

Limits Hath Thy Fortune Not

- Friedrich Schiller, "Der Ring des Polykrates"

By Troy O. Dixon
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Background to Korngold's *Der Ring des Polykrates*

The child prodigy composer, Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957), had an intuitive theatrical inclination and possessed an innate skill at effectively illustrating characters and scenes in musical terms. This is evident in his earliest published scores, including the *Don Quixote* and *Märchenbilder* piano suites, and the work that launched his fame, the ballet-pantomime *Der Schneemann*. Along with an extraordinary gift for melody, this theatrical capacity foreshadowed his development as an operatic composer.

Korngold composed five operas. The psychologically-oriented *Die tote Stadt* ("The Dead City", staged by The Dallas Opera in 2014), his third and most popular, is frequently staged around the world today. His first is the one act comic opera, *Der Ring des Polykrates* ("The Ring of Polycrates"). Though rarely performed today, and though he would ultimately never return to the genre, it demonstrates a mastery of the opera buffa tradition at the age of sixteen when he composed the work in 1913-14.

The story originates with the Greek legend of King Polycrates. To appease the gods and safeguard his extreme good fortune, Polycrates threw his favorite jeweled ring into the sea, only to have it returned to him several days later inside a fish. Friedrich Schiller set the story as a lyrical ballad in 1797, and in 1888 the author and dramatist Heinrich Teweles (1856-1927) adapted the tale as a comic play. In 1913 the play captured Korngold's imagination. With Teweles's permission, Erich and his father – the feared music critic Dr. Julius Korngold – enlisted the Viennese writer Leo Feld to adapt the play for operatic treatment. Julius found Feld's version awkward and not well-suited to musical adaptation, so he himself revised Feld's work for Erich to set to music. Erich completed composition by Christmas 1913 and orchestration by spring 1914. Immediately after finishing *Polykrates*, Korngold began composing his second opera, the one act tragedy *Violanta*, which occupied the rest of 1914 and first part of 1915.

At the end of 1914, Julius Korngold became friends with the Russian privy counselor's wife, Luise von Fraenkel Ehrenstein, who maintained a musical salon. Korngold played his two newly completed operas on the piano at one of her gatherings in early 1915. Present that evening was

The handbill is for the K. K. Hof-Operntheater. It features a decorative border and a central emblem. The text is in German and provides details about the opera *Der Ring des Polykrates* by Erich Wolfgang Korngold, including the cast, the conductor, and the performance schedule. The premiere is on Monday, April 10, 1916, at 7:30 PM. The handbill also mentions the opera *Violanta* and the *Der Rosenkranz* series.

K. K. Hof-Operntheater

Montag den 10. April 1916

Im Jahres-Abonnement 2. Viertel Bei aufgehobenem Saison-Abonnement
Für das Pensions-Institut dieses Hoftheaters

Violanta

Oper in einem Akt von Hans Rittler. Musik von Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Inszenierung: Dr. v. Bometal Musikalische Leitung: Dr. Reichwein

Simone Trubel, Hauptmann der Republik Senebis Dr. Weidemann

Violanta, seine Gattin Fr. Zetina

Affonso, natürlicher Sohn des Königs von Scapel Dr. Müller

Giovanni Bracca, ein Maler Dr. Leuer

Bice Fr. Ortner

Barbara, Violantas Amme Fr. Mittel

Mattio Dr. Maist

Erster Soldat Dr. Galles

Zweiter Soldat Dr. Mabin

Erste Magd Fr. Hejzl

Zweite Magd Fr. Böhmer

Soldaten, Schiffer, Waage, Masken Senebis, 15. Jahrhundert

Das Textbuch ist an der Kasse für 90 Heller erhältlich

Der im Orchester zur Verwendung kommende Stängel ist von der Firma V. Böhmendorfer, I. u. I. Hof- und Kammermusikmeister, beschickelt

Der Ring des Polykrates

Seitliche Oper in einem Akt nach einer Lustspielidee von H. Teweles

Musik von Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Inszenierung: Dr. von Bometal Musikalische Leitung: Dr. Reichwein

Wilhelm Krudt, Hofkapellmeister Dr. Reaner

Laura, dessen Frau Dr. Stutz

Florian Döblinger, Postist und Notentopist Dr. Maist

Vieschen, bei Laura bedientet Fr. Jovanovic

Peter Bogel, Wilhelms Freund Fr. Gandler

Spielt an einem Herbstnachmittag 1797 in einer kleinen landstädtl. Residenz

Das Textbuch ist an der Kasse für 90 Heller erhältlich

Der Beginn der Vorstellung und der zweiten Oper wird durch ein Glöckchen bekanntgegeben

Nach „Violanta“ eine größere Pause

Überlassen-Eröffnung vor 7 1/2 Uhr Anfang 7 Uhr Ende 10 Uhr

Der Kartenverkauf findet heute Mittags für obige Vorstellung und für

Dienstag den 11. Die verkaufte Nacht (Anfang 7 Uhr)

Mittwoch den 12. Trüben und Stolze (Anfang 7 Uhr)

Beleitet Spielplan:

Donnerstag den 13. Violanta – Der Ring des Polykrates (Anfang 7 Uhr)

Freitag den 14. Gefährten

Samstag den 15. Violanta – Der Ring des Polykrates (Anfang 7 Uhr)

Sonntag den 16. Partikel (Anfang 7 Uhr)

Montag den 17. Partikel (Anfang 7 Uhr)

Original handbill for the Vienna premiere of *Der Ring des Polykrates* on April 10, 1916 (author's private collection).

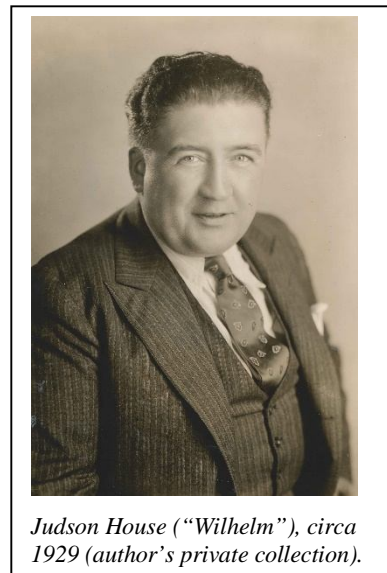
Hans Gregor, director of the Vienna Court Opera. After hearing Erich's performance, he requested rights to premiere both operas. Later that summer, the intendant of the Munich Court Opera, Clemens von Franckenstein, heard Korngold playing excerpts from the two operas. Similarly impressed, he also asked for rights to the premieres. Julius's preference for his son's works to receive their first performances outside Vienna ultimately led to Munich garnering the honor.

Der Ring des Polykrates and *Violanta* received their world premieres as a double-bill in Munich on March 28, 1916 under the baton of Bruno Walter. European and American reviewers reported the premiere a major success, with both operas receiving critical praise. By December 1916, the pair were staged in a dozen European cities. *Der Ring des Polykrates* was produced many times before the National Socialists rose to power in the 1930s, including Prague in November 1917 conducted by Korngold's former mentor Alexander von Zemlinsky, and Vienna in February 1920 with Korngold himself at the podium. Prior to The Dallas Opera's production, however, it has only been produced twice in North America. In fact, The Dallas Opera's four performances in February 2018 will nearly double the total number of previous US performances.



Margit Angerer & Josef Kalenberg from the 1929 Vienna State Opera production, conducted by Robert Heger (author's private collection).

Der Ring des Polykrates was the second of Korngold's operas to be performed in America, following five-and-a-half years after *Die tote Stadt*, and preceding *Violanta* by nine months. (His last two operas have yet to be staged in America.) Financed by an American who had attended the 1916 Munich dress rehearsal, the US premiere was given on February 10, 1927. The production was presented in the original German by the Philadelphia Civic Opera Company, conducted by Alexander Smallens. Stars included Irene Williams and Hilda Reiter, with Judson House in the role of "Wilhelm Arndt". That sole performance was repeated only once, in early 1928.



Judson House ("Wilhelm"), circa 1929 (author's private collection).

The Manhattan School of Music presented the only other US production of *Polykrates* in March 1983, as part of a triple bill that also included *Renard* (Stravinsky), and *Sancta Susanna* (Hindemith). Conducted by C. William Harwood, the school's three performances of *Polykrates* used an English translation by Ruth Martin, whose translations of operas were widely used in American opera houses. Performers included Richard Decker, Joseph Philippe, and Lauren Flanigan as "Laura". A review of this production in the Miklós Rózsa Society newsletter observed:

"Though based, as the title implies, on a Greek myth, the opera turns out to be an updating: a joyous and hysterically funny comedy of manners set in the Rosenkavalier world of eighteenth-century Vienna. There are echoes of Strauss in the early pages, but the really amazing thing is the way the young Korngold had already developed something very close to his mature style in this, his first opera."

With the resurgence of interest in Korngold's music over the past two decades, the current generation of American opera lovers and Korngold aficionados deserve the opportunity to experience and evaluate his lesser known works alongside of his popular ones. The Dallas Opera's production of this Korngold rarity is therefore a welcome one.

The Opera

Korngold's musical style followed in the lush Romantic tradition of Richard Strauss, Mahler and Puccini. His first two symphonic works similarly employ large forces like those of the opera *Salome*, or the symphonies of Mahler. For *Polykrates* however Korngold pared down his style, applying a more Mozartean-sized orchestra of not quite two dozen players. Despite the reduced number of players, it is still highly effective and is perfectly suited to the action. (He would use a similarly sized orchestra in 1918-19 for his incidental music to Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*.) Biographer Brendan G. Carroll notes that this approach is Korngold's solution to mirroring an eighteenth century story: music that is harmonically uncluttered by anything too complex yet retaining an early twentieth-century idiom, not emulating a classical style.

The single act opera is divided into ten scenes. Scenes one and two introduce the two couples, and scene three brings them all together. Scenes five and six introduce Wilhelm's friend Vogel and sets up the problem that will be resolved at the opera's conclusion.

The most beautiful and famous aria in the opera is Laura's "Diary Song", "Kann's heut nicht fassen". The aria appears in Scene 4 when she sits at her desk reflecting over her diary and romantic involvements. "Kann's heut nicht fassen, nicht verstehen" she sings: "Today I can't believe it, can't understand." This aria has been recorded on several occasions, but little else from the opera is frequently heard.

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hindemith SANCTA SUSANNA
korngold THE RING OF POLYCRATES
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Violin Concerto in D Major, op. 35

Korngold's unique contract with Warner Brothers permitted him to retain the rights to any film music he composed for them between 1935 and 1947. His film scores and late concert works thus often share themes. Three works that exhibit this trait are the *Third String Quartet*, the *Symphony in F#*, and the *Violin Concerto in D Major*.

The Violin Concerto dates to 1937 when Korngold announced in a newspaper that he was working on such a concerto. The love theme from the forgotten film *Another Dawn* (1937) impressed Korngold's father, who suggested it would make a good theme for a violin concerto. Indeed, this love theme forms the opening rising theme of movement one, and may be the inspiration for the entire work. Following a poor preliminary performance of the sketches, Korngold lost confidence in the work and put it away. In 1945 he revised the concerto with hopes that his old friend Bronislaw Huberman would give the premiere.



Photo of Jascha Heifetz discussing Korngold's new violin concerto with the composer [courtesy of the Korngold Estate].

When Huberman would not commit to a performance date, Korngold arranged with Jascha Heifetz to introduce the work. The concerto received its premiere by Heifetz in February 1947 with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra conducted by Vladimir Golschmann.

Each of the concerto's three movements share themes with Korngold's film scores. The work opens with the love theme from *Another Dawn*. The love theme in *Juarez* (1939) is the second subject of the first movement's sonata form structure. The second movement Romance uses a theme heard in *Anthony Adverse* (1936), and a second theme in the central section that appears to be specially written for the concerto. The virtuosic finale is a rondo based around the main theme of *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937). The concerto ends with a light-hearted mood and with witty "wrong notes". This work is now a mainstay in the repertoire with multiple performances yearly around the globe.

Troy O. Dixon, MS, PE

Mr. Dixon is a Korngold researcher based in Connecticut. His primary interest for the past seven years has been the performance history of Korngold's music in North America. He is the current chief editor of the Korngold website www.korngold-society.org.