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
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 Zemlinksy, 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.

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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.”

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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.
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. 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.

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