



## STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

### SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

#### CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE: Larry Rothe on *Die tote Stadt*, 2008

#### Revisiting the Dead City

BY LARRY ROTHE  
(read time ~ 8 minutes)

When *Die tote Stadt* arrived at the San Francisco Opera in the fall of 2008, those of us who admitted loving the music of Erich Wolfgang Korngold savored the moment, confident that others would be joining our ranks. We understood why something so sublime had been forced to wait so long for its chance on the stage of the War Memorial Opera House, but we never really bought the explanation. Which was simply this: *Die tote Stadt*, which premiered in 1920 and within the year delighted audiences in eighty cities, had fallen under the shadow of Hollywood, as had Korngold himself. That shadow was cast in 1935, when Warner Brothers decided to add some class to its films by hiring a big-name composer to score them. Korngold balked at first, but he liked movies and finally agreed to provide music for the Errol Flynn swashbuckler *Captain Blood*. Other offers and further scores followed: *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, *The Sea Hawk*, to name a handful among many. The music establishment that had nurtured Korngold—that of late-Romantic/early-20th-century Vienna—believed in high and low culture, each consigned to its corner of the ring, denying any overlap between the movie theater and the concert hall or opera house. The conductor Otto Klemperer spoke for High Culture when a colleague lamented that a talent like Korngold’s should be squandered on the movies. “Oh, well,” Klemperer snarked, “Erich Wolfgang has always composed for Warner Brothers. He just didn’t realize it.”

As a Wunderkind in Vienna in the years before the Great War, Korngold was used to success and to sniping. Critics and malcontents believed his early triumphs followed from his father’s position as the *Neue Freie Presse*’s chief music critic, a man not to be crossed, certainly not by anyone who judged the son’s work a good example of bad art. Erich Wolfgang produced tuneful music, the kind often mistaken for trivial. Until *Die tote Stadt*, he exhibited little interest in the angst that haunted the fin-de-siècle Vienna Zeitgeist, neither the anxieties that Schoenberg or Berg wove into their scores, nor the disturbing visions suggested by Freud’s research, nor the dark human interiors explored in the canvases of Kokoschka and Schiele. Korngold strives for a similar psychological heft in *Die tote Stadt*, but the composer was constitutionally incapable of sustaining a pervasively morbid melancholy, and what lingers in the memory of *Die tote Stadt* is not the story’s darkness so much as the music’s radiance, even in passages meant to portray the contents of mental baggage better left unpacked. Korngold’s first biographer, R.S. Hoffmann, hit upon a single word to name the thing that has led some to judge Korngold a lightweight and others to love his music, a trait at the foundation of the composer’s worldview and which his work manifests: optimism.

Optimism, in short supply when *Die tote Stadt* first came to the San Francisco Opera fourteen years ago, is in shorter supply today, and the need for it greater. Think of Korngold's optimism as a synonym for beauty, readily accessible beauty, beauty of melody and texture, beauty that reminds us of the pleasures that humans can offer one another. Pleasures such as *Die tote Stadt's* were once devalued for being too easily enjoyed, but composers have come to understand, as Korngold understood, that listeners long to be touched, that they crave the emotional full immersion that will refresh their sensibilities. No work of art can counterbalance misery and evil such as the world witnessed before *Die tote Stadt* or has witnessed since, to say nothing of what is transpiring somewhere as you read this. But because you are reading this, chances are that you will discover—or have discovered or rediscovered—*Die tote Stadt*, whose potent energy can push back the world's hostile force fields, creating a safe place, if only for its duration.

I was led to such a place by my first encounter with Korngold. On a Sunday afternoon, from the TV in my parents' living room, I heard the fanfare that opens the great score for the 1942 film *Kings Row*. The sound lured me from my schoolbooks. I caught only the last few seconds of the title sequence, just in time to see "Music by Erich Wolfgang Korngold," a credit given pride of place immediately preceding the director's.

Years passed before I saw *Kings Row* from start to finish, and I learned that I was hardly alone in loving that film's score. Listen to it while watching, and you get an idea of how Korngold's movie music works. He scored a film as though it were a musical drama, assigning individual themes to characters and fitting those themes to the plot, reflecting it and advancing it. In *Kings Row*, every principal theme is introduced within the first ten minutes. During the two hours that follow, the music's ebb and flow add a third dimension to the performances, and when Betty Field tries to seduce Robert Cummings, Korngold is helping them convince us that they really are Cassie Tower and Parris Mitchell. Korngold treated movies as operas. *Tosca*, he once told his studio orchestrator and fellow film composer Hugo Friedhofer, was the greatest movie score ever written.

Between *Kings Row* and the San Francisco Opera's 2008 *Die tote Stadt*, I came to anticipate increasingly frequent chances to hear Korngold's music. In the early 1970s came a pair of albums excerpting the film scores, recorded in sonics that revealed an orchestral palette rivaling Richard Strauss's. In 1975, *Die tote Stadt* received its first recording. RCA thought enough of the opera to assemble an A-level cast headed by Carol Neblett, René Kollo, and Hermann Prey, with Erich Leinsdorf conducting. The orchestral works have also been rediscovered. The Violin Concerto, introduced originally in 1947 by Jascha Heifetz, has in recent years been championed on the concert stage and in recordings by artists such as Anne-Sophie Mutter, Itzhak Perlman, and Gil Shaham, and the Symphony in F-sharp, dismissed after its 1954 premiere, is currently available in six commercial recordings. In 2019, Korngold was the focus of Bard College's summer Music Festival. More than a century after *Die tote Stadt's* premiere, its composer is again taken seriously.

Listening to the San Francisco Opera's 2008 *Die tote Stadt*, I am struck by a remarkable flexibility of phrasing, instrumentally no less than vocally. Under Donald Runnicles, the San Francisco Opera Orchestra delivers a lavish sound, at once transparent and weighty, reveling in the purely orchestral moments, and joining the voices in a supple dancelike give-and-take that adheres as much to the music's spirit as to its letter, true to the score's Viennese heritage.

The cast is headed by two singers in their San Francisco Opera debuts. As Marie/Marietta, American soprano Emily Magee contributes more than vocal luxury, for her punishing role also demands acting that can make an audience suspend its disbelief when confronted with an admittedly fantastic story. Appearing as Paul is German tenor Torsten Kerl, who paces his energy over two hours of almost nonstop frenzy, in a role that could easily defeat a lesser voice. Listen to Magee and Kerl in one of the opera's rare, relaxed episodes, Marietta's Song, perhaps the opera's best-known number, often performed as a stand-alone piece (~ 32:50-38:23). In the double role of Frank and Fritz, American baritone Lucas Meachem brings a straightforward generosity, minus any hint of affectation, to Pierrot's Dance Song, an enchanting number that can lure a singer into an overly inflected performance, where

expressiveness congeals into schmaltz (~ 01:11:35-01:15:35). In the small but crucial role of Paul's housekeeper, Brigitta, Australian mezzo-soprano Katharine Tier taps the soaring majesty of the Act I aria in which Brigitta quits claim to affection even as she serves in a household she believes is filled with love. Note especially the ecstatic orchestral passage that follows her last notes (14:14-15:25). (For more on these passages, see the accompanying essay from the 2008 program, "En route from the dead City"). Director Willy Decker fuses Acts I and II, dispensing with the original intermission break. As Magee and Kerl point out in the interviews recorded here (beginning at 01:37:01), Decker's strategy solves a dramatic problem even as it places added burdens on the soprano and tenor leads. They forfeit an interval of relief from roles that are among opera's most taxing, sacrificing their comfort to verisimilitude. As Korngold conceived the drama, the onset of Paul's nightmare straddles the two discrete acts, yet in the world outside the theater nightmares never pause to allow visits to the bar or bathrooms.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold died in 1957, at only sixty, forsaken by his optimism, convinced he would be forgotten. Yet today his music, no longer a guilty pleasure for the few, is embraced openly. Hugo Friedhofer, who orchestrated most of the composer's film scores, made the case for Korngold most eloquently. "I know there is a tendency in some quarters to be rather derogatory about his music," he said, "but I don't think that anybody with any spark of feeling can listen to Korngold and not agree that here was a man who knew exactly what he wanted to say and said it beautifully." Listen. Breathe deeply. Take all *Die tote Stadt* offers. Indulge.

**Larry Rothe** writes about music for San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances. His books include *For the Love of Music* and *Music for a City, Music for the World*. Visit [larryrothe.com](http://larryrothe.com).