Last Prodigy*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997, p. 339.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>7</sup> Dorothy Crawford's book *Evenings On and Off the Roof*, dedicated to this concert series, would seem to emphasize its importance to the LA community. The series is still produced today as "Monday Evening Concerts".

<sup>8</sup> Crawford, Dorothy Lamb. *Evenings On and Off the Roof*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1995, p. 4-6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

*“Yates was a quintessential fish-out-of-water — an independent thinker with highbrow tastes in a city that had little use for intellectuals, a proud amateur in a circle of professional artists, a cheerleader for new music operating in a place that, then as now, mainly worshipped movie stars.”<sup>10</sup>*

In the spring of 1938, the Yateses asked the modernist Viennese architect Rudolph M. Schindler to build a small concert studio onto their house in Silver Lake. Schindler decided the studio should be a second floor addition on the roof of the Yates' bungalow, offering a grand view of the valley below. Acknowledging the new space, they started “Evenings on the Roof” – literally on their roof – by inviting a few friends over to play music for their own enjoyment.

The first concert in April 1939 was an all-Bartók affair for 19 people, and initiated a series that featured contemporary music along with more traditional works. It was originally music played by musicians for musicians. Many of the performers and composers were important figures in the Los Angeles avant-garde music scene, from the Los Angeles Symphony and the Hollywood studio orchestras. They played for nothing but their own enjoyment regardless of audience, and did not care about critics' responses, despite most often receiving positive reviews. As a result, the works performed were selected to please themselves, and most often formed a good balance between modern composers (periodically including Southern California composers) and old masters.

Soon word spread, musicians brought other musicians, and what started as a small gathering became a full-fledged event. The series became so popular that a hall had to be hired<sup>11</sup> and a small amount of financial support secured. Tickets were sold to cover expenses only. In 1954, Yates retired as director of the series and it was renamed “Monday Evening Concerts.” The Los Angeles County Museum of Art opened its doors in 1965 and the Monday Evening Concerts were transferred there. Beginning in 1975 they became an integral part of the music program at the Museum.

In the early 1940s “Evenings on the Roof” were reportedly the only concerts that presented chamber music in a serious way, and were very important to émigré composers who settled in LA in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Those in attendance met composers and other musicians, and encountered many new ideas. The musicians attempted to program at least one Los Angeles “first” for each concert, which sometimes led them “...into fairly deep musical waters...”, considering that unfamiliar works by Schoenberg, Hindemith, von Webern and others were performed. They gained a national reputation for presenting many works of 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, the list of which would eventually include the likes of Stravinsky, Cage, Ives, Schoenberg, and Korngold.

#### Sources for “Evenings on the Roof”

*“Music: A Roof in Los Angeles.”* *TIME*: Monday, 08 Oct 1951.

*“Obituary: Frances Yates.”* *Los Angeles Times*: 24 Jun 2000

*Crawford, Dorothy Lamb.* *Evenings On and Off the Roof.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

*Ginell, Richard S.* “Los Angeles: Monday Evening Concerts Face The Future.” 15 Nov 2006. *newmusicbox.org*. Web.

*Peter Yates Papers, Finding Aid.* University of California, San Diego Libraries.

*Rosenberg, Deena.* *The Music Makers.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.

<sup>10</sup> Ginell, Richard S. “Los Angeles: Monday Evening Concerts Face The Future.” 15 Nov 2006.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of the premiere of Korngold's Third Quartet, the venue was the Wilshire Ebell Theater.

<sup>12</sup> Dorrance Stalvey, former director of music programs at the LA County Museum of Art, in *TIME*, 08 Oct 1951.

### The Wilshire Ebell Theater

An historic structure registered at the local, state and national levels, the Wilshire Ebell Theater is a landmark in every sense of the word. The 1,300-seat theater is known for its acoustics and its Barton pipe organ. The Los Angeles Times in 2003 described the theater as “the grande dame of genteel grace,” “a cultural centerpiece for Los Angeles,” and “one of the area’s most striking” auditoriums. Over its 80 years of productions, the Theater has witnessed several notable events, including:

- Frances Gumm – later known as Judy Garland – was discovered by MGM producers George Sidney and Joseph L. Mankiewicz through her early performances at the Wilshire Ebell Theater.
- In 1937, Amelia Earhart made her last public appearance and speech at the Ebell before leaving for her ill-fated around-the-world flight.
- On April 10, 1964, Glenn Gould gave his final public performance at the Ebell, spending the rest of his public life in the recording studio.

The Ebell of Los Angeles was formed as a women’s club in either 1894 or 1897. It was originally based on the principles and teachings of Adrian John Ebell, a late 19th century pioneer in women’s education and organizing women’s societies. In 1923, the group announced plans to build a new clubhouse and theater west of downtown on Wilshire Boulevard. By 1927 the facility was complete, comprising a clubhouse with lounge, art salon and dining room, and a 1,300-seat auditorium at the rear of the property.

The clubhouse opened with a musicale tea in October 1927, and the Wilshire Ebell Theater, originally known as the Windsor Square Playhouse, opened to the public in December 1927 with the west coast premiere of Sigmund Romberg’s musical *The Desert Song*. The theater is still a popular venue today.

#### Sources for “The Wilshire Ebell Theater”

“*The Ebell of Los Angeles: Mission Statement and History.*” *ebella.com*, accessed

“*Wilshire Ebell Theater: History and Mission Statement.*” *ebella.com/operating*, accessed

*Wikipedia.* “*Ebell of Los Angeles.*” *en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilshire\_Ebell\_Theater*, accessed

### The New Art Quartet

On 03 November 1947, a newly formed string quartet made its debut performance in Los Angeles. The New Art Quartet – Israel Baker and George Berres, violins; Milton Thomas, viola; William Van den Burg, cello – played publicly for the first time at the “Evenings on the Roof” concert in the Wilshire Ebell Theater that night at 8:30 p.m. They simultaneously garnered fame by giving the American premiere of Benjamin Britten’s Second Quartet at their debut.

The quartet gave several performances over the next 14 months.<sup>13</sup> At some point during those months, the quartet roster changed, and they secured the premiere performance of Korngold’s latest string quartet, not necessarily in that order. At the time of the premiere, the group included Israel Baker and Achille Mierlot, violins; Germain Prevost, viola; and William Van den Burg, cello.

On 02 January 1949 the LA Times announced the premiere of the Third Quartet (quoted in its entirety):

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<sup>13</sup> Sourced performance dates so far include 14 Dec 47 and 15 Feb 48, with references to others.

*Erich Korngold's Third String Quartet will receive its premiere performance at the Evenings on the Roof concert in Wilshire Ebell Theater at 8:30 p.m. Monday.*

*The work will be played by the New Art Quartet, which will also contribute Haydn's Quartet, Opus 20, No. 2, Schumann's Quartet in A Minor, Opus 41, and the first Los Angeles performance of Julius Toldi's String Trio.*

On 04 January, the following review was offered by Albert Goldberg:

*The honor, if such it be, of giving the first concert of the new year fell to the indefatigable Evenings on the Roof organization, which presented the New Art Quartet in new music by Erich Wolfgang Korngold and Julius Toldi and in old music by Haydn, in Wilshire Ebell Theater last night.*

*And by the way of a welcome New Year's resolution Evenings on the Roof led off with the practice of having the lights up sufficiently so that it was possible to read both the program and the score of his new string quartet, No. 3, in D Major, Opus 34, which Mr. Korngold had thoughtfully provided.*

*In this latest work of a prolific and distinguished composer, Korngold has steered a certain but slightly indeterminate course between early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism and a late and slightly overripe romanticism. The first movement and the interesting scherzo, with their shifting and restless chromaticism suggest the Schoenberg of the "Verklarte Nacht" period, a style that relapses in the expressive and folk-like slow movement into an austere, post-Wagnerian reminiscence of "Tristan."*

*But in the vigorous finale, the composer relies chiefly upon the frank diatonic idiom of his own earlier works with fleeting memories of the thematic material of the opening movements to round off a composition that as a whole is light-textured, economical, and sure of touch. ...*

*...The difficult task of making both these new pieces intelligible fell to the New Art Quartet – Israel Baker and Achille Mierlot, violins; Germain Prevost, viola; William Van den Burg, cello – which fulfilled its duties with such musicianly skill and tonal agreeableness that one regretted having to miss the Haydn Quartet, Opus 20, No. 2, which was scheduled to close the program.*

#### Sources for New Art Quartet

*"Music This Week." Los Angeles Times 14 Dec 1947: H5.*

*"New Art Quartet Plays Here Today." Los Angeles Times 15 Feb 1948: C6.*

*"New Art Quartet Will Make Debut." Los Angeles Times 02 Nov 1947: B5.*

*"Quartet to Present Work of Korngold" Los Angeles Times 02 Jan 1949: D5.*

*Goldberg, Albert. "The Sounding Board: Quartet Gives First Concert of New Year." Los Angeles Times 04 Jan 1949: A7.*

## **Conclusion**

The presumed premiere of Korngold's Third Quartet by the Roth Quartet was in fact the US premiere of his Second Quartet. That premiere took place on 21 June 1946 in Royce Hall, UCLA. The premiere of the Third Quartet did not occur until 03 January 1949, performed by the New Art Quartet at that night's "Evening on the Roof" concert at the Wilshire Ebell Theater, Los Angeles.