

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 5. 10. 2018

Erich Wolfgang Korngold

A wonder kid, a successful opera composer in Europe and a pioneer of orchestral film scores in Hollywood. A music genius comparable to the biggest names in the history of classical music. Author of the soundtracks to films such as *Captain Blood*, *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *The Sea Hawk*. Erich Wolfgang Korngold from Brno.

On Christmas Day 1860, Julius Korngold, one of Vienna's prominent musical critics was born in the Austro-Hungarian city of Brünn (now known as Brno). He fathered two sons whom he and his wife named after renowned composers. Older Hans Robert (after Robert Schumann) was born in 1892 and younger Erich Wolfgang (after Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart) on 29th May 1897. Erich's birthplace was situated at the Franzens-Glacié street (now the Koliště street) in Brno.

The talent of the youngest Korngold began to show at the age of three, when he astonished his parents with rhythmical smashing of a wooden spoon against a table. At the age of five, his perfect pitch and unique musical memory allowed him to replay themes from *Don Giovanni* and other operas he heard his father play on the piano. At the age of seven, he began composing his own music. When he turned eleven, he, much to the amazement of his own parents, teachers and the wide public, composed ballet *Der Schneemann* (The Snowman). At the age of thirteen, he came up with his first piano sonata. Because of his father's work, soon after Erich's birth the family moved to Vienna, one of the world's cultural centres of that time. Julius Korngold realised that his son's talent needs to be developed properly so he turned to family friend Gustav Mahler who was at that time serving as the director of the Vienna State Opera. Mahler, who also happened to be born in Bohemia, saw a musical genius in young Erich and recommended him to study under the tutelage of Alexander Zemlinsky, composer, conductor and pedagogue.

Zemlinsky's tuition gave Korngold's composition a more solid form and prepared the young composer for the world of the opera where, even before reaching puberty, Korngold was able to attract attention of greats such as Richard Strauss and Giacomo Puccini. His first significant public performance was the staging of his ballet in the Vienna State Opera in 1910. But after his debut, Erich had to face the doubts of several representatives of the Viennese cultural circles, whom his father had antagonised with his uncompromising criticisms.

In the 1910s, Korngold was the subject of heated debates not only in Vienna. Invitations came from all over Europe. After the recommendation of Czech viola player Oskar Nedbal, also one of his admirers, he performed his *Schneemann* in the National Theatre in Prague. Another success came in Budapest and other cities followed. Korngold spent most of the year 1914 composing his first one-act opera *Violanta* which was later followed by *Der Ring des Polykrates* (The Ring of Polykrates). Both operas premiered in 1916 in Munich.

Both of the aforementioned as well as all of Korngold's subsequent operas remained in the repertoire of German and Austrian opera houses until the 1930s when they were pulled from their programmes due to political circumstances foreshadowing the rise of Nazism. The First World War may have plunged many people into depression and poverty, but its effect on Korngold's career was not particularly negative. After the war, he found success as a travelling conductor. With his own compositions, he visited Berlin, Frankfurt, Hamburg and his hometown on Brunn. At a time when modernist music was on the rise, Korngold – as a successor of Strauss, Mahler, Stravinsky and Debussy – was considered a conservative composer ignorant to new trends. But thanks to the virtuosity he achieved in classical tonal music, he had no need to resort to atonality. With his talent, however, we can safely assume that a significantly different musical style would have made no difficulties to him.

In 1924, Korngold married the granddaughter of actor Adolf von Sonnenthal, Luzi von Sonnenthal (1900–1962), who was an actress, writer, singer and pianist. Luzi, who was to become the mother of two Korngold's sons, appeared in several silent films. In the 1920s, Korngold received several invitations to perform and conduct overseas. He gladly accepted and for the first time he set out to the country which later became his second home. In 1927, Korngold was, like the rest of the world, overwhelmed by the

news about the premiere of *The Jazz Singer*, the first feature length sound film that de facto ended the silent film era. The German film industry definitively switched to production of sound films in 1931 and, like in the US, musicals emerged as one of new popular genres. But unlike the US, where musicals were based mostly on Broadway shows, the German filmmakers used newly composed or existing operettas.

The first opportunity to connect his name with a film was presented to Korngold in the spring of 1930 when Erich Pommer, an influential film producer from the production company UFA, asked him to compose music for the musical *The Congress Dances* (1931) that later became one of the most successful early German sound films.

Despite the fact that the music wasn't composed by Korngold, who turned down Pommer's offer, but by Werner R. Heymann (who, like Korngold, emigrated to the US during the war). After Hitler's rise to power and the escalation of Anti-Semitism, there was a massive exodus of European artists to the US in the middle of 1930s. Many of them found their place in Hollywood, where an international community of artists from Europe had been forming since the 1920s. And it was German directors (Lubitsch, Wilder) and English actors (Chaplin, Grant, Leigh) who became the brightest stars in their respective professions.

Korngold originally went to America after the Warner Bros. asked him to score the epic Shakespearean adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935). He was probably tempted by the opportunity to work with two German-speaking directors – William Dieterle and Max Reinhardt who knew Korngold from Vienna. And as Korngold didn't intend to stay overseas, Korngold returned to Vienna after he finished his work on this project. But the impending risk of a war and the impossibility to compose freely eventually forced him to choose the United States as long-term refuge. With his wife and two children, Korngold arrived to New York in August 1935. After spending several days at the East coast, the family moved into a rented house in Beverly Hills.

Korngold's Hollywood career began in the era when technical inventions were developing rapidly and the importance of the film score was rising. A pivotal role was played by the soundtrack of *King Kong* (1933) by Max Steiner from Vienna. A perfect example how to combine music with the action taking place on screen, this score served as a model for a majority of film scores made in the following years. Korngold managed to deal with new technical challenges extraordinarily fast and in the field of

film music, he soon achieved a mastery similar to the one he achieved in composing operas, which only proves his musical versatility.[1]

After signing a new contract with Warner Bros., Korngold's first commissioned work was the score for the adventure film *Captain Blood* (1935) starring Errol Flynn. He had only three weeks to compose it (compared to the usual period of six weeks), which was the shortest period time he ever had to compose a film score. Later Korngold enforced a contract amendment which guaranteed him almost unlimited time to compose a film score, which might explain why he composed considerably less film scores (approx. 20) than for instance Steiner (approx. 200). But despite the shortened period of time, Korngold's *Captain Blood* inspired by musical idioms of the 19th century, belongs with its uncompromising tempo to the best symphonic film scores ever made.[2] And what's more, it inspired other composers to come up with more catchy tunes the cinemagoers will hum long after they have left the cinemas.

When Korngold began composing film music, his symphonic style did not undergo any major changes. But he changed film music. In his interpretation it reminds of long symphonic poems. The main musical theme is usually introduced with the opening titles and sometimes continues to the first minutes of the film. Individual themes then correspond with the needs of the story, are developed throughout the film, and contribute to its structural unity. The music accompanies most of the action scenes without attracting too much attention to itself and individual compositions seamlessly follow each other. Altogether, we are talking about a compact composition without moments that would need "bridging" with recycling of a used motive. One of Hollywood's most ambitious production of the 1930s was the epic *Anthony Adverse* (1936) based on the bestseller by Hervey Allen. Korngold was the ideal candidate for composing a fittingly grandiose score. Long epic adventures became his speciality and producers could be sure that the score would be as monumental as the action on the screen. Probably the most prestigious one from these productions was *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) for which Korngold won an Oscar.

At first, Korngold didn't want to compose the music for this captivating adaptation of the legend about the famed outlaw as he couldn't identify himself with the story based on too much action for his taste. But eventually he was talked into it. Warner Bros. realised that the score forms an inseparable part of the film's success and used

it in its promo campaign. The radio broadcast almost the whole soundtrack as performed by the studio orchestra conducted by Korngold. The broadcast was narrated by Basil Rathbone who portrayed Guy of Gisborn.

After the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany, Korngold realised there was no way back. All of his possessions and savings were confiscated by the Nazis. His operas and concertos were banned in Europe and only seldom performed in the US. Work for film became basically the only source of income he had in order to sustain his family and several friends who lost everything. But after the success of *Robin Hood*, Korngold luckily became a sought-after composer for the Hollywood studios and his table was always full of offers.

His music for expensive adventure films – in the following years it was for instance *The Sea Hawk* (1940) – set the standards for film compositions in this genre. With his neoromantic style and the complexity of his compositions in which individual elements organically intertwine with each other and together form a coherent composition without fillers, he influenced not only his contemporaries such as Alfred Newman, but also a whole generation of younger composers, in particular James Horner and John Williams whose music for *Star Wars* and a number of other iconic films would probably sound very different without Korngold.[3]

Beginning with *Devotion* (1946), a period drama set in Victorian England, we can trace a certain qualitative decline in the films that were offered to Korngold. Compared to the previous epics with A-list stars and renowned directors, this was a B-class title. The new film adaptation of the famous novel by Maugham *Of Human Bondage* (1946) with Paul Henreid and Eleanor Parker wasn't very convincing either. Not even Korngold's score could save the film. But Korngold himself wasn't very pleased with it and that subsequently led to a gradual loss of confidence that he could fulfil his potential as a film music composer.

Korngold realised that in the future, a film score will be only as popular as the film itself and, unlike operas and concertos, it will not succeed alone. No matter how good the soundtrack would be, it could be easily forgotten as long it would be accompanied by a forgettable film. And it was because of this realisation that he after the war returned to concert music in which he didn't hesitate to use the themes from his film

music – a thing that some of his critics held against him. Before leaving Hollywood definitively, Korngold worked on the adaptation of the French theatre play *Monsieur Lamberthier*. Its theme was very close to him as it followed the story of a talented composer. The drama called *Deception* (1936) starring Bette Davis and Claude Rains is considered to be one of few Hollywood films that show the world of classical music in accordance with reality. When the characters have dialogues about music, which Korngold helped to write, they don't utter any nonsenses. Korngold also took on the role of a music teacher. He taught Davis how to play the piano and introduced Rains to the work of a conductor.

Deception was Korngold's last film for the Warner Bros. After finishing the score, he decided not to prolong his contract in hopes that he could return to Vienna. But despite that, the work kept on coming (for instance the western film *Duel in the Sun*, 1946). Stronger inclination to film realism after the war however led to a decrease in interest in romantic melodramas and classic adventure films which were Korngold's speciality. This new type of production with less space for heroism was not matching his focus. He had therefore no motivation to stay in the States.

The Korngold family returned to Europe in the fall of 1947. At that time, Erich suffered his first serious stroke. As a result, he was unable to conduct for a while and so he put all his energy into composing and playing the piano. In the post-war era, he composed a string serenade and opera *Die Kathrin* which was unfortunately not accepted in Vienna because of its simple story and classical musical arrangement. It was a flop cancelled after only eight performances and the first proof that Korngold's comeback wasn't going to be easy.

America, however, remained interested in Korngold's skills. Director William Dieterle asked him to compose the score for Richard Wagner's biography *Magic Fire* (1956) filmed on authentic locations in Germany. Korngold's task was in fact not to compose new music but rework Wagner's music for the dramatic purposes of the story. Korngold accepted the offer under the condition that not a single note of Wagner's music would be changed. He also used Wagner's compositions relevant for the story and existing in the given time.

The film, cut from original 150 minutes of running time to two hours, failed to impress the viewers and was screened as a curiosity in double programmes of suburban cinemas. The remnants of Korngold's desire to compose film music were gone. This dignified homage to one of the greats of European music remains his last film score. In July 1954, the Korngolds set out for one last journey from the US to Europe.

Korngold's loss of energy unfortunately didn't apply only to film music. Opera houses and concert halls didn't show any interest in Korngold's compositions and that only sustained his feeling of depression and worthlessness. In the middle of the 1950s he suffered another stroke after which he was left unable to talk and paralysed in the right half of his body. He was no longer able to play the piano. When his condition bereaved him of the possibility to indulge the biggest passion of his life, his resignation reached its peak. Nothing motivated him to stay alive.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold died on 29th November 1957. A majority of his obituaries described him as a famous composer of film music. He probably wouldn't have accepted such label. He attached more importance to his non-film compositions. They were rediscovered in the 1970s as a part of the revival in interest in classical tonal and romantic music. The composer who was criticised for copying famous predecessors and recycling of his own work was in retrospect praised as an original author of exceedingly complex compositions worthy of same admiration as Mahler, Strauss and Wagner.

Notes:

[1] Out of Korngold's renowned collaborators, we need to mention Hugo Friedhofer who took care of the instrumentation of seventeen out of eighteen Korngold's film scores. Korngold's musical education enabled him to instrument his compositions by himself, but due to the studio regulations about a clear (and efficient) division of labour, he had to leave this part of the job to someone else.

[2] When Gene Roddenberry was thinking about ideal music for his *Star Trek* in the 1960s, the closest thing he found was Korngold's neoromantic score for *Captain Blood*.

[3] When composing the unforgettable melody accompanying the famous opening crawl in Star Wars, John Williams drew inspiration from Korngold's composition for *Kings Row* (1942).