

Erich Wolfgang Korngold's

“Beim Großmütterchen”

An Introduction and Analysis by

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The following paper was written at the request of the founding editor for the Erich Wolfgang Korngold internet website www.korngold-society.org for publication on that website. The purpose of this paper is to present a background of Korngold's composition “Beim Großmütterchen” and to act as a starting reference for those who may wish to study the work in further detail. The text is comprised of a general summary and a musical discussion of the work. Historical background has been included where appropriate. References used in the preparation of this study are included at the end. No recordings of the work are known by the writer to exist. All translations from the German are by the author. The analysis is based on the author's transcription from the reproduction of the score in Jessica Duchen's biography “Erich Wolfgang Korngold.”

Note: A reproduction of the original manuscript is available to the general public in Jessica Duchen's book “Erich Wolfgang Korngold” (Phaidon Press Limited, 1996) on pages 24-25.

General Summary¹

Written in 3/4 time in the key of A major for solo piano

Composed: June 1908

Dedication: “Dedicated to my Grandmama June 1908 from Erich”

First Performance: Munich, Germany – 29 April 1995: David Ian Kram (piano)²

Musical Discussion

Later in life Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957) would become a recognized authority on the music Johann Strauss, Jr. and the Strauss family, and throughout his own original compositions, Korngold created Viennese waltzes of exquisite charm. In his original waltzes we recognize his idiomatic understanding of this musical form indigenous to the land he first called home, and one does not need to look beyond his earliest works to find some wonderful examples. In June of 1908, at the age of eleven, Korngold composed a fine Viennese waltz and, dedicating it to “his Grandmama,” titled it simply “Beim Großmütterchen,” or “At Grandmother's.” Already in this early work³ we can see his innate knowledge of this traditional waltz form.

The Viennese waltz, both as a musical form and a dance style, is a derivative of the “Ländler,” an Austrian and south-German folk dance specifically for paired dancers (i.e., male and female). Derived from the word “ländlich,” which translates as “rural” or “rustic”, the term “ländler” itself simplistically refers to “[person/people] of the land/country” but specifically connotes the style of dancing executed by these country folk. The exact origins of this dance form are unknown, but they are known to have been

established firmly enough by the late 1700s to allow Mozart (K. 606), Beethoven (WoO. 11) and Schubert (D. 378, 734, 790) to compose music in this style. Before 1800, the old-style Austrian Ländler music contained leaping melodies, often based on arpeggios and other large-interval melodic runs, that frequently covered as much as two octaves. By the late 18th century the ländler became a popular dance for the ballroom and was very much in vogue in the early 19th century.⁴ The dance style was later transformed into the Viennese waltz, though the musical style/form remained reasonably unchanged. According to Curt Sachs (pp. 189-90, 282), "...the struggle between expanded and close movement, which was particularly violent in the Alpine regions, was finally decided in favor of close movement [in the dance] as well as of close melody."⁵ (A result perhaps related to the trend for the upper level of society to take something from the "common" people – in this case a dance – and ultimately return it purified and ennobled in its meaning.) It is this multi-hundred year tradition that Korngold inherited.

Even at the age of eleven, Korngold apparently understood the structural requirements of this music to keep it "danceable." The traditional Viennese waltz is written in 3/4 time, has an introductory passage of usually four measures but sometimes (infrequently) eight, followed by the main body, and often concluding with a brief coda. In "Beim Großmütterchen" Korngold presents us with a four measure introduction, which is derived from the central thematic idea of the composition, followed by a 52 measure construction (separated from the introduction by a measure rest) and a three measure coda. Characteristically, in the score Korngold separates his structural elements with double bar-lines, resulting in the following construction:

Section	Measures	Length	Primary Key
Introduction	1-5	5 mm.*	E major
Theme A	6-13	8 mm.	A major
Theme B	14-21	8 mm.	E major
Theme A	22-29	8 mm.	A major
Theme C	30-45	16 mm.	D major
Bridge	46-49	4 mm.	E major
Theme A	50-57	8 mm.	A major
Coda	58-60	3 mm.	A major

* *The introduction is actually four measures long followed by a measure rest.*

The Viennese waltz is based on a two-measure dance pattern, requiring six steps (one step to each beat) for the couple to turn one complete revolution. It is typically choreographed in multiples of eight-measure phrases (or subdivisions of eight, such as four or, rarely, two measure lengths), and as evidenced from the breakdown above, Korngold's composition follows this eight-bar-based structure. But also evidenced from this breakdown, we find yet another example of Korngold's preference for the use of already established musical structures. In this case, the form ABACA is recognized as a rondo (specifically a two-couplet rondo), in which a principle theme alternates with subsidiary sections and then returns at the end of the work to close the piece.

Korngold's introductory passage does two things musically, aside from the obvious establishment of a waltz. The first two bars presage the main musical figure of the central theme, the melody line differing from that in measures 6-7 by only the concluding scale tone. Secondly it establishes one of Korngold's defining musical devices – chromaticism. Using contrary motion, the left hand displays three upward moving half steps from C# to E natural (upper note of the bass chord) while the right hand moves down,

firstly in a chromatic shift of the diminished 6th interval (mm. 2-3) but also in the movement of the upper-most note, beginning on F#, moving to F-natural, and ending on an implied E-natural in the E7 chord of measure four. (Note that the measure rest of measure five provides a dramatic musical pause just prior to the initial statement of the main theme. However, in a true dance form, this solitary measure would be out-of-place in the standard choreography of a Viennese waltz.)

The main theme, which recurs three times throughout the piece, appears in measures 6-13. This theme is charmingly effective in its simplicity (though playing mm. 11-13 is hardly simple), and is reminiscent of something we might expect to hear from the pen of a similarly-aged Mozart. As prepared by measures 1-2, our ears hear in measures 6-7 the rising scale figure followed by a downward leap of a seventh (another favorite Korngoldian device), in this case a dominant 7th. The pattern is repeated in measures 8-9 one scale-tone higher. In measure ten, the scale figure is altered to an arpeggio, followed by a transformation of the rhythm in measure eleven (dotted-eighth/sixteenth/half-note becomes eighth/eighth/sustained eighth). Korngold then finishes the eight-bar phrase with a downward scale figure completing an overall melodic “arch” that rises through measures 6-10, “peaks” in the first half (first three notes) of measure eleven, and falls through measures eleven (second half) to the theme’s conclusion in measure 13.

Two things strike the listener, however, that suggest the Mozart-like comparison above as inappropriate or invalid. The first is the “apparent” stray B# in measure nine (see Figure 1), a dissonance usually foreign to a composer like Mozart, and second, the rather late establishment of the piece’s tonic key of A-major. Taking the latter first, examination shows that measures 1-9 all employ some form of an E-chord (most often an E7) that continually hints at tonic A-major. The tonic A-major chord, however, is not actually heard until measure ten, only three bars from the end of the main theme/passage. Such a delayed establishment of the key would serve Korngold exceptionally well in later works, most notably the opening bars of *Violanta*, op. 8.



Figure 1. Transcription of mm. 8-10 of Korngold’s “Beim Großmütterchen”.

Of the former, at first glance the B# in measure nine appears out of place. Indeed this diminished 6th leap seems much more out of place here than the one presented in measure two during the introduction. However, recognizing the Korngoldian trait of inner moving harmonies, and this piece’s already established display of chromaticism, we can see that the B# is actually a stepping stone on the way from the E-major (specifically an E7 harmony) of measure eight to the A-major harmony of measure ten (see Figure 2). Suddenly the apparent “out-of-place” B# in the left hand is no longer out-of-context. Korngold’s use of the same note as part of the melody in the right hand (one octave higher) serves to further emphasize his chromatically moving inner harmony. It is also possible to extend Korngold’s chromaticism into measure 11 by following Korngold’s own half-notes (left hand), which rise from B# (C-natural) in measure nine to C# in measure ten and D-natural (transposed one octave lower) in measure eleven.



Figure 2. Measures 8-10 of Korngold's "Beim Großmütterchen" highlighting chromaticism in the bass.

As with others of Korngold's early works, directions for the performer are somewhat lacking. In measure 14 we find the only indication of tempo and style in this whole composition: "lente/breit". The first term is Italian and means "slow(ly)"; the second term is German and means "broadly". So Korngold appears to indicate this section is to be played – we assume – more slowly, more "broadly" than the first. Which leaves the question about the intended style of the first section.

The speed of Viennese waltzes, from the viewpoint of dancing, has varied considerably over time. One source records that early waltzing, around the time of the Ländler, was performed as slowly as 48 measures per minute (MPM), or about 144 beats per minute (BPM). The Viennese waltz was somewhat faster. In recent times, up until about the year 2001, the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (London) established the official speed for ballroom competition in Viennese Waltz as high as 60-62 MPM (180-186 BPM). Today the accepted range for competition speed is 56-58 MPM (168-174 BPM) in many regions. Without the benefit of the composer's indications, these dance speeds may perhaps give us a guide for performance, and in fact, the piece sounds reasonably well when played more quickly at first, with perhaps a poco ritard in measure 13, leading to a more broadly played second section.⁶

The second section, or "Theme B" from the chart above, in measures 14-21 has two notable characteristics. The first is the syncopated rhythm of the chord accompaniment played underneath the melody by the right hand. The second, more interesting effect, is another appearance of chromaticism in measure 21 as the bass note shifts down over the last three beats of the section. This chromatic stepping takes the bass note from the tonic E on beat one to the dominant 7th scale-tone on beat three, providing all the notes of the E7 chord to lead naturally back to the A-major tonic of the "Theme A" repeat that follows. (As a transition to the next section, these last notes could be diminished, accelerated, or a variety of other effects, as the composer's intention/notation is again sadly absent.)

Following this second section is a repeat of the main "Theme A". The reappearance is perfectly identical to measures 6-13 with one exception: the first note of measure 22 is one octave lower compared to measure six. One could assume the style of playing would be identical to the first section, given its exact duplication, and again, the piece sounds reasonably well when played in this manner.

The next section, "Theme C" (measures 30-45) changes key to D-major and presents a melody based on the repeating rhythmic motif of an accented eighth note, followed by an unaccented eighth note and half note. (Interestingly, a companion of this motif can be found in the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 1 in D-major.) Here again Korngold weaves chromaticism into the work, this time in the rising bass note on the first beat of each measure for measures 30-33 (see Figure 3). Measures 34-37 present a melodic idea that rounds out the eight-bar phrase to end cleanly in the tonic D-major.



Figure 3. Transcription of mm. 30-33 of Korngold's "Beim Großmütterchen".

Korngold repeats this eight-bar idea, with some development, in measures 38-45 in which the melody is transposed one octave higher, and ends on a D instead of an A. The major development of these measures revolves around the left hand accompaniment. As seen in Figure 4 (compare with Figure 3), the same rising chromatics from the bass of measures 30-33 are repeated, but this time they are followed in each measure with a falling chromatic, four-note scale. Comparing the two sets of four measures (mm. 30-33 & 38-41), we see that the first and third scales (mm. 38 & 40) begin on the same note as the half notes in measures 30 & 32, and in the second and fourth measures (mm. 39 & 41) the chromatics end on the same note as the previous half notes – an ingenious juxtaposition of scale figures. In order to display these chromatic runs more effectively, Korngold shifts the right hand chord from beat three to the half-notes on beat two of each measure.



Figure 4. Transcription of mm. 38-41 of Korngold's "Beim Großmütterchen".

Following this excursion into the sub-dominant key of D-major, but before restating "Theme A" again, Korngold ingeniously inserts a repetition of the four-measure introduction (he would use this same concept of restating an introduction in his Schauspiel Ouverture, op. 4), but with modification. In this incarnation, the left hand presents a diminished triad on B-natural topped by a dominant 7th (A-natural). This harmony naturally resolves to A-major, providing a simple device for returning to the original tonic key of the work. And ending in measure 49 with a E7 chord, Korngold brings us back to the restatement of the original theme.

As with the previous appearance, the restatement of "Theme A" is identical to the original in measures 6-13 (with even the first note of measure 50 unaltered) but with one variation. At the end of this restatement in measure 57, the second beat A-major harmony is changed to a remote F-major, marking the start of the coda. This brief F-major appearance is replaced on the third beat of measure 57 by an F# diminished 7th (note the upward chromatic step from F to F#), which resolves to E-major in measure 58. This E-major tonality is immediately resolved through the use of an E7 harmony on beat three of measure 58 into the concluding two measures of the piece in the tonic A-major.

Comparison with Other Contemporaneous Works

“[Korngold] would compose little pieces as presents for his family and friends on birthdays and at Christmas, some so striking, Julius tells us, that Erich was able to incorporate the ideas into later serious works.” (Duchen, p. 26.)

Anyone familiar with the work of Erich Wolfgang Korngold knows that ideas (themes, entire songs, or even fragments) from earlier works often find their way into later works. Sometimes the result is simple recasting of the work (e.g., the *Sursum Corda*, op. 13 symphonic music became the theme of *Robin Hood* in the 1938 Warner Bros. release, or the reuse of cinematic material in Korngold’s *Symphony in F sharp*, op. 40, or the 1937 *Violin Concerto*, op. 35, revised 1945, which appears to have followed both symphonic-cinematic and cinematic-symphonic paths), other times the previous material was developed further (the op. 14 song “*Mond, so gehst du wieder auf*” as a theme and variations movement within the *Piano Quintet*, op. 15). While “*Beim Großmütterchen*” does not quite fit either of these categories, the trend is still visible.

Having become acquainted in this work with some details of Korngold’s compositional style, similarities can be quickly found in other works from this time period. For example, in measure four of the final movement of the “*Don Quixote*” suite, “*Don Qixote’s Conversion and Death*,” we can see another example of chromatic, inner moving harmony (see Figure 5). Also seen in Figure 5 (right), the interval of a major 10th created between the two hands shifts down chromatically over the first three beats of the measure. Also in “*Don Quixote*” we can find multiple examples of endings that are similar to the ending of “*Beim Großmütterchen*.” One example is shown in Figure 6. But both of these examples are merely recurrences of compositional style or compositional language, especially given the close proximity in time between works.

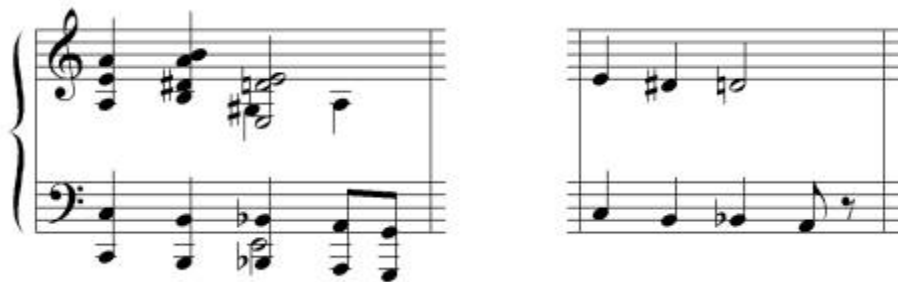


Figure 5. Measure 4 from “Don Quixote’s Conversion and Death” (l) and illustrative simplification (r).



Figure 6. Ending of “Beim Großmütterchen” (l) and “Don Quixote’s Dreams of Heroic Deeds” (r).

In “Beim Großmütterchen”, however, one motivic element can be found – albeit, in developed/modified form – in the work which immediately follows it. At the top of Figure 7 is a passage from “Beim Großmütterchen”. The middle and bottom staves in Figure 7 are two separate passages from the piano score of “Der Schneemann.” Note the similarities between all three passages: the falling step-pattern in eighth-notes; the appearance of a dotted-quarter immediately thereafter; some form of rising or near-rising pattern following the dotted-quarter; and so forth – as if Korngold had stumbled upon a good idea in one work, and sought to improve upon it in his next.



Figure 7. Passage from “Beim Großmütterchen” (top) and two passages from “Der Schneemann” (mid & bot).

In Closing

In the work “Beim Großmütterchen,” we can see many of Korngold’s characteristic compositional tools and trademarks already firmly established. We see his innate knowledge of the traditional Viennese waltz idiom, as well as another example of his preference for traditional “classical” musical structures. His already well developed use of chromatics and individual harmonic styles are apparent. Even his “recycling” of ideas from one work to another are already evident. And from the age of only eleven, Korngold has left us yet another stunning example of his musical precocity.

Sources

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About the Author

Troy O. Dixon is a former U.S. National Amateur Ballroom Dance Competition finalist and is a volunteer assistant coach for the Yale University Ballroom Dance Team. For nearly a decade he has been researching Erich Wolfgang Korngold and his music, and last year he prepared a similar introductory paper on Korngold's *Schauspiel Ouvertüre*, Op. 4 for the New Haven Symphony Orchestra. He is a licensed structural engineer by profession and is currently employed by a multi-discipline architectural/engineering firm.

Notes

¹ Unless noted, General Summary information is taken from the score.

² Carroll, Brendan G. *The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Amadeus Press, Portland, Oregon, 1997, p. 400.

³ "Beim Großmütterchen" was composed several months before he started work on the famous pantomime "Der Schneemann," one of the three works (including the first piano sonata, and "Don Quixote") which comprised the first ever publication (in 1910) of Korngold's compositions.

⁴ According to Grove's Dictionary, circa 1812, Carl Maria von Weber's well-known "Invitation à la Valse" marked the adoption of the Waltz form into the sphere of absolute music, no longer relegating it solely to the ballroom.

⁵ "Close melody" is defined as having short motifs of two or three tones, small steps up to a whole tone, and narrow compass not exceeding a fourth. Based on this definition, Korngold's five-note, scale-based theme and a melody line that ranges barely beyond an octave (mm. 6-13 of the present work) could be considered close melody.

⁶ There may be a precedent for such "changes" in style and tempo. Sachs comments that in dances from earlier periods (minuets, saltarellos, etc.) there was an alternation between the "dance" proper and the old "procession," where slower more promenade-like action was executed by the dancers, which came between dance/pantomimic episodes.