

## Opera Circle's Die Tote Stadt Preview

By Daniel Hautzinger



Erich Wolfgang Korngold isn't exactly a household name, but you've probably heard music by him or imitating him. Korngold, an Austrian composer active in the first half of the twentieth century, is best known in the US for his scores of such Hollywood films as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *The Prince and the Pauper* in the '30s and '40s. As the distinguished music journalist Donald Rosenberg said in a phone interview, "He really changed the whole trajectory of film scores by writing very lushly for the orchestra, using it almost as a character in the drama, and by writing scores that were essentially operatic, with themes for different characters."

Yet before he worked in Hollywood, Korngold achieved great success as a composer of concert and theater music. On June 14, Opera Circle will present Korngold's opera *Die Tote Stadt* ("The Dead City") at the Ohio Theatre in PlayhouseSquare. In anticipation of that production, Rosenberg has been giving a series of introductory programs on Korngold and *Die Tote Stadt* at libraries throughout the area (see our concert listings page for times and locations).



The opera was inspired by Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte*, the first piece of fiction to include photographs. The libretto, written by Korngold and his father, the music critic Julius Korngold, under the collective pseudonym Paul Schott, explores lost love and remembrance. As in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, a widowed man meets a woman who bears a striking resemblance to his deceased wife. He then attempts to assuage the loss of his wife by pursuing this new woman.

"*Die Tote Stadt* is sort of a preview of a lot of Korngold's techniques in the movies: greatly descriptive music that really tells you a lot about the situations and the characters, and does so in a very colorful, expressive way," Rosenberg explained. "His sense of the dramatic was established very early."

Very early indeed: Korngold was just twenty-three years old when *Die Tote Stadt* was premiered in 1920 to much acclaim. And he was famous even earlier than that, having been proclaimed a genius at the ripe age of nine by none other than Gustav Mahler. "Korngold really lived up to the promise. He was prolific and an astonishing virtuoso in terms of compositional technique. He was in command of all the resources of the orchestra and the voice."



Unfortunately, Korngold's success in Europe was not to last. In 1938, after the Nazis took over much of German-speaking Europe, he was forced to immigrate to the US as a result of his Jewish ancestry, vowing to never write concert works again while Hitler was in power. "We thought of ourselves as Viennese," Korngold later said, according to Rosenberg. "Hitler made us Jewish."

Opera Circle's production of *Die Tote Stadt* brings Korngold back to his Viennese identity. "I think there's a lot of Viennese operetta in *Die Tote Stadt*," Opera Circle executive director Dorota Sobieska said in a phone interview. "Korngold is halfway between Richard Strauss and Imre Kálmán," the popular Vienna-based Hungarian composer of operettas. "We decided in our production to go closer to Kálmán."

“We wanted a little more theater,” continued Sobieska, who will also take the joint role of Marietta/Marie in the opera. “This opera is a little tricky in terms of balance. There is so much for Marietta and Paul that the other characters can be overpowered.” In an attempt to alleviate this problem, Opera Circle’s production splits many of the dual roles of the original opera, which casts singers as multiple characters. “It’s not a monologue by Paul or Marietta, or a duet. It’s a theater of many actors,” said Sobieska in characterizing this production.



There are multiple reasons behind Opera Circle’s decision to stage *Die Tote Stadt*, which had been somewhat neglected after an initial period of success. (The Metropolitan Opera, for instance, has not presented it since a run of twelve performances between 1921 and 1923). “First, we want to fill in the gaps with things that are missing in Cleveland, to bring the best of the best to our city,” Sobieska explained. “A more personal reason comes second. I have a deep appreciation of works by composers, often young, who have a freedom of mind and a belief in the unlimited possibilities of art. With time, they learn about limitations. But when they begin, their minds are so free and imaginative, and sometimes impractical. So you have to make choices or substitutions to make it practical. But that’s the work we like, the creative work.”

Korngold himself would have appreciated that creative adaptation of another composer’s work, having repurposed music of Mendelssohn for a film version of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and crafted arrangements of Johann Strauss and Offenbach for operettas. “He certainly had the chops to do anything,” Rosenberg said. “It’s a shame that a lot of people by the late ‘40s didn’t take him seriously anymore.” With Opera Circle’s help, Korngold’s stature may now rise in Cleveland to fulfill Mahler’s early prediction of genius.

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