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COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS

Thesis

SUBVERTED MODERNISM:
KORNGOLD'S *DIE TOTE STADT*

by

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Disclaimer: this document may bear my name as author, but I had very little to do with its creation. Sure, I may have typed in the actual prose, but I had to be dragged kicking and screaming all the way to the final sentence. Real credit for this tiny tome owes far less to my own exertions than to the shattered nerves of a small group of people without whom I'd have simply abandoned the project and joined the nearest traveling circus. I'd therefore like to offer them the following shamefully disproportionate votes of thanks:

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SUBVERTED MODERNISM:

KORNGOLD'S *DIE TOTE STADT*

KATHERINE ELIZABETH STRINGER

ABSTRACT

Using the 1920 opera *Die tote Stadt* as its primary case in point, this thesis interrogates the pervasive notion that the Austrian-born composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957) refused to acknowledge Modernist trends, dialogues and aesthetics in his works for the stage, and instead held fast to late-Romantic aesthetics and philosophies at the expense of engaging directly with contemporary culture and politics. I show evidence to the contrary, that Korngold was in fact actively involved with the intellectual, artistic and socio-political discourse of his time, and that this engagement is manifest in his opera, which draws parallels between the city of Bruges, setting of *Die tote Stadt*'s source material, Georges Rodenbach's 1892 novel *Bruges-la-morte*, and Vienna, the composer's hometown, as it was at the close of the First World War. In substantiating this claim, I first of all seek to place the composer in his proper context as a child of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna, and the son of that city's leading conservative music critic, the influential and much-feared Julius Korngold, successor to Eduard Hanslick at the *Neue Freie Presse*. I also interrogate lingering assumptions about the composer's lack of socio-political engagement owing to his status as a former child prodigy, famous across Europe for his preternatural musical gifts. I also explore the specific, alterations, additions and excisions made

by the composer to his source material in translating it to the musical stage, and discuss how those changes reflect his compositional and socio-political ethos. Finally, I analyze portions of *Die tote Stadt* and discuss how a composer's late-Romantic compositional language can in fact indicate Modernist sympathies, albeit in their own specific strain, before sketching a brief reception history of this opera in particular, the composer's works in general, as well as discussing how this work might be reassessed and rehabilitated into the "art music" canon.

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Introduction

Whether we like to admit it or not, there is an overriding sense in today's society that the motives of any work of art whose guiding spirit is one of optimism must immediately be regarded as suspect. Given that many twentieth and twenty-first century artists and intellectuals either directly experienced many of the unprecedentedly catastrophic world events of the past century, or experienced these same events indirectly through their parents and grandparents, it is hardly surprising that recent generations have come to regard cultural establishments, would-be political messiahs and mindlessly cheerful, pseudo-philosophical sound-bites as subject to the highest possible degree of skepticism. For as well founded as our postmodern distrust of zealotry and evangelism of any kind might be, is it perhaps possible that we take our cynicism beyond the bounds of good sense and occasionally into the realm of the self-destructive? More unsettlingly, do we adopt these attitudes as a response against the facile optimism that led previous generations so far astray, or is this attitude in fact a disguised continuation of earlier forms of societal masochism that led to so much widespread destruction in the first place? Such a question may be impossible to answer definitively, not least because contemporary culture, particularly musical culture, has been so diversified as to create a number of highly specialized niche markets, each with their own standards of artistic excellence, and representing different, often conflicting social mores. Moreover, the widespread entrenchment of an aesthetic value system that roughly equates cheerfulness to kitsch and moroseness to brilliance is one that has persisted, and

indeed, grown steadily in acceptance, for well over a century. Whether one is listening to art song or alt-rock, it is generally understood that an explicitly positive outlook suggests a certain lack of artistic gravitas.

But what if the focus of a composer's apparently straightforward optimism is the result of a deliberate attempt to reject a culture of fatalism and nullification, or at least to call it sharply into question? Can such an attempt ever be successful, or must it always be subject to misunderstanding and ridicule? Insight to these questions may well be found in the case of the Austrian-born composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897-1957). In his youth an unrivalled prodigy, mentored by the high priests of Austro-Germanic musical tradition, Korngold's works sought to bridge the worlds of opulent late Romanticism and stark, dispassionate Modernism. Though his conciliatory approach afforded him both critical and popular acclaim in his early adulthood, by the time of his death, Korngold was generally regarded—when he was discussed at all—as an outdated sentimentalist, unable to break with an irrelevant musical past. Further confounding the composer's legacy and casting doubt on his accomplishments is his lingering reputation as a composer of rhapsodic film scores for Warner Brothers Studios from the late 1930s onward (a career move necessitated by Korngold's escape from Austria's Anchsluss with Nazi Germany in 1938), and by his unabashed delight at adapting and conducting the operettas of Johann Strauss Jr., profitable commissions for which Korngold was never guileful enough to feign contempt. Yet there is more to Korngold's seemingly retrospective worldview than may be immediately apparent; his opera *Die tote*

Stadt, an unqualified success at the time of its 1920 premiere and a focal point of the recent Korngold renaissance, is a celebration of life in the guise of a brooding contemplation of death; more importantly it is a subtly allegorical rumination on aesthetic debates of the composer's own era, i.e. the years leading up to and immediately following the First World War.

This span of time, characterized by a widespread collapse of centuries-old social, political, religious and cultural values, gave rise to a series of endless debates about the nature and role of artists and the arts in society, forming just part of what amounted to a decades-long existential crisis plaguing Western Europe. The term Modernism arose as the catchall designation for the prevailing aesthetic of this complex epoch, during which the cumbersome and restrictive practice of guarding and perpetuating cultural and artistic traditions for their own sake became regarded as an exercise largely irrelevant to a post-industrial Central European community of crumbling empires and evolving social mores. First-person experience of the here and now became the basis for new forms and styles in all areas of the fine arts, while long-established genres and conventions fell to the wayside in an effort to discard non-essentials and useless historical detritus. Moreover, as artists and intellectuals began to refocus attention away from matters ageless and eternal and onto the fleeting, transitory nature of contemporary life, the inherent value of the individual and his or her specific merits and experiences became more important than ever before.[1]

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[1] Steinberg, Michael P. "The Politics and Aesthetics of Operatic Modernism", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36 (2006): 629.

This focus on the individual contains a number of challenges to any single, unifying definition of the term "Modern" or "Modernist". One of the primary difficulties lying at the root of any discussion of Modernism, both as employed at the beginning of the past century, and as an epochal designation employed in present-day scholarship, is that its ideology is so focused on the subjective and the transitory that a successful description of Modernism as an aesthetic is dependent on a wide variety of factors, not the least of which is the subjective experience not only of a particular artist, but also of the individual audience member or observer. Perhaps the true spirit of Modernism lies in a kind of productive solipsism, often revelatory but also inescapably linked with a tendency toward nihilism and self-destruction. Indeed, this intense focus on the individual self and its particular quirks and concerns lay at the root of an omnipresent feeling of existential dread among staunch adherents of Modernist ideals, as well as a general sense of alienation from previously unchallenged notions of communal identity, either within specific cultural or ethnic circles, or as extant within a greater national or regional collective.

This uneasy mixture of individual egoism with a crisis of communal identity would, of course, help precipitate an unforeseen and ultimately cataclysmic sequence of events in the history of the Germanic peoples; as the moldering Hapsburg and volatile Wilhelmine empires finally went up in smoke at the close of the First World War, Austria and Germany—nations long known for an obsession with maintaining order at any cost—were deprived of their ultimate symbols of political and cultural stability. *Fin-de-siècle* preoccupations

with individual neuroses and a suspicion of life's meaninglessness collided head-on with a long-established tradition of pessimism and a longing for obliteration—in other words, institutionalized cultural death worship. What Peter Franklin describes as the Austro-German "post-war humiliation and suicidal tendency toward self-castigation,"[2] in fact manifested itself as a tendency toward murder-suicide; on the one hand, the helplessness and panic brought about by defeat fueled a societal tendency to self-destruct, while the accompanying humiliation launched an unprecedented search for people, ideas and institutions to serve as the vessels for communal shame. Of course the most extreme examples of this phenomenon would materialize in Germany some years after the 1919 Armistice, and after the relatively optimistic years of the Weimar Republic, however, the course toward destruction had been charted over a century before the Nazi rise to power in 1933.

In the newly created, ethnically German Republic of Austria, an analogous trend developed along similar lines, manifesting in a singularly intense manner in Vienna, a city renowned as much for its status as an intellectual hub as for the foibles of its temperament. Prior to 1919, the Viennese could theorize and postulate new systems of government in the lecture hall or the coffee house without assuming too much responsibility for the practical applications of their philosophies; under Hapbsurg rule, with its accompanying rigid socio-political structure, there was very opportunity for anyone outside the royal family to effect actual change. While maddening to the progressive intelligentsia, many of

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[2] Peter Franklin, "Audiences, Critics and the Depurification of Music: Reflections on a 1920s Controversy" *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 114 (1989): 84

whom distrusted the fragile balance of spectacle and ancient custom that kept the Empire afloat, this system carried with it certain implied securities and guarantees, all of which vanished with the Hapsburgs. Jessica Duchen, author of a 1996 biography of Korngold, remarks:

> The Viennese-born writer George Clare, in his autobiography *Last Waltz in Vienna*, described the *Zeitgeist* of the times: "…all the glory of the Empire… was nothing but elegant futility… underneath that sparkling surface was hiding the decay of the nineteenth century and of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy." What started among artistic intellectuals as an idealistic "death wish" for their flawed and over-ripe society led ultimately to the disaster of war and dissolution through the first half of the twentieth century.[3]

This "death wish" that Duchen mentions, whether idealistic or not, was a facet of Viennese culture that reflects a longstanding trend in both Austria and Germany, tracing its origins to German Romanticism; indeed the greatest exponent of Germanic fatalism in music is certainly Richard Wagner, who in reviving Nordic myth and its teleological progression toward *Ragnarök*—or in Wagner's parlance, *Götterdämmerung*—underscored a latent longing for annihilation and oblivion in the Austro-Germanic cultural consciousness. Though Viennese intellectuals, particularly those whose ideologies were rooted in political liberalism or socialism, may have wished for the metaphorical death of their diseased society, they too were affected by what their nationalist and conservative counterparts interpreted more literally as a tradition of death worship among Teutonic descendants. When Adolf Hitler, the ultimate Austro-German xenophobe, commissioned his chief architect, Albert Speer, to remodel German cities with the particular wish that they would eventually become picturesque ruins in the

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[3] Jessica Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 19-20.

Greco-Roman style, he was in fact interpreting a cultural obsession with the idea of *Götterdämmerung* in a grotesquely literal sense.[4]

This urge toward annihilation went hand in hand with a conception of identity in negative terms of what one is *not*, or does *not* represent, rather than in positive statements of what one *is* or *does* represent, what Carl Schorske describes as "that whole reductionist revolt against grandness."[5] In this aspect, Modernism constituted as much a subtraction of characteristics as an addition of new ones. A built-in weakness in applying such a theory of identity, built almost entirely on negation, is an inherent lack of descriptors of what actually constitutes the Modern; much of what makes up a Modern identity is a reputation, varying in degree according to the individual observer, as to the work's level of originality and dissociation from previous forms. Even such generally recognized Modernist traits as a lack of ornament and a distance from the past express themselves, by definition, in terms of negation. As the Viennese branch of the Austro-German *Secession* movement declared at the *fin-de-siècle*, "'Wir vernichten morsches Leben,' we are going to destroy decaying life."[6] A movement that had its roots in a deep-seated longing for salubrious progress and excision of necrotic tissue thus showed itself to be in perpetual peril of administering an ideological cure more destructive than the cultural disease it was meant to target.

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[4] In a bizarre parallel to the behavior of Korngold's Paul in *Die tote Stadt*, Hermann Göring constructed a tomb-cum-shrine to his first wife Carin at his country residence—named Carinhall in her honor—in 1933. Though Carin had died two years prior to the construction of the residence, her husband had her body exhumed from its grave in her native Sweden and reinterred in Germany, accompanied by a grandiose ceremony, which, though private, rivaled a state funeral in its pomp and splendor. Despite remarrying in 1935, Göring maintained an altar to Carin's memory at his Berlin apartment for the remainder of his life.
[5] Carl E. Schorske, "Operatic Modernism 1," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36 (2006): 678.
[6] Ibid., 676.

A further difficulty of aesthetic implementation lay with the practical near-impossibility of a complete break with past traditions and influences. Such a break may very well be impossible in the infinitely diverse, music-saturated twenty-first century, but was already extremely improbable by the turn of the twentieth century, when, as Franklin remarks,

> Any young composer since the nineteenth century will have been a consumer before he was a producer and have approached music in one of those emblematic ways that may be less dependent upon 'purely musical' perceptions than where he was educated, how much money his parents had, who his friends were, whom he was trying to impress, or which despised public figure's declared taste had prompted him to resolve never to listen to *that* again…[7]

Franklin colorfully illustrates an issue nascent among music consumers in years leading up to the emergence of the Modernist aesthetic—that of an abundance of choice, progressively aided by the technological and educational advances of each passing era, creating struggle for intellectual, and to a certain degree, moral supremacy between musical factions. This conflict helped to alienate a great part of the audience for what we now broadly term "classical music", as well as caused a number of composers who either defy easy categorization or refuse to declare their allegiance to any given caucus to fall by the wayside, regardless of whether or not they have anything worthy or unusual to say.

Korngold is just such an overlooked composer, largely on the basis of his status as a conscientious objector in the conflict between musical ideologues. David Allenby notes in reviewing Duchen's biography of the composer, that the problem with Korngold might well be that there *is* no problem[8]; at any rate, those

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[7] Franklin, "Audiences, Critics and the Depurification of Music," 81.
[8] David Allenby, "Don't Mention The War?" *The Musical Times* 137 (1996): 30.

problems with which he chooses to grapple are presented and explored with remarkable equanimity, particularly in light of the troubled society in which he grew up and reached maturity. So blithe an attitude in the face of turmoil arouses instant suspicions of flippancy or superficiality—after all, how can any twentieth-century composer who adopts a musical signature self-described as the "Motto of the Cheerful Heart" expect to be taken seriously?[9] There are in fact, many problems, moral, spiritual and existential, with which Korngold concerns himself in his operatic output, all of which speak to the concerns of his time; his gradual removal to the far reaches of the repertory does not reflect his own lack of socio-political awareness as his unwillingness to choose sides, musically speaking, or to advocate for the wholesale abandonment of a compositional language which was both complex enough for the learned ear and intelligible to the lay listener. More than any unpopular stance that he might have taken on government or public policy, it was this lack of attention to the politics involved in debates over style and trends in contemporary composition that doomed Korngold to the sidelines of twentieth century music; indeed, the further he traveled into the twentieth century, the more his lack of partisanship seemed a significant artistic detriment at best and a character flaw at worst. As Jacques Le Rider remarks in regard of such Modernist mavericks, "Solitude seems to be the price of a declared individualism."[10]

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[9] Brendan G. Carroll, *The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997), 86.
[10] Jacques Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 33.

In recent years, however, Korngold's integrative approach to composition would seem, at least in part, to be vindicated; the standard classification of Korngold as a Romantic composer who showed up too late to the party seems less and less valid in the present day, when many twenty-first century composers are reexamining the possibilities still offered by tonality, or using it as a springboard to launch their own idiomatic musical language. As such, there has been an effort to re-interrogate the works of twentieth-century composers who may have been previously considered as not radical enough for the demands of their era, particularly when viewed from a post-World War II perspective of wildly experimental composition. However, as Steinberg remarks,

> Modernism's drive for freedom did not entail a disavowal of history so much as distance from the reactionary aspects of history. Disciplining itself with that production of distance, modernism gained ballast precisely by not altogether disavowing the temptations of historicism or even of nostalgia. Modernism's house has more rooms than its curators or guardians have tended to avow.[11]

Korngold was just such as composer as Steinberg describes, and little by little, his reputation has begun to shift. Beginning with the first comprehensive biography of the composer, written by Brendan G. Carroll and first published in 1985, the composer has experienced a slow but consistent renewal of attention from both scholars and music journalists, yielding up Duchen's book-length profile for Phaidon as well as a small number of scholarly articles, in which Korngold either serves as the main subject or is mentioned as a part of larger discussion of twentieth-century opera. Korngold's enduring popularity with performers, thanks largely to the coupling of his exquisite melodic writing with the challenge

[11] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics of Operatic Modernism," 638.

of dense chromatic harmonies and ever-shifting meter, has allowed the composer to be favorably reevaluated on the aesthetic rewards of his music, if nothing else.

Yet despite a renewed presence on the opera stage and greater attention from scholars, the general impression of Korngold as a composer of pleasant anachronisms persists. It is the aim of this thesis to call into question these longstanding claims of irrelevancy and socio-political disengagement that have obscured Korngold's reputation. The choice of *Die tote Stadt* as the primary case in point, is due in large part to its status as Korngold's best-known stage work; as such, it shall serve as a more generally-recognized (and therefore more useful) point of reference for Korngold's compositional ethos than many of his lesser-known, though perhaps equally representative works. *Die tote Stadt* is also significant as it marks not only the single definitive high point of Korngold's career as a composer of art music, but also the turning point between his early status as a phenomenally talented prodigy and possible hope for the future of Austrian composition, and his slow devaluation and recession to the hinterlands of twentieth-century music. *Die tote Stadt* is a work very much in tune with the character of its age; it is at once an embrace and a critique of Modernist aesthetics, representing Korngold as a socially engaged, musically progressive composer at the single most definitive stylistic crossroads of his career.

In substantiating the above statement, I shall consult and explore the extant scholarship on the opera, including recent articles by Ben Winters and William Cheng dealing with the work's symbolism and dramatic structure, in addition to the work of Arne Stollberg and others, in which the status of

Korngold as a Modernist or late Romantic is considered. Various other sources, notably the scholarship of Andreas Giger, will allow me to explore Korngold's place among his peers and contemporaries in Vienna in the years leading up to and immediately following the First World War. Equally important to this thesis will be the placement of Korngold in his proper historical context; this will include a discussion of his singular position as both prodigy and object of international curiosity, as well as the son of Vienna's most powerful and polarizing music critic of the conservative faction. This contextualization will involve Carroll's biography of the composer, currently the single most authoritative and comprehensive collection of biographical material on Korngold, as well as a secondary consultation of Duchen's biography, Luzi Korngold's collection of reminiscences of her husband, and the memoirs of Julius Korngold, the composer's father. These latter two sources, owing to their inherently anecdotal character, will by necessity be given less credence than Carroll's biography and other scholarly works on the composer. I will also consider the role of Korngold's father as co-librettist, a role that has been conflated by critics and historians to the point where the composer himself is no longer given credit for creative control over the majority of the opera's textual content. As Julius Korngold's reputation and involvement in contemporary musical politics are inextricably entwined with the reception history of his son's works, the critic's actions and influence will be considered as an important factor in Korngold's career trajectory and in the history of the opera's critical reception.

In addition to contextual evidence, it will of course be necessary to consult the score of the opera itself and Georges Rodenbach's novel *Bruges-la-Morte*. Paramount to this analysis will be a comparison of the opera, its symbols, plot and characterizations, to those of the novel and, secondarily, the handful of stage adaptations that appeared between the first publication of the novel and the premiere of Korngold's opera. These changes, deletions and additions are crucial to the transformation of the libretto from a morally ambiguous Symbolist work to an opera straddling the divide between the Modernist and Romantic worlds of sound and significance. I shall consider documents pertaining to the genesis of the opera, including the composer's writings and correspondence, and explore how personal philosophies, religious beliefs (or lack thereof) and stated sympathies with aspects of both Modernist and Romantic aesthetics might have played into the choice of material, as well as creative choices made in presentation of said material. The score itself will yield up clues as to the composer's highly personal idiom—tonal, melodious and orchestrally lush passages contrasted with jagged vocal lines, stark and discordant instrumentation, and dissonant harmonies placed at carefully chosen junctures in the plot to sharply opposing and deeply significant effect. In conclusion, I will briefly touch on the opera's differences and commonalities with other operas composed at roughly the same time, in an attempt to reconcile contemporary views of Korngold with his reception later on his own life, after his death, and into the twenty-first century. All of the above will be considered in the hope of contributing an alternative view of the composer as neither a staunch Romantic

or a stark Modernist, but rather as an artist resolutely committed to his own individual musical idiom, following an ethos that is as meticulous as it is affecting, and as progressive as it is historically-minded, looking ahead to the future while gratefully and affectionately acknowledging the inescapable past.

Chapter One: *Wiener Moderne*

In order to properly contextualize the composer and his works, it is first necessary to understand the city that molded him. As the wunderkind offspring of Vienna's leading music critic, it would be utterly impossible even for the most oblivious youth to remain unaware of the complex politics governing the city's musical establishment; as an Austro-German composer reaching maturity during the dying days of Romanticism, while Modernism was taking root as the new century's prevailing aesthetic, the composer could not but take an active interest in the debate between old and new; finally, as a young man reaching adulthood during the First World War, and as a Jew—no matter how secular in outlook—living in an increasingly anti-Semitic environment, it would have been impossible for Korngold to remain insensitive to the political tides that would threaten his life and livelihood. Owing partly its status as an intellectual hub and partly to its own famously capricious temperament, the city of Vienna's crisis of identity was singularly pronounced. Cultural historians have long remarked upon Vienna's two radically different but equally potent personalities, as the city manifested itself both as the beguiling, vibrant hometown of the waltz, seemingly carefree and powered by its own effervescent *Lebenslust*; and also as a sinister metropolis of unshakeable dread and constant anxiety, an atmosphere embodied in the term *Weltschmerz*. At the time of *Die tote Stadt's* composition and premiere, the contrast between the two faces of Austria's capital city had never been more pronounced, and its preoccupation with mortality was at an all-time high.

In the years leading up to the First World War, we find that death and its various mysteries provided a consistent theme in Vienna's day-to-day life, as familiar to the city's denizens as the sound of church bells or coffee-house chatter. In contrast to their primarily Protestant German counterparts, the Austrian view of death was inherently Roman Catholic, tied to the legacy of an Empire and its ruling family that had remained overwhelmingly Catholic even in the wake of the Reformation. Whether or not a citizen of Vienna was born, raised and confirmed in the Roman Church, he or she would have been inundated by Catholic mythology and Catholic or Catholic-derivative iconography in daily life and popular culture.[12] Austrian cultural historian Reingard Witzmann remarks that folk-singers were particularly in demand "on All Saint's Day, when all good Viennese went to pay their respects to the dead. … Death was not ignored or regarded as particularly frightening. With an underlying flippancy that transcended the realities of this life, the Viennese would speculate on the hereafter in a mood of bibulous euphoria."[13] Its is worth noting that Witzmann does not say that "all good Catholics" or even "the faithful" paid their respects to the dead on All Saints' Day, but that all good *Viennese* did so. This comment reflects both the thorough integration of Catholic ritual in Viennese culture, and also the extent to which the presumably "bad" Viennese—the small contingent of outsiders who did not fully assimilate into the culture—were ostracized.

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[12] Though cultural Catholicism is not, perhaps, taken for granted as being an Austrian characteristic than it might be in countries with that were further removed from the influence of Luther or Calvin, the interweaving of Catholic imagery and mysticism with the cultural makeup of any native Viennese of the early twentieth century, regardless of his or her religious beliefs, would be on par with any given native of France, Italy or Ireland.

[13] Reingard Witzmann, "The Two Faces of Vienna" in *Vienna 1890-1920*, ed. Robert Waissenberger (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 83-4.

Thus it was possible for Korngold, born Jewish but raised in an almost completely secular household, to be about as well versed in Austrian cultural Catholicism as any other bourgeois Viennese. Korngold's own personal religious beliefs were rather vague—he did not particularly concern himself with the question of the existence or non-existence of God, and though he occasionally pondered the possibility of an afterlife, he was not concerned with the details of any specific theology. He married his wife in a civil ceremony, and only once wrote music expressly for liturgical use, a 1941 commission at the particular request of the chief Los Angeles-area rabbi, Dr. Josef Sonderling.[14] The rituals, traditions and mysticism of Roman Catholicism did, however, hold an enduring fascination for Korngold, as becomes strikingly clear in *Die tote Stadt*, the title city being very like the composer's own not only in its abundance of Catholic imagery but also in its macabre fixation on the past.

For all the flippancy of the Viennese attitude toward death and destruction, and whatever cultural and theological overtones such an attitude might have retained, the First World War and the subsequent fall of the Hapsburg Empire made the city's customary devil-may-care façade all but impossible to maintain. Vienna might not have counted the waltz, the coffee house, or its own insatiable appetite for gossip as casualties of war, but the seemingly adamantine structure that had made all this perfidious charm possible had crumbled, for all intents and purposes, overnight. In contrast to Germany, where the idea of a German empire and a *kaiserlich* tradition had been

[14] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 301.

comparatively recent before the war, Austria's imperial legacy was centuries old, its power rigidly defined and enforced, and its methods unmistakably direct. With the disappearance of the ironclad imperial status quo came a terrifying communal feeling of disorientation, even for those who might benefit most from the nation's emancipation from Hapsburg rule. Though many racial, religious and ethnic minorities had not enjoyed the greatest tolerance under the long reign of Franz Joseph, conditions had certainly been livable, and at any rate, secure, if only in their predictability. Those who had fully adopted mainstream, particularly urban, Austrian culture as their own enjoyed most of the privileges of the German-speaking peoples in the Western part of the empire; which is to say that the assimilated minorities coexisted on almost the same level with that portion of the population already privileged on the basis of ethnicity. As Jessica Duchen describes:

> The long period of political stability… had allowed most of the empire's Jewish population to become thoroughly assimilated, despite the presence of popular and widespread anti-Semitic feeling. The security of the late nineteenth century in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was described by the Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig in his autobiography *The World of Yesterday*: "In this vast empire everything stood firmly and immovably in its appointed place, and at its head was the aged emperor, and were he to die, one knew (or believed) and nothing would take its place, and nothing would change in the well-regulated order. No one thought of war, of revolutions, or revolts."[15]

Suddenly, in 1914, the heir presumptive was shot dead. Two years later, in the midst of a global conflict whose devastation was as unexpected as it was unprecedented, the "aged emperor" himself was gone, and by the time military action had ceased, one of the world's great powers was in absolute chaos, its

[15] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 12-13.

capitol city at the heart of a mortifying loss of life, of territory, and of repute. Vienna's *Lebenslust*, always at odds with its *Weltschmerz*, found itself categorically beaten at last.

If the Austrians had undertaken the enterprise of rebuilding their considerably shrunken state with any kind of optimism, they were soon disabused of their illusions while concluding peace at St. Germain in 1919. The Allies (led by a French contingent disinclined toward forgiving and forgetting),[16] systematically amputated the former Austro-Hungarian Empire's ethno-geographic appendages, independent of input from the Austrian delegation. Following this procedure, the comparatively small area that remained proposed itself as a new nation-state. As its cultural-linguistic profile was primarily German, and as the new state hoped to precipitate a politically and economically expedient Anschluss with Germany as soon as possible, the delegation proposed "German-Austria" as the new nation's name. Determined to circumvent any moves toward Anschluss, the Allies rejected the nomenclature and instead gave the new state the name, "Republic of Austria". William E. Wright, founding director of the University of Minnesota's Center for Austrian Studies, eloquently sums up the position of the fledgling democracy:

> The Austrians returned to the Alpine republic, required by the Allied victors to maintain a state in most dolorous circumstances and with the confidence of its people terribly eroded. One is hard put to imagine less auspicious circumstances for the launching of a new nation-state: it had found its generation in military defeat; territorially, it was a leftover after victor and successor had seized what they wanted; it had been left in exceedingly strained economic circumstances; it had been forbidden by the conquerors to take the one measure deemed necessary for survival

[16] William E. Wright, "World War I and Its Implications for Austria", in *Austria Between Wars: Dream and Reality*, ed. Walter Greinert (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 6.

> [immediate political unity with Germany]; it had been forced to maintain an existence that its citizens believed to be impossible and to accept a name not of its people's own devising but one thrust upon them by their conquerors. … The journalist-historian Helmut Andics aptly dubbed Austria 'the state that no one wanted' (*der Staat der keiner wollte)*.[17]

All this was prodigious fuel to the smoldering embers of apprehension and anxiety laced with cynicism that had plagued the Viennese for decades. Having been severely chastened at St. Germain, the city and the nation were all too eager for a convenient resolution to their recent humiliation, and for a wholesale abandonment of a painful past. Not only would these elements eventually create a perfect opportunity for Nazi annexation, but they would also help fuel the steadily increasing taste among the Austrian intelligentsia for an aesthetic of the analytical over the emotional, and for the material over the intangible.

Thus the years immediately following the Great War witnessed a national crisis of identity that would give rise to all manner of musical debates: what constituted the character of Austrian music versus German music? What inherent virtues appertained to Austrian music that could not be claimed by other nations, and how did these "specifically" Austrian traits distinguish Austrian music as desirable over music of foreign lands? At this time, of course, Schoenberg was well on his way to developing his the twelve-tone method and, in essence, attempting to launch a Grand Design for the future of Western art music.[18] However, Schoenberg and members the Second Viennese School were still receiving a cool reception from the critical establishment as well as some of

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[17] Wright, "World War I and its Implications," 7.
[18] It could, however, be argued that Schoenberg's conviction that his methods were continuing the development of music in the noble tradition of the German masters such as Bach and Beethoven might be considered its own form of Austro-Germanic ethnic privileging, but only in the most oblique sense.

the more elite performance institutions, and remained relegated to the sidelines of musical society until the 1920s; their ideas bear mentioning in this context largely because they represents the growing desire among Modernist composers to make a clean break with both the traumatic recent past, which to the brave new world of the First Republic represented both senescence and obsolescence. *Die tote Stadt* sought a similar break from the past; in contrast to the composer's more extreme contemporaries, however, Korngold's valediction to the past sought simultaneous reconciliation; his brand of Modernism would prove to be not so much an outright abandonment of tradition as an affectionate leave-taking.

In the meantime, the city's intellectuals and aesthetes, seeking to define Vienna's place in the post-war musical milieu of Central Europe, were busy debating the nature of Austrian music, as well as tracing, embellishing upon and romanticizing the history of native forms and values. Temporarily forbidden the apparent security and cultural fellowship of a merger with Germany (enjoying its own short-lived period of self-discovery during the Weimar Republic), Austrian writers still sought to define the national character in terms of their northern neighbor. Andreas Giger comments:

> The feeling of a *Shicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of common destiny) between Germany and Austria appears throughout the literature on Austrian tradition. Authors frequently used the designation "German" for both the Austrian and German lands, sometimes in the sense of a *Kulturgemeinschaft* or *Deutsche Gesamtkultur* (Greater German cultural unity), sometimes with considerable obscurity and inconsistency in its meaning. …

> Most of the authors considered Viennese music the epitome of south German music.[19]

Indeed, "South German", as opposed to Austrian, is exactly the identity that the decimated little country desired: in order to regain status and self-regard, Austria longed to be made a part of a presumably greater whole, as it had been in the days when the country represented the ultimate political and cultural authority in a vast and powerful Empire.

Though self-represented as a part of Germany, Austrian writers continued to portray themselves as distinct from it, displaying a lighter side of the brooding German character, the latter given to bouts "philosophizing" and other unbecoming fits of pique. Austrians proclaimed German music to be overly intellectual, too much mired in strict rules of counterpoint and voice leading, as well as being melodically constrained.[20] In the prevailing Viennese critical view of the 1920s, the happy-go-lucky archetypal Austrian was supposed to be able to draw the doleful and cerebral stereotyped German out of himself, to the endless creative and personal benefit of the latter. By virtue of their shared heritage, these two personalities were able to relate to each another, but could also allow their differences to be mutually beneficial. While Austrian cultural critics saw themselves as the bearers of optimism, simplicity and good cheer to their German counterparts, it was with the implied understanding that their role was a subordinate one. In referring to themselves as "South Germans" in relation to the standard Germans due north, such writers had already subjugated

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[19] Andreas Giger, "Tradition in Post-World-War-I Vienna: The Role of the Vienna State Opera from 1919-1924," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 28 (1997): 192-93.
[20] Ibid., 193.

themselves to another nation; by casting themselves in the role of jolly, simple people ready to help their heroically overburdened German masters, Austrians pigeonholed themselves into the role of loyal retainers to the noble northerners on their solemn and sacred quest for Germanic self-actualization. To use an iconic image from Viennese opera, the Austrians were content to play the pleasant and ordinary Papageno to an exalted, valorous German Tamino.

The management of the Vienna Staatsoper[21] was well aware of its audience's need for comprehensible and reassuringly familiar entertainment immediately following the war, and therefore underwent a period of more than usually conservative, economically cautious programming. Comparatively few new operas were mounted in the post-war period than in previous decades, and even fewer of these new works were given their world premieres in Vienna; between 1919 and 1924, only thirteen new works were given at the Staatsoper, of which four were composed by Richard Strauss, whose appointment in as co-director of the opera in 1919 (together with Franz Schalk) effectively granted him a ready laboratory in which to finesse and premiere his new stage works.[22] The state-sponsored house, whose budget was necessarily restricted by a cash-strapped new government, could not afford to take too many programming risks; high-quality revival productions of perennial box-office hits were therefore much preferred over untested new works, colloquially known as *Novitäten*. The choice of financial prudence over artistic daring was to play a key role in the changing disposition of Vienna as a cultural capital. As Andreas Giger remarks,

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[21] Recently rechristened as such from the imperial-era "Hofoper."
[22] Giger, "Tradition In Post-World War I Vienna," 196.

> At the end of World War I, the Viennese proudly described their city as one that attracted and formed composers such as Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Bruckner and Mahler. This chain of illustrious composers led right up to the War and was expected to continue thereafter. But while the musical institutions did indeed revive, the city increasingly contented itself with the reputation of a glorious past.[23]

This era marked the beginning of a Vienna's rebranding as a center for unrivalled excellence in the performance of the Western art canon, rather than as the city *de rigueur* for any promising young composer to finish his education and launch his career.

As for those few *Novitäten* staged successfully at the Staatsoper, audiences and critics agreed that this success was owed to the presence of some degree of South German spirit in the opera. Several characteristics made up this folksy image. Giger elaborates: "*Volkstümlichkeit* (folk characteristics) and *Naturverbundenheit* (closeness to nature) played a very important role in the post-war writings: not only was Austria the only country whose entire musical culture grew on the foundation of folk music, but each time art music was 'stuck in too much artificiality' Austrian folk music brought it back on the right track."[24] To some extent, this focus on the *Volk* explains the degree to which Austrian musical tastes in general, whether in art music or popular styles, remained more conservative in relation to much of contemporary compositions in Germany. While Weimar-era Berlin was flirting with jazz and incubating a nascent sub-genre of agitprop song and street theatre, Vienna remained loyal to the memory of Johann Strauss and relished its legacy of the waltz and the *Ländler*; a spirit

[23] Ibid., 189.
[24] Ibid., 194.

Giger characterizes as "the ubiquitous Viennese *Lebenslust* run riot.[25] Moreover, social commentators of the time categorically held that the characterization of Viennese music as full of inherent simplicity and charm could be extrapolated across all types of Austrian music, despite a general disinclination to use Vienna as a synecdoche for the nation as a whole.[26] For a country that had spawned the likes of Mahler and Bruckner, such an overemphasis on light entertainments was of course, a gross simplification of the profound intellectual and emotional depth of which homegrown composers were capable. Yet, the myth of the ideal "South German" composer with his anti-intellectual, merry and tuneful demeanor was celebrated as a symbol of the national character: "Critics referred to such musicians, whose compositional process was guided by instinct, as *Volksblutmusiker* (passionate, full-blooded, and thoroughly musical musicians.)"[27] The creation of such a title may have been informed as much by an impetus to tout Vienna as the mystical font of all great musical inspiration as by a genuine belief that Austrian music was better off without too tortured an intellectual basis.

Whatever its underlying ideological agenda, the *Volksblutmusiker* title fell upon Korngold in the wake of *Die Tote Stadt*'s triumphant Austrian debut; in spite of the opera's dark subject matter, its psychological intricacies and dramatic peculiarities, (to say nothing of its jagged rhythms and often discordant recitatives), the Viennese public essentially saw a play in which all characters

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[25] Ibid.,194.
[26] Ibid., 193.
[27] Ibid.

ultimately escape with their lives and heard a score containing two exceptionally haunting melodies, and these basic observations proved enough to convince the audience of the opera's suitability for the stage—for the time being, at any rate. The lack of explicit intellectualism in the opera fit, or rather, was fitted to, the reigning ideal of Austrian music in 1921, praised in light of what critics depicted as a long tradition of tedious operatic lecturing. As one Viennese writer complained, "For a lifetime or even longer, [greater] German operatic stages have been abused [by the temptation] to philosophize, to propagate mysteries and redemptions."[28] Vienna's distaste for philosophizing and use of metaphors helps explain the cool reception to Director Strauss' own *Die Frau ohne Schatten* in 1919, and did Franz Schreker's *Der Schatzgräber* no favors when it premiered in 1922; as William Cheng points out, Strauss and Schreker had long since "come of age" musically, and thus would have been held responsible for their own distasteful operatic "philosophizing". The twenty-three year-old Korngold, however, still enjoyed the critical condescension afforded to child prodigies, would not have been held responsible for any perceived socio-political ruminations in his opera.[29] Later in the decade, however, his explicitly allegorical *Das Wunder der Heliane* would fall flat with critics and public alike at its premiere in 1927; Korngold, by then a man of thirty, could no longer be excused for attempting to use the opera stage as a platform for philosophical parables. The extent to which *Die tote Stadt* itself is concerned with mysteries, redemption and

[28] Ibid., 197.
[29] William Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*: The Prodigious Ritual of Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22 (2011): 143.

"philosophizing" will be explored at length in chapters three and four; for the moment it is enough to say that for a brief period following its premiere, the opera was popularly acclaimed as embodying the best of what is "Austrian" in music, and that in as brief a period, Erich Wolfgang Korngold was seen as one of the only likely successors to the noble line of world-beating composers of Viennese origin.[30]

The trouble with all this retrofitted tradition and the accompanying hyper-idealistic demands on the city's composers was that no one could quite agree what all of it meant, and how, correspondingly, any of the theories played out in practice. Austrian national identity in a perpetual state of flux, and its cultural institutions were at a loss to keep up with the various trends and creative philosophies espoused by the country's artists and aesthetes. Friedrich C. Heller neatly cordons off three major factions in post-war Austrian composition as new Romantics, the forgotten avant-garde, and the avant-garde.[31] The "forgotten avant-garde" is meant to include Alexander Zemlinsky, the teacher whose instruction Erich Korngold most valued; however Heller places Korngold himself in the "new Romantic" category, alongside the likes of Franz Schmidt and Julius Bittner. Heller's categorization of Korngold as a "new Romantic" is a fairly common, if somewhat myopic pronouncement in light of the composer's reputation post-1938; it is indicative of the disagreement in the critical and scholarly communities, however, over Korngold's status as *either* Romantic *or* Modern that he is alternately described as one or the other, depending on whom

[30] Giger, "Tradition in Post-World War I Vienna," 210.
[31] Ibid., 195.

one asks. Michael Steinberg provides a more thorough description than most in describing Korngold, along with Schreker and Zemlinsky, as "subaltern Viennese modernists (in the shadow, that is, of Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern.)"[32] Steinberg's appraisal calls into focus the difficulty of finding an overarching description of the term "Modernist" in the first place, and also suggests that the criteria for selection have hitherto been perhaps narrower than advisable, given both the wildly diverse iterations of Modernism across the European continent, as well as the highly specific nature of the Modernist movement in Vienna.

Wiener Moderne, as it has come to be known, was a particular subspecies of Modernist sentiment; a pastiche of influences, mostly foreign[33], coming into play with a desire on the part of members of the intelligentsia to break out of Vienna's deeply conservative Imperial-era mindset, with varying levels of success and no small degree of frustration. As Le Rider has observed, "those of Vienna's inhabitants who loved her most had occasional attacks of genuine despair which Bahr dubbed *Wiener Selbsthass*, Viennese self-hatred. Part of it was the difficulty of being an innovator, a 'modernist' within a culture notoriously conservative and hostile to the smallest signs of independence."[34] Freud, for one, found the intellectual atmosphere of the city to be wholly intolerable, a yet a necessary evil for the advancement of his research;[35] by the same token, musical innovators such as Mahler and Zemlinsky came up against constant resistance in their

[32] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics," 639.
[33] Le Rider identifies this trend as "a wholesale importation of ideals and models from Germany, France, Italy, Scandinavia and even America." See Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*, 18.
[34] Le Rider, *Modernity and Crises of Identity*, 14.
[35] Ibid.

efforts to drag the city kicking and screaming into the twentieth century. No one had more cause to complain of this conservative backlash than Schoenberg, whose radicalism kept him on the peripheries of music until his ideas could reach a wider international audience during his years in exile. In the meantime, Vienna lived up to its bipolar reputation in that it managed to be a cradle of Modernist thought, yielding up seminal works from the likes of Gustav Klimt, Oscar Kokoschka, Egon Schiele, Otto Weininger and Robert Musil, while at the same time, maintaining status as a bulwark of artistic conservatism, particularly in the sphere of music.

No critic wore the colors of the conservative faction more proudly than Julius Korngold, whom Michael P. Steinberg piquantly characterizes as "Eduard Hanslick's successor—in every way—as chief music critic of the *Neue Freie Presse* and the general nemesis of 'new music'."[36] Korngold the elder, who had moved his family from their Moravian hometown of Brünn (present-day Brno in the Czech Republic) to the Austrian capital in 1901 to work for the newspaper at Hanslick's recommendation, inherited the venerable chief critic's title when the latter died in 1904, thus arguably becoming the most powerful critic in the Viennese musical universe, handing down judgment from the pedestal of an immensely well-respected newspaper. Austrian historian Robert Waissenberger gives the following summation of the influential publication:

> The *Neue Freie Presse*, which demanded of its readers a reasonable degree of education, was a paper of considerable influence. Its editorial department comprised a team of first-class journalists specializing in politics, business and the arts. The main credit for this happy state of

[36] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics," 639.

> affairs must go to Moritz Benedikt, its editor-in-chief, who had a flair for choosing the right men. From 1881 to 1908 he was co-publisher and thereafter sole proprietor of the paper, which enjoyed a steadily growing international reputation.[37]

As the home publication of the redoubtable Hanslick, the newspaper had become a supreme arbiter of musical taste in Vienna, as well as the standard-bearer of musical conservatism. Intellectually, the paper maintained strong ties to the political liberalism of the *fin-de-siècle*, with its emphasis on the inherent value of the individual; musically, however, it remained firmly rooted in tradition. It would seem that the particular quirk of the man occupying the post of chief critic at the *Presse* was a penchant for remaining a generation behind the avant-garde of his day; just as Hanslick had despised Wagner and disdained Mahler while championing Brahms, Julius Korngold advocated for Wagner and was a strong supporter of Mahler, but considered the members of the Second Viennese School to be beneath contempt. While this retrospective outlook might have been unprepossessing for a journalist in Hamburg or Berlin, a critic mistrustful of innovation and given to occasional bouts of exaggerated nostalgia suited the general Viennese public quite well.

Thus, Julius Korngold established himself as the terror of the radical faction of Austrian composers, and became a sort of *fidei defensor* for what he himself referred to as the "sacred Art".[38] The elder Korngold's zeal and reactionary bluster would not, however, have been as effective a weapon against the avant-garde infidel if the critic had not been so prodigiously well-qualified

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[37] Robert Waissenberger, "Politics in Vienna Before and After the Turn of the Century." In *Vienna 1890-1920*, Robert Waissenberger, ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 47.

[38] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 15.

for his job; a passionate and thoroughly self-motivated connoisseur from a young age, Julius harbored ambitions of musical greatness in his youth, frustrated both by family objections as well as a lack of requisite talent, of which he was all too aware. Trained in the infinitely more practical field of law, Korngold was adept at crafting rhetoric of intensity and precision, fueled by his own ferociously held convictions. Finally, though he lacked musical ability beyond ardent admiration of the art form, Julius' literary gifts were plentiful and masterfully employed. Felix Weingartner, who was doomed to the full force of the critic's invective simply by virtue of his appointment as Mahler's successor at the Hofoper, was nevertheless gracious and equitable in describing the elder Korngold's talents:

> He was a brilliant writer, of cultivated aesthetic tastes and thoroughly well-educated in musical matters; he wielded his pen much as Hanslick did, with an ease which conjured up prismatic colorings making the reading of his articles and criticisms a thing of joy, even when the subject was of no interest to the reader, nay even when the content of the article constituted an attack on him.[39]

Though Weingartner was prepared to acknowledge his adversary's finer qualities, few of Korngold's other critical targets were as generous; the composer and critic Max Graf was particularly stung by Korngold's barbed opinions, to the extent that he launched an ongoing smear campaign against the latter. (For his part, Korngold despised Graf all the more for this underhanded quest for retribution, and consistently refers to the lesser critic as "Iago" in his memoirs.) It is a testament to the respect accorded to Erich Korngold during his formative years that so many eminent musicians and composers chose to ignore the vitriol of the father in favor of mentoring the son; Strauss, Weingartner, and even

[39] Felix Weingartner quoted in Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 18.

Erich's beloved teacher Zemlinsky were known to run afoul of old Korngold, but managed to separate their conflicts with the father from their esteem for the talent and geniality of the son.

Being Dr. Korngold's son was not entirely to young Erich's disadvantage, however; Korngold the elder provided his son with an entry into the social milieu best suited to nurture the nascent composer's talents—indeed, Julius' friendship with Mahler led to Erich's association with Zemlinsky, whose tutelage the young composer felt to be absolutely invaluable to his development. Though Zemlinsky faded into the aforementioned "forgotten avant-garde", and never achieved a degree of success commensurate with that of his pupil, Erich remained publicly loyal to his teacher for the rest of his life, championing the elder composer's works and methods with warm enthusiasm. In 1921, when Korngold was at the very height of his success after the previous December's double-premiere of *Die tote Stadt*, he penned the following tribute to his mentor for the Prague publication, *Auftakt*:

> Zemlinsky's rigorous logic in harmony—together with his freedom and daring in chord structure, his search for the distant relationships and connections of sounds, and his own technique of "delayed resolution"—became decisive factors in my entire musical development and my outlook in regard to *that which is called "modern", toward which I instinctively leaned from the beginning.*
>
> One voice moving naturally and consistently allows freedom for the other—this was Zemlinsky's basic principle; he was particularly emphatic about the logical structure of bass lines—that they should lead and give direction. Thus, I owe everything to Zemlinsky in matters of modern voice-leading and harmony, especially the avoidance of anything arbitrary.[40]

[40] Erich Wolfgang Korngold quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 49. Emphasis added.

Korngold goes on to explain Zemlinsky's struggle against theories of his then-brother-in-law, Arnold Schoenberg, but acknowledges Schoenberg's influence on Zemlinksy in warm terms. Thanks in part to Zemlinsky's instruction, Korngold felt justified in pushing the bounds of tonality, but never just for the sake of experiment; Korngold felt himself to be a Modernist, but maintained throughout his career that progressive composers need not reinvent harmony from the ground up. As Giger points out, in Vienna, at least, "modernism and tonality did not exclude each other. A composer could find new melodic and harmonic turns, new *Farbenglanz* (splendor of colors) or *instrumentale Zauberkünste* (instrumental magic) as Bruckner had done."[41] From the viewpoint of a number of progressive Viennese composers, Korngold among them, as long as one kept interrogating the old forms and styles, the broad language of tonality remained useful.

Korngold the elder unwittingly contributed to his son's enduring reputation as a perennial naïf, a kind of musical idiot savant, blissfully ignorant of his turbulent surroundings and thus possessed of considerably less moral authority than his more socio-politically engaged peers. Julius Korngold's memoirs feature a melodramatic description of the outbreak of war, in which he describes his "wild imaginings" of the dangers that might befall his "endangered boy" as a result of the conflict; Julius goes on to say that this selfsame "boy" (the connotations of utter helplessness inherent in the term ill-fit the young Korngold, seventeen years old at the time) remained detached from the conflict and

[41] Giger, "Tradition in Post-World War I Vienna," 195.

continued to compose undisturbed.[42] The truth, in fact, was not that Erich Korngold remained indifferent to the global catastrophe, nor that he was almost impossibly oblivious to the world around him; the greater significance to Julius' remarks is that the critic himself wished to keep his gregarious, perceptive, intellectually curious and independent-minded son in as impenetrable a bubble of innocence as possible, for as long as possible. Often, Julius' micromanagement of his son's life was informed as much by a genuine concern for Erich's survival in the harsh world of Viennese musical politics—and being one of its chief architects, Julius knew its vagaries—as by a desire to dictate Erich's tastes and preferences according to his own wishes.

In this endeavor, Julius often failed miserably. Erich boasted extremely catholic musical tastes from the very beginning, no matter how much a particular work or composer might displease his father. According to Carroll, young Erich attended a performance of Stravinsky's *Petrushka* in 1912 and was moved to wild applause, provoking his father not only to admonish his enthusiasm but also to physically restrain him from further outbursts.[43] Genial, charismatic and eager to please, Erich was popular within his social circle and much desired the approval of his parents, who not only restricted his society but were never far from his side; even into the composer's early adulthood his parents insisted on accompanying him on almost every occasion he ventured out in public. Yet, as Carroll remarks, Korngold's parents never quite managed to extend this stranglehold to the young man's musical interests: "Submissive and obedient as

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[42] Julius Korngold quoted in Caroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 10.
[43] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 45.

a child, exhibiting deep filial love for his father in all other things, Korngold protested violently if his father tried to interfere or infiltrate his own tastes into his son's musical thinking."[44] As mentioned above, Korngold greatly admired Zemlinsky's composition as well as his instruction, whereas his father's attitude toward Zemlinsky's music was dismissive at best; and while he admired Zemlinsky's abilities as a teacher, Julius had only engaged him to instruct young Erich based on Gustav Mahler's recommendation. Though Julius Korngold's musical preferences and prejudices made a definite impression on his son, the latter never sought the approval of the former in coming to his own independent aesthetic judgments. Unlike his father, Erich Korngold knew how to choose his battles, and saved his defiance for those few subjects he felt were really worth the effort; until he met his future wife in 1917, music was the only topic on which the younger Korngold would never yield to the elder.

Resolute in his musical identity, Korngold never shied away from spirited dialogue concerning the ethos of new music. In their later years, Korngold and Arnold Schoenberg both lived in the greater Los Angeles area and indeed became friends, though admittedly friends with wildly differing professional viewpoints. Korngold's son George, a childhood playmate of Schoenberg's daughter Nuria, recalls his father's amicable disagreements with Schoenberg thus:

> My father was always glad to see Schoenberg because, although he didn't agree with his principles, he enjoyed the stimulus of discussion and respected him. … I remember [on one] occasion Schoenberg saying to my father, "Erich, do you like *any* of my music?" and being astonished when

[44] Ibid., 44.

> my father went over to the piano and played the little piano pieces—you know, from around 1910—from memory. I doubt if he'd seen the music for thirty years, and I don't think Schoenberg could have played them. [45]

George's descriptions of his father's jocular debates with Schoenberg put one in mind more of friends who favor rival sports teams than of two ideologues engaged in a bitter dogmatic dispute. Moreover, they reflect something of Korngold's all-encompassing musical curiosity, to say nothing of his extraordinary memory.

In his posthumous reputation, particularly in regards to his early career, Erich Korngold is seen as being continually in the thrall of his omnipresent and oppressive father, about as responsible for his own artistic choices as a singing parakeet. In his relationships with his contemporaries, however, Korngold shows an astonishing open-mindedness and clear-headed engagement with musical dialogues of the time, independent of the hectoring of his reactionary parent. By the time Schoenberg and Korngold were exchanging ideas over coffee in their Hollywood bungalows, the latter had, of course, become a fully independent adult and had experienced a fair number of explosive confrontations with his ever-recalcitrant aged parent, leading at times to periods of near-estrangement between the two. There was nothing new about this situation save Erich's resolution not to allow his father to meddle in his affairs, both personal and professional. This resolution had been growing since 1924, the year of Korngold's blissfully happy marriage to Louise "Luzi" von Sonnenthal, a cultured, exuberantly modern young woman of whom Korngold's parents heartily

[45] George Korngold quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 291.

disapproved. From that point forward, Julius steadily lost his vise-like grip on the management of Erich's life, a habit he was irritatingly unable (or unwilling) to break.

For, indeed, ever since his son's professional debut at age thirteen, Julius Korngold, already uncommonly gifted at making enemies, had been steadily increasing the rate at which he provoked ire on the basis of an unfortunate habit of taking any given musician's opinion of his son's work into account when forming critical judgments. In 1914, the well-regarded pianist and pedagogue Richard Robert wrote the following in the *Wiener Sonn- und Montags Zeitung*:

> Dr. Korngold divides the whole world of artists into two camps: those who perform Erich Wolfgang and critics who unreservedly praise his works—and those who don't.
>
> I respect Dr. Korngold's factual knowledge, his conscientious preparation, his undeniable critical faculty—but since his son entered public life, he has lost all sense of responsibility, even common sense. …
>
> How many musicians have fallen by the wayside, since Erich Wolfgang's star has been in the ascendant? As for me, I do not deserve anything better. True, I have always recognized this extraordinary talent which is so great that not even his father can harm it; but I have never sunk on my knees before him, and that is *lèse majesté.*[46]

In his attempt to render his own appraisal even-handedly, Robert may have taken general esteem for the young Korngold's gifts too much for granted, or at any rate may have too charitably judged the Viennese intelligentsia's capacity for objectivity. It is true that very few among the musical establishment failed to accord young Korngold's gifts their proper due; unfortunately for young Erich, however, his father's genius for provoking enmity was almost as great as his own uncanny gifts as a composer. Though Julius Korngold couldn't quite

[46] Richard Robert, Letter to the *Weiner Sonn- und Montags-Zeitung*, 11 May 1914, quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 67.

destroy his son's career, he most certainly could, and would, do it appreciable and lasting harm.

Chapter Two: Birth of a Dead City

Despite its lush harmonies, massive pit requirements, and the occasional melodic outburst, *Die tote Stadt* encapsulates *Wiener Moderne* in a manner to which most other operas appearing in the decade following World War I could only aspire. The dead city of the title is Bruges, once an international center of commerce—arguably the economic capitol of Medieval Europe—which fell into decline in the sixteenth century, and by the time Rodenbach's novel appeared in 1892, had effectively been "dead" for hundreds of years, a fossilized monument to its own glorious past. Bruges—or rather, Rodenbach's Symbolist vision of Bruges—provided Korngold with an excellent analogue for contemporary Vienna in many respects. Both cities boasted long and storied histories, and both had at one time or another enjoyed major positions of economic and cultural importance throughout Europe. Both cities thrived, or at least survived on preserving and memorializing cultural treasures of bygone golden eras. Finally, both Bruges and Vienna were imbued with an ancient, institutionalized cultural Catholicism, tidily drawing together the veneration of relics both religious and artistic.

The material difference between the two locales lay, of course, in their varying degrees of rigor mortis; whereas in 1920 Bruges had been its own grave for centuries, Vienna was only, socio-economically speaking, quite ill, and morbidly preoccupied with its own infirmity. As established in the previous chapter, Vienna's fall from grace, though catastrophic, was quite recent and the verdict on the city's fate, as well as the fate of Austria in general, was as yet

indeterminate. In 1916, the year in which Korngold began work on *Die tote Stadt*, the aged Emperor Franz Joseph died, to be replaced briefly by a then twenty-nine year-old Charles I of Austria; by the time *Die tote Stadt* had its premiere in 1920, Charles and his family were in exile, and a country ill-accustomed to democratic rule was struggling to come to grips with its new post-imperial administration. In the interim, Korngold had been conscripted into the army, but thanks to a chance encounter with a music-loving army doctor, Korngold was exempt from going to the front and served as his regiment's music director, confined to Vienna for the duration of the conflict.[47] Despite being spared combat duty, aspects of Korngold's brief military career would have ipso facto broadened his horizons beyond his meticulously-governed family life and social circle; it is possible that short periods of necessary separation from his ever-watchful parents and exposure to fellow soldiers—representing a much wider cross-section of society than Korngold's own bourgeois artist-intellectual milieu—may have allowed the young man to give vent to some of his more universal human concerns. Not only would he have the rare chance to interact with social classes other than his own, but for the first time in his life, Korngold would also have been in an environment dominated by a rougher class of men than his own; in contrast to the gentlemen of the intellectual elite, most of Korngold's comrades-in-arms would have been thrown together by war, concerned with everyday matters, and possessed of earthy conversation.

Critics and scholars have wondered at the source of the deep current of

[47] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 114.

sexual aggression and violence that runs through both the book and the music of *Die tote Stadt*; similar questions have arisen concerning Korngold's earlier one-act opera, *Violanta*, premiered in 1916.[48] The question is always how a young man in his late teens and early twenties, particularly one as cloistered—not to mention as outwardly placid—as Korngold, could express such depths of passionate anguish and, in the case of *Die tote Stadt*, murderous sexual obsession. In the case of *Violanta*, even Julius Korngold was a bit taken aback at his teenaged son's sudden outpouring of fully mature emotions on very adult themes.[49] He managed to justify them however, via public statements conflating his son's uncanny intuition and genius; one imagines that by the time father and son began working together on the even more psycho-sexually violent libretto for *Die tote Stadt*, Julius had accepted his own explanation of his son's preternatural insights into areas in which the latter had little practical experience, and was content to let the Muse descend in whatever way she wished.

In an attempt to find clear points of origin for this unaccountable acquisition of insight, some authors have attributed the aspect of violence in the composer's output to a sublimation of frustration at the oppression and repression of life in the Korngold family's gilded cage; a frustration which, fed by a tremendous intellect and imagination, yielded creative feats of astounding verisimilitude.[50] While reasonable, this approach is both reductive and

[48] *Violanta* is a revenge drama in which the title character seeks retribution for the suicide of her sister, who killed herself after being abandoned by a lover. Violanta and her husband conspire to lure the seducer to his own death, but somewhere between the thought and the act, Violanta herself falls deeply in love with her target and at the last moment sacrifices herself to save him.
[49] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold,* 67.
[50] Ibid.

superficial; the search for simple explanations, although perfectly valid on an emotional level, represents the false assumption that owing to his comparative youth and inexperience, Korngold was incapable of expressing complex, mature feelings via his music without the assistance of an unknown variable. This search also generally fails to take into account either the enduring image of a "Wunderkind frozen in a cocoon of social pre-maturation"[51] that surrounds Korngold, or also the very real fact of his burgeoning maturity, in spite of all parental efforts to the contrary. First of all, his military experience would have provided him with a gritty slice of life hitherto unknown; according to Julius Korngold's memoirs, when the nineteen year-old Erich was called up for military service, his parents permitted him, for the first time ever, to walk through the city unaccompanied on his way to the barracks.[52] Secondly, Korngold was a voracious reader, who would have sought to access to parentally restricted subjects through books. Thirdly, he was a great observer of his fellow humans, and intellectually advanced well beyond his years. Korngold's mental and emotional precocity allowed him to interact with a large circle of friends and colleagues comprising all age groups and levels of life experience; as the English musicologist Ernest Newman remarked in 1912, the young composer seemed "mentally, never to have had a childhood."[53]

Thus, Korngold would not have to have been possessed of latent murderous tendencies or sexual deviancies in order to accurately portray Paul's

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[51] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 121.
[52] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 68.
[53] Ernest Newman quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 87.

brain fever through music, any more than Shakespeare would have been required to commit regicide as a case study for *Macbeth*. Perhaps what is most unsettling about Korngold's abilities is the supposition that a young man with such limited knowledge of the world could simply intuit these emotions and imbalanced states of mind and present them onstage with so little artifice; the rarity of such a gift is discomfiting in and of itself. William Cheng comments, "The term 'genius' tends to be avoided nowadays due to its connotations of hero-worship, the work concept and hegemonic canons, but this label has consistently been central to characterizations of Korngold and his early output."[54] Particularly in discussion of twentieth-century music, so comparatively close to the present day, in which we regard all claims to genius with a hard-earned degree of skepticism, one feels particularly overawed invoking the term; in describing Korngold's development, however, marked by breathtaking precocity and a artistic maturation progressing at breakneck speed, one is equally hard put to find descriptors that do *not* suggest some kind of worshipful superlative.

Whatever term one wants to attach to Korngold's uncommon maturity, it can safely be stated that *Die tote Stadt* features a scenario of great psychological intricacy, ably bolstered by the composer's remarkably multilayered, meticulously organized score. The plot is as follows: our (anti)hero, Paul, has lived in Bruges for many years and has been a widower for five of them. He is financially well-enough established as to be able to spend his days as curator to a private museum-cum-mausoleum: a room in his home, locked away from the

[54] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 145.

outside world, in which he keeps sacred mementos of his departed wife, Marie. He refers to this chamber as the Temple of the Past (*Kirche des Gewesenen*), featuring a life-sized painting of the departed and, most precious of all, a braid of her hair under a glass case. Assisted by the devoted, spinsterly housekeeper Brigitte, he is occasionally visited by Frank, who appears to be his only friend, or at least his only friend in *this* world. As the opera opens, a young dancer named Marietta has arrived in Bruges with a traveling company, and, to Paul's astonishment and delight, bears an uncanny physical resemblance to his beloved. He invites her to his home and they begin an affair[55] which quickly becomes obsessive and insanely jealous on his side, exacerbated by the coquettish and irreverent Marietta's temperamental dissimilarity to Marie, idolized by Paul as having been ever saintly and chaste. At the climax of the conflict between Paul and Marietta, the latter seizes the sacrosanct braid of Marie's hair and uses it to ridicule Paul. In a fit of madness, Paul wraps the braid around Marietta's throat and strangles her to death. The next moment, Paul has awakened to find all is as it was the day Marietta first came to his home; it would appear that he dreamed everything after their first encounter. Marietta reenters, having forgotten a bouquet of roses that Paul presented to her at the beginning of the opera. Having reclaimed them, she lingers, fishing for an invitation to stay. Paul dismisses her, and resolves to leave the dead city, abandoning its ghosts and relics once and for all.

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[55] By "affair" I mean chiefly to signify a relationship of a sexual nature, although to Paul it is also an affair in the sense of an episode of infidelity, as he is consumed by the notion that his relations with Marietta might constitute a betrayal of his dead wife.

The journey between the original 1892 appearance of *Bruges-la-morte* in novel form and its adoption by Korngold was circuitous, if unremarkable in transformation, as the story made its way through various lesser-known versions for the stage. Brendan Carroll explains:

> Rodenbach adapted the novel into a four-act play entitled *Le Mirage*. Although it was accepted by the Comédie-Française in Rodenbach's lifetime, it was never actually produced there or, in fact, anywhere else. It was translated into German (in 1902) by the Viennese playwright Siegfried Trebitsch as *Die stille Stadt* (The Silent City) and produced at the Lessing Theater, Berlin in September 1903. In 1913, Trebitsch republished this version of Rodenbach's play as *Das Trugbild* (The Mirage) together with his translation of another play, *La Voile* (Der Schleier).[56]

Throughout most of these incarnations, however, the plot remains essentially the same as the novel; the most salient difference between *Bruges-la-morte* and *Le Mirage*/*Das Trugbild* one of degree, as the play makes the protagonist's mental instability manifest in less ambiguous terms than the novel.[57] By a significant margin, *Die tote Stadt* would have been the most adventurous take on the material to date, although given that *Das Trugbild* was not a particularly sought-after theatrical commodity at the time, audiences and critics would hardly have protested the expansion and alteration of the story in Korngold's opera.[58]

As it happened, Korngold himself might not have taken up the scenario in the first place if it weren't for a chance conversation between Julius Korngold and his friend Trebitsch; finding that Korngold *fils* was in want of a dramatic text for his next opera, Trebitsch encouraged Korngold *père* to suggest it to him, and

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[56] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 121.

[57] Ben Winters, "Strangling Blondes: Nineteenth-Century Femininity and Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23 (2012): 62.

[58] The property had been considered for musical adaptation, both by Giacomo Puccini and the operetta composer Leo Fall, but neither were particularly inspired by the premise—the latter may have quite rightly deemed it too complex and morose for the operetta stage—and eventually turned to other projects. (See Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 72.)

indeed enjoined the composer himself to consider the material when next they met.[59] The richly evocative scenario, as well as the abundance of musical and dramatic possibilities it presented took hold of Erich's imagination. He immediately set about sketching an outline for another one-act opera, with the intention of engaging Hans Müller, librettist of *Violanta*, to adapt *Das Trugbild*'s text. Müller quite rightly insisted that the material was too extensive for a one-act, and set about sketching a three-act prose draft for Korngold's first full-length opera. This was the only major contribution Müller was to make to the creation of the *Die tote Stadt* as we know it, as he soon dropped out of the project owing to the demanding production schedules of his own original plays. At this point, Korngold the elder, proclaiming Müller's prose "wordy and unsingable anyway"[60] took on the task of co-authoring the libretto with his son. In forming the dramatic partnership, Korngold and son adopted the pseudonym of "Paul Schott", taking the first name from the opera's protagonist and the last name from Korngold's publisher, B. Schott's Söhne of Mainz. Julius Korngold was well aware that signing his own name to the opera's libretto would have been as good as declaring (and for that matter, hosting) a public holiday for his enemies in the press and the concert-hall; indeed, father and son led so successful a campaign to conceal their true identity as librettists that their authorship was not discovered until 1975, well after both men had died.[61]

In the guise of Paul Schott, Korngold and Korngold were able to

[59] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 121.
[60] Julius Korngold quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 121.
[61] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 74.

collaborate very successfully and by all accounts, equitably together, a circumstance owing in large part to the tacit understanding between the two that while Julius might dictate the terms of almost every other aspect of his son's life without incurring Erich's open rebellion, the critic would make no attempt to impose his will on the composer's work without the unqualified agreement of the latter. This is not to imply that Julius never offered a different opinion on an aspect of *Die tote Stadt*'s creation, rather that by the time of the opera's writing, he had learned that his own bombastic bullheadedness, justly famous and always on display, was as naught to the strength of his otherwise imperturbable son's perfectionism and intransigence where the latter's music was concerned.

Perhaps it was this reversed hierarchy in this sphere of father-son professional collaboration that accounts for Julius' self-satisfaction in having won Erich over to the alteration of a major plot point: the creation of a dream structure within the framework narrative, allowing for a "happy" ending in which all acts of violence are undone and the audience is allowed catharsis without tragedy. Despite the fact that Julius' role as co-librettist remained under wraps for the whole of his lifetime, in his memoirs he cannot resist relating his role in the alteration of the opera's ending following Hans Müller's withdrawal from the project: "It was not difficult to find another writer inasmuch as Erich participated in the construction of the plot. The transformation of the action into a dream was my idea. I suggested it to soften the impact of the strangling of a woman, to create a conciliatory, elegiac ending."[62] While he may have been the

[62] Julius Korngold quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 122.

originator of the action-as-dream concept, it is important to note, as Julius himself has done, that Erich was as responsible as the content of the plot of the finished opera as his co-librettist. Julius' reputation as a rabid anti-Modernist, the widespread media dissemination of his opinions—far more outspoken than his son's—on the state of contemporary composition, as well as his self-congratulatory claim of credit for the opera's ending, have all helped to perpetuate the general assumption that Korngold *fils*, in the guise of the depoliticized prodigy, would have simply acquiesced to any dramatic idea proffered by his arch-conservative father, either to please the latter or simply because he didn't much care about any other aspect of the opera other than the excuse to write sensuous melodies. Considering what we know of Korngold's powerful grip on his own compositions regardless of any filial subservience he may have shown his father in other matters, such an assumption is patently absurd.

Only because they would serve his own dramatic purposes, Erich agreed to implement Julius' plot suggestions; though he decided to alter the opera's ending to reflect a spirit of optimism, the composer never intended to refashion the material into lighthearted entertainment. *Bruges-la-morte* captured and held on to Korngold's attention specifically because of its dark subject matter, and the rich musical and theatrical possibilities inherent to the novel's brooding evocation of grief:

> Korngold confessed that he was deeply attracted to Rodenbach's novel because of its atmosphere—"characteristic of Bruges, melancholy, low keyed; the spiritual conflict between the two protagonists; the erotic force and drive of the living woman contending with the powerful sway still

> exerted by the dead one; the more fundamental concept of the struggle between death and life, and particularly the question of how the claims of life must cause us to moderate our grief at the departing of loved ones."[63]

Surrounded as he was by a world in complete turmoil, in a city already given to manic-depressive shifts of exaggerated frivolity and paralyzing anxiety, the subject matter of *Bruges-la-morte* must have presented a fascinating opportunity to probe the psyche of a people in crisis, as well as to ruminate on how they had arrived, as a culture, into a nadir of depression, bereavement, and obsession with mortality.

The creation of *Die tote Stadt* was necessarily composed in fits and starts, as Korngold's military duties and other limited engagements intruded on his time for composition; during this protracted gestation, the composer had ample time to contemplate the rapidly-changing world around him, and to shape his approach to his very timely material. Korngold's original title for the opera, significantly, was *Der Triumph des Lebens* (The Triumph of Life);[64] as the war that was supposed to have been over after a few weeks dragged into successive years, perhaps such a title began to acquire an air of flippancy, as if to belittle the suffering of the opera's prospective audience. At any rate, the title was changed to the more straightforward *Die tote Stadt* in the later stages of the opera's development. Not that Korngold ever intended to discard his altered ending or his redemptive interpretation of the dark source material; for all the composer's sobering wartime experience, he was unwilling to capitulate to the defeatism running riot in his hometown. Unlike the majority of his fellow Modernists,

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[63] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy,* 122.
[64] Ibid., 129.

Korngold was not content simply to catalogue manifestations of collective anxiety and present them onstage; through the music and the text of *Die tote Stadt*, he sought to find a way out of the worshipful circle of death and negation begetting more of the same, a means to honor grief without indulging it, and to accept life without fetishizing its caprices and vulgarities.

Similarly, the opera allowed him to contemplate the state of the particular art which he employed to muse on the dead past; much in keeping with its source material, *Die tote Stadt* operates on the conceit that death and the past are, functionally speaking, one and the same thing. Both death and the past are by definition possessed of the smoke-and-mirrors distortion occasioned by a distance from life; this distance virtually guarantees that both are perceived in the softening, rosy glow of nostalgia. Much of the substance of the opera arises from the conflict between Marie, the personification of sainthood—a condition purified and consecrated by death—and Marietta, the coarse and profane ambassador of life in all its vulgar glory. Both have the power to charm and seduce, but in vastly differing ways, appealing to conflicting aspects of human nature. The seductive power of death is a seduction of the mind and of the emotions, tantalizing each with the promise of an end to mental and emotional distress, as well as freedom from perennial anxiety and unfulfillable longing. The seductive charm of life, on the other hand, draws its power from the thrill of the senses and the body, promising relief from physical pain through sensual abandonment. Particularly in cultures like late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century Bruges and Vienna, entrenched as they were in a medieval Catholicism,

the seduction of death would have been for more socially acceptable because it appeals to humanity's spiritual nature and not to its animal one; as Korngold demonstrates, however, both powers can be equally destructive if indulged in excess.

The fallacy surrounding Korngold's posthumous reputation is that he was, at his core, a decadently sentimental composer; yet there is no inherently sentimental component of *Die tote Stadt* that has not been included specifically in order to make a point. In advocating for the case of Korngold-As-Modernist, Michael P. Steinberg remarks that *Die tote Stadt* "may be nostalgic, but in any case is explicitly *about* nostalgia."[65] The adoption of the dream as primary vehicle for the onstage action is exactly what allows Korngold to deliver the kind of meta-theatrics that speak to the opera's Modernist pedigree. Without the dream, the opera would still retain its preoccupation with the individual, the subjective, and the development of neuroses fostered by the same, but it would lose that critical distance that is so vital to the opera's role as an analysis of grief and its power both within society and in the lives of individuals. In the structure of the opera, Paul's dream functions primarily as a temporary suspension of reality, allowing him to play out the worst case scenario of his preoccupation with death, in which his innate animal instincts both to survive and to indulge his physical appetites come into cataclysmic conflict with his personal cult of mourning and self-isolation. The climax of this conflict having been reached, Paul must be allowed to return to his senses in order to reflect upon his past, as well as the

[65] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics", 639. Emphasis in the original.

choices he must make in present to dictate his future, otherwise all we are left with is a front-row seat to a crime of passion—spectacularly operatic in its own right, but also as old a device as the medium itself. Many operas depict violent crimes that result from unhealthy fixations; few of these works are able to simultaneously explore the fixations themselves and how they distort an individual's view of the world he or she inhabits.

In addition to the one major plot alteration, a few other, smaller changes exist between the original novel (and its various translations and adaptations for the stage prior to *Die tote Stadt*[66]) and the opera. These additions, subtle but crucial, bear discussion in order to highlight the shift in ideology between *Bruges-la-morte* and *Die tote Stadt*. To begin with, there is the business of altering predominantly French character names to fit the libretto's German text; the widower, named Hugues in Rodenbach's novel, becomes Paul, while his housekeeper is rechristened Brigitte from the original Barbe. In *Bruges-la-morte,* Hugues' wife remains nameless, entwined as her persona is with that of the dead city, while her doppelganger is named—inexplicably enough for a woman claiming to be a native of Lille—Jane Scott. The operatic renaming of both objects of the widower's obsession is somewhat less perfunctory, the dead wife being given the name Marie, while her less-exalted double is Marietta, with the addition of a diminutive suffix suggesting that she is in fact Marie the Lesser, a kind of down-market version of her predecessor. Even if the diminution of Marie to Marietta is meant to convey the latter's youth relative both to Paul and his

[66] Indeed, the title page of the score reads "frei nach G. Rodenbachs Roman 'Bruges la Morte'" as opposed to any other version of the story.

dead wife, the particular manner in which the name of the elder Marie is linked to the younger one inevitably carries with it connotations of the latter's jejune superficiality, hints that might go unnoticed were it not that Marietta's behavior increasingly reveals her to be vain, careless and shallow as the plot progresses. Of course, these name changes are not purely motivated by symbolic or philosophical implications; as Carroll points out, there is a musically practical element at work here, the simple fact that "Paul and Marietta are far easier names to sing than Jane and Hugues."[67]

Ben Winters argues that this nomenclature also serves to illustrate the struggle of the Modern male intellectual to reconcile the nineteenth century ideal of womanhood, i.e. the chaste, apolitical female confined to her "natural" domestic sphere, with the emerging twentieth-century woman, an independent, sexually liberated and socio-politically engaged human being pursuing interests outside the home. Winters comments, "*Die tote Stadt* … is largely concerned with two dominant images of woman, the names suggestive of the virgin-whore dichotomy traceable back to the biblical Marys (mother of God and Magdalene)."[68] Referencing Jessica Duchen, Winters also mentions that Hugues'/Paul's strangulation of a twentieth-century woman with a braid of a nineteenth-century woman's hair signifies the man's inability to cope with

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[67] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 122.
[68] Winters, "Strangling blondes," 60. Winters goes on to argue that Luzi Sonnenthal, the future Mrs. Erich Wolfgang Korngold, with whom the composer had already become acquainted by the time he was composing *Die tote Stadt*, may have served as partial inspiration for his depiction of a modern woman, insofar as the sweet-tempered Luzi enraged Korngold's parents on occasion by committing such sins as dancing too long into the evening or once dressing in tails in order to conduct a private performance of Erich's *Much Ado About Nothing* suite. Julius Korngold, already scandalized by his son's romance with a sometime film actress descending from a long line of stage actors, could not abide such "scandalous" flouting of tradition.

modern society, a circumstance he can only amend by symbolically murdering the culture to which he cannot adapt.[69] The point is well taken; if this is the case, however, then surely it is of paramount significance that the Symbolist Rodenbach allows the offending woman to stay dead, whereas the Modern Korngold grants her a full pardon, and her erstwhile murderer sees the error of his ways and repents.

Staying with the subject of the opera's women, the character of the housekeeper, though appearing in both *Bruges-la-morte* and *Die tote Stadt*, is sufficiently different between the novel and the opera as to almost count as two separate people; her translation from page to stage, therefore, is significant to the opera's message in a number of particular details. To begin with, Rodenbach's Barbe is a prudish, rather fussy old maid whose sole ambition is to accumulate enough savings to retire to the Béguinage convent, joining the holy order long established there. She quits her post in Hugues' household prematurely because of the gossip surrounding the latter's concubinage; as Barbe's cousin, a sister at the convent, has reminded her, no respectable woman could serve so depraved an employer, and it is therefore her moral duty to abandon her master immediately. Korngold's Brigitte, on the other hand, while likewise a spinster, is a hopeless, and indeed, pathetically romantic figure, enamored of the devotion embodied in Paul's shrine to Marie. When Frank wonders aloud how Brigitte can bear being custodian to such a desolate monument, she replies that her post allows her to experience love, if only second-hand. While Barbe serves as the

[69] Ben Winters, "Strangling Blondes," 81.

credulous pawn of a hypocritical socio-religious system, Brigitte is a willing acolyte of Paul in his capacity as high priest of quietus, and her behavior is symptomatic of the prevailing death culture both of the household and the city at large. Brigitte may well be more inherently maladjusted than her employer, insofar as she seeks to experience both love and grief only through vicarious means. After all, Paul spiraled into a hallucinatory depression following a tragic event over which he had no control; Brigitte, on the other hand, takes the job of handmaiden to the dead upon herself, involving herself in her employer's private despair entirely of her own volition. Significantly, Brigitte resigns her post not through any worry of scandal or threat to her plans for the future, but simply because she views Paul's affair with Marietta as constituting infidelity to the dead Marie. Granted, Brigitte's resignation occurs during the extended dream sequence; however, if such an action were not already in keeping with what we know of her nature outside the dream narrative, it is unlikely that she would manifest within the dream as the most explicit voice of reproach regarding Paul's lust for Marietta.

One of the more significant differences between the opera and its source material is the addition of characters to the former. Korngold's choices in this cast expansion reflect both the twenty-eight-year gap between the novel's publication and the opera's premiere, as well as allow for the inclusion of particular references to the Viennese zeitgeist following the First World War. The addition of Frank, seemingly Paul's only friend existing outside the Temple of the Past, is necessary on a very practical level to bring about plot exposition via

Frank's conversation with Brigitte, surely vastly preferable to having the already-overworked lead tenor give a dramatically inert account of himself and his circumstances in the form of a soliloquy. However, Frank serves other, more exalted purposes, such as tethering the non-compos-mentis Paul to reality. Without Frank, Paul's ultimate redemption would ring false; consider that in *Bruges-la-morte*, Hugues exists in an utterly friendless world, albeit of his own making:

> He had no acquaintances, no families he visited, he lived alone. But in this town, its sparse population with so little to occupy it, in this Bruges where everyone knows about everyone else, asks about newcomers, tells their neighbors, gets information from them, everyone knew him by sight, at least knew who he was, knew of his noble despair.[70]

This world is not only a devoid of friendship or human connection, but it is also actively hostile; the gossip and speculation surrounding Hugues turns malicious as they observe the progression of the affair between the hitherto nobly despairing widower and the object of his obsession. Moreover, these small-minded townspeople, feeding on scandal like maggots devouring a carcass, consume the minutiae of Hugues' fall from grace without ever making an attempt to understand him or seek out his point of view. "Doorstep chatter, idle gossip, tittle-tattle, all was greeted with the prurience of pious bigots – the weed of scandal which springs up between all the paving stones in dead towns."[71] In such an environment, it would in fact be impossible for Hugues to find a friend even if he desired to, and therefore without any connection to human sympathy, he is unable to rejoin the world of the living.

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[70] Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2005), 42-44.
[71] Ibid., 55.

Korngold's world, on the other hand, is far kinder. By equipping his protagonist with a confidant, Korngold allows for a Bruges which, though dead itself, does not actively seek to destroy all its inhabitants. As opposed to the novel, the world of the opera is actually capable of producing a friend for a man who willfully shuts out life. The addition of Frank is an act commensurate with Korngold's extraordinary optimism; through this new character, even the most devout worshipper of death may have a link to life, and therefore a reason to hope. The symbolic nature of this character produces a role that is in many ways necessarily thankless to play, as Frank's primary purpose is not to express his own personality so much as to, as it were, hold a mirror up to Paul's nature. In the context of the framework narrative of "reality", Frank reflects what Paul might be if he were cured of his morbid obsession. In the context of the dream-vision, however, in which Paul rejects Frank's friendship on the basis of their shared desire for Marietta, Frank serves to reflect the delusional and violent man his friend has allowed himself to become. Upon regaining his senses and awakening from his brain fever, Frank resumes his Horatio-like role as trusted confidant and advocate for sanity.[72] Further relating to the Vienna of 1920, a city riding the crest of the Freudian wave, Frank acts as Paul's ad hoc psychoanalyst.[73]

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[72] The comparison of the Paul/Frank relationship to Hamlet/Horatio is not an idle one; Korngold was a fervent admirer of Shakespeare from his earliest youth, and various Shakespeare-oriented works pepper the composer's resume throughout his career. It is not inconceivable, therefore, that Korngold might have taken the mad, grief-obsessed Dane into account when composing *Die tote Stadt*.

[73] No particular evidence exists to suggest a direct link between Korngold's work and that of Sigmund Freud; however, since Freud had been doing groundbreaking work in Vienna for decades before the composer wrote *Die tote Stadt*, and further considering Korngold's vast

It is also useful to note at this juncture that Korngold's pragmatic optimism is also bolstered by a slight change to the lead character's back-story: in *Bruges-la-morte*, Hugues has actively chosen to relocate to the title city after the death of his wife. As Bruges is the deadest place he knows, he finds it to the appropriate venue and receptacle for his ghosts, demons and relics:

> And how melancholy Bruges was, too, during those late afternoons! It was for its melancholy that he had chosen it and had gone to live there after the great catastrophe! … He needed infinite silence and an existence that was so monotonous it almost failed to give him the sense of being alive.[74]

Hugues has chosen a locale with an explicit culture of death worship, the better to give reign to his grief, a state of being he has painstakingly cultivated so that it should have lost none of its potency in the five years of his widowhood. In *Die tote Stadt* on the other hand, Paul has chosen to remain in the city where his wife died as a way of honoring and preserving her memory.[75] Paul may be in a particularly good spot for the veneration of the past and of death, but it is an accidental and therefore somewhat ironic placement; he just so happened to be living in a town obsessed with mortality when he suffered unexpected tragedy, but finding himself so fortuitously placed under the circumstances, he chooses to stay. The distinction between the two, from an ideological standpoint, is that while Hugues actively seeks out as much proximity to death as he possibly can

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knowledge of the intellectual activity occurring in his hometown at the time, it is unlikely that he would have been unaware of Freud and his ideas. Furthermore, Korngold's family friend and personal idol, Gustav Mahler, had a famous encounter with Freud, an occurrence of which it is unlikely that the younger composer would have been unaware. (See Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 63-64.)

[74] Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-morte*, 30.

[75] Paul Schott, *Die tote Stadt: Opera in Three Acts Founded on G. Rodenbach's "Das Trugbild"*, trans. R. H. Elkin (New York: Ricordi, 1921), 14.

without resorting to suicide,[76] Paul can only be held responsible for indulging in a tradition of death-worship already present in his own culture. This circumstance does not exonerate Paul, nor indeed his audience, for wallowing in despair; if Paul must have the courage to choose life in the face of overwhelming personal tragedy, so must Vienna have the courage to abandon the dark comforts of its *Weltschmerz* and face the cold light of reality long enough to struggle towards a more benign, constructive state of being.

The parallels between Bruges, 1892 and Vienna, 1916-21 are made even clearer by the addition of a second major character to the opera, that of Fritz, resident interpreter of "Pierrot" in Marietta's troupe. Fritz, in the guise of Pierrot, delivers "Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen", the showpiece aria placed at the very center of the opera's structure. An apparent non sequitur to the main narrative, this is a complex scene of immense dramatic import, all the more so because it contains no analogue whatever in Rodenbach's novel. This character, however, is inextricably entwined with the music of his single scene that the entire episode warrants discussion at length in the next chapter. Suffice it to say, for the moment, that Pierrot is the lynchpin character in the opera's significance to Modernist discourse and Vienna's post-war socio-political mindset, and is perhaps the single most important indicator of Korngold's active engagement with the social, artistic and intellectual movements of his era.

[76] Suicide is to be avoided on the basis that is an act that would rob Hugues, according to his and Bruges' Catholic doctrine, of any chance of entering heaven, and therefore of any hope of eventual reunion with his wife in death.

Chapter Three: *Sehnen und Wähnen*

Having suspended the composition of *Die tote Stadt* for almost a year prior to the November 1918 Armistice, Korngold resumed work after the cessation of hostilities with an altered outlook on both life and art; not only did he change the title of the piece from the untimely *Der Triumph des Lebens* at this juncture, but he also adjusted his compositional techniques in a way that reflected greater restraint and maturity. Carroll comments: "His father recalled that in 1919 Korngold began to approach the problems of orchestration in a new way. He felt that up to then the sound of his orchestration had been too consistently rich. Now he aimed for what he called 'Wagner's ingenious moderation in adhering whenever possible to the middle registers."[77] The reference to Wagner rather eliminates any suggestion that that Korngold suddenly favored austerity of orchestral forces; the prodigious instrumental requirements of *Die tote Stadt* make this point clear. Rather, Korngold transitioned from the habit, common in his juvenile output, of creating large walls of sound for their own sake. Though Korngold had always had a keen ability to depict drama through music, he began to display a greater facility for expression through subtraction of particular melodic or orchestral effects, rather than addition. He began therefore, to move away from a technique rooted in all-around sonic bombardment to a more nuanced approach, one in which the drama is supported by a feast-or-famine alternation of harmonic, melodic and orchestral effects.

[77] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 122.

Where *Die tote Stadt* is concerned, the result is a score that thrives on and propels itself forward through stark contrasts and sudden shifts. The most salient contrasts occur as a result of the battles between consonance and dissonance, and between abundance and scarcity, that last throughout the entire opera. One might well ask how it is possible for an opera with such a preponderance of forces to be anything other than a collection of elaborate aural special effects, a musical side-show targeted toward the lowest common denominator. It is certainly true that economy and concision are not hallmarks of Korngold's style, but it does not necessarily follow that he is guilty of waste and excess, or of that infectious over-indulgence in decoration against which the Modernists rebelled. At worst, Korngold overestimates his audience's ability to properly digest the whole of his scores in a single sitting. As Martin Anderson puts it,

> If I have a criticism of the music itself, it's … that it seems to be written for some kind of super-listener who can take in the relentless profusion of ideas – Korngold, of course, was expressing himself entirely naturally, but on occasion we mere mortals require the aural equivalent of the slow-motion camera to perceive everything that's going on in the music. Still, that's the right kind of problem to have.[78]

It is not then, that Korngold fills his score to bursting with decadent torrents of orchestral hysteria, but simply that he may seek to convey too much in a necessarily limited span of time. However, Korngold's extraordinary ability to create an unified sound-world out of varied, sometimes disparate instruments, rhythms, and recurring motives, combined with his gift for melodic invention, keep the audience on track with the progression of the drama and the development of themes and characters even if it is impossible to pick up on every

[78] Martin Anderson, "First Performances: Opera premières in London, Royal Opera House/Barbican: Korngold, Smelkov," *Tempo* 63 (2009): 61.

reference and gesture as they occur in real time. A perfect example of this phenomenon is the prelude and first scene of Act II, in which all manner of effects, melodic fragments, and percussive gestures are used to conjure up the sound world of Bruges and its various faces and identities. Korngold deploys an arsenal of sonic artillery in single and group alternation; glockenspiel, organ, harps, celesta, and a full complement of percussion contribute to the impression of the austere, all-pervading Catholicism of the dead city (and its analogue, Vienna), while a wind-machine, a nontraditional "instrument", undercuts the mighty and awe-inspiring brass forces, combining the desolation and loneliness of stagnant canals and deserted streets with the terrible, internalized *Weltschmerz* of the man who wanders through them. The voice of the dead Marie entwines itself with the dreadful music of Bruges, as if to reinforce the manner in which these two entities are utterly dependent on each other for their ruinous power over Paul's psyche.

Though Paul's dread and anxiety are often expressed through passages of dense orchestral dissonance or jagged chromatic vocal lines, there is arguably greater psychological danger present in the score's moments of consonance; dulcet lyricism is often used to wash down a particularly lethal dose of self-pitying nostalgia. The sweetest melodies and greatest outpourings of lush orchestral euphony occur primarily at moments when the ever-present past is directly referenced; though their effect is winsome and hypnotic, the melodies carry with them a generous portion of self-awareness and irony, though indeed irony without bitterness. Moreover, the effect of melody is specifically intended

to be mesmerizing; Korngold communicates his critical detachment of his loveliest and most Romantic passages of music insofar as they not only enrapture the audience—a circumstance over which the composer has no direct control, gratifying as the result may be—but in that these passages are specifically directed to bewitch the characters onstage, and alter their behavior to an extent that may prove dangerous or even fatal.

Die tote Stadt features two extraordinarily challenging, hauntingly beautiful set-piece arias, to which we may well owe the lion's share of thanks for the opera's rehabilitation to the repertory in recent years. "Glück das mir verblieb" and "Mein Sähnen, mein Wähnen", commonly referred to as Marietta's Lautenlied and the Pierrot-Lied, respectively, feature sumptuous harmonies coupled with the kind of achingly tender melodic writing for which Korngold was justly famous. Moreover, they are fiendishly difficult to sing—rhythmic shifts pervade the Lautenlied while the Pierrot-Lied lies in an unusually high tessitura for its intended baritone interpreter—and thus make for ideal star turns in operatic recitals, blending bravura musicianship with an evocative sound in the vein of Richard Strauss at his most wistful, all to the effect of virtually guaranteeing an ecstatic audience reaction. Paradoxically, those arias that may well have saved *Die tote Stadt* from gradually disappearing from the opera stage also help form the basis for much of the negative criticism surrounding its composer; these are unabashedly Romantic effusions, no matter how far they stretch the bounds of tonality, however those who would maintain that such fragrant bouquets of nostalgic rosemary are all for which Korngold may be relied

upon have missed the point of their placement in the opera, and have surely only considered them out of context. Other than these two literal show-stoppers, both of which have the effect of slowing diegetic time to a crawl[79], the opera contains so little in the way of harmonic clarity and melodic structure that when such moments of lyricism do appear, the effect is almost as unnerving as if the tables were reversed, and a highly ordered, harmonically clear work were suddenly interrupted by an storm of chaotic vocal lines and free-form orchestral passages devoid of a tonal center.

It is precisely this reverse logic that makes the two set pieces so dramatically effective in context. Tellingly, these two arias are the only moments in the opera in which a character can be "heard" as singing by both the audience and by other characters onstage; both are examples of what Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon refer to as "phenomenal song", explaining "The operatic convention is that the characters do not hear the music that is what Carolyn Abbate calls the 'ambient fluid of their music-drowned world,' but they do hear performed songs."[80] Both are intended to evoke the past and, particularly in the case of the Pierrot-Lied, to induce a kind of dream-like stupor in both the de facto audience and the audience onstage.

The first of these melodic outpourings to occur during the action is "Glück das mir Verblieb", Marietta's lute song, what Carroll aptly designates as "the last great hit tune in German opera"[81]. A ruefully appropriate elegy, to be sure; one

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[79] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 116.
[80] Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon. "The 'Phenomenal Image' in Opera," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 104 (2005): 66.
[81] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 122.

that Steinberg characterizes as "hauntingly beautiful, at once an indulgence in nostalgia and a critique of nostalgia, [guiding] Paul from melancholy to mourning and recovery at the end of the opera—perhaps too easily."[82] Regardless of whether or not the journey is "too easy", the power of this unifying melody is finite, and will expire as soon as Paul has made his peace with both life and death. It is not, as Steinberg seems to imply, a melody that represents some kind of trite aphorism speaking to the "healing power of music" or the ability of music to soothe the savage beast—or in this case, grief-crazed widower—but rather a remnant of the past that is only useful insofar as it may serve as a vehicle of reconciliation with a traumatic past and perhaps even a reminder that if life was once worth living on the strength of its own merits, perhaps it will be so again.

The melody is introduced in the first act soon after Marietta's entrance: Paul has entreated his dead wife's doppelganger to wear the latter's shawl and hold her lute, thus imitating in conspicuous detail the large portrait of Marie that hangs in the Temple of the Past, lording over the chamber like a statue of the Madonna, and serving much the same purpose. Marietta, not yet aware that she has been remodeled in the image of another, coyly complies and offers to play. The aria takes the form of a rhapsodic exchange between Paul and Marietta, framed by two verses of an old, sad song, which Marietta claims she likes to sing because she herself is always so jolly, and therefore takes more pleasure in

[82] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics," 641.

singing sad songs than happy ones.[83] Her recital conjures up memories of the dead woman, and the song becomes a duet as Paul interjects a slow, soaring line, pulled by the irresistible force of melancholy. Recalling the second verse, in which the speaker promises his or her beloved that they will reunite in the afterlife, Paul and Marietta sing together in harmony, Paul shadowing Marietta while never straying much farther than a third below the melody as the song comes to an end.

The song sets itself up as a conspicuous curio of days gone by; Korngold lays the self-conscious nostalgia on thick, although with engaging melodic originality that prevents the scene from becoming farcically twee. The song begins with a series of arpeggiated fifths, sixths and octaves played in triplets on the celesta, as if to imitate the silvery, ghostly tones of a music box. This figure serves to evoke an ever-so-slightly eerie atmosphere of reminiscence; as the scene immediately following Paul and Marietta's encounter features a hallucinatory conversation between Paul and his dead wife, it is almost as though the celesta serves double duty in both transporting Paul back to the dead past, and in helping to conjure up its chief ghost to haunt him. The celesta is not a part of the diegetic music "heard" by the characters onstage; we are to understand that both hear only the lute and their own signing. Given that Paul has drifted almost into a trance by the end of the song, however, we might infer that he can hear the orchestra while Marietta can only hear what she plays and sings—the orchestra

[83] This contradictory statement serves as a double bluff of sorts for Marietta; at first Paul might assume that she wishes to temper her naturally high spirits by grounding them with contemplative melancholy. As the opera progresses, however, Marietta proves herself (or rather, is revealed through Paul's dream-vision) to be the very incarnation of irreverence, and what Paul may have taken for a noble sentiment is in fact a wish to subvert all things solemn and sacred.

has taken us inside Paul's head already, prefiguring the dream sequence that is to begin upon Marietta's departure from the scene.

Though near-constant changes in tempo and unexpected shifts in meter are a hallmark of Korngold's style dating back almost to his earliest juvenilia, the Lautenlied adopts a specific, semi-consistent pattern of time changes that Steinberg calls "the invasion of 3/4 time by 4/4 time."[84] Within the song's structure, in which the two signatures alternate almost every other measure, time itself seems to be suspended; an appropriate setting for a lyric that practically begs time to freeze, thus forestalling an inevitable separation between a lover and the object of his or her affection. Steinberg aptly characterizes the aria's effect as " sensual but also confusing and even painful."[85] It is, to a certain extent, a desperate plea to eternity; when taken out of context, the song is exactly as Marietta describes it—a lovely melancholic ballad, and nothing more. However, when considered in context, it becomes a rather pathetic manifestation of Paul's own wretchedness, a consummation of his fetishistic grief. As Steinberg goes on to remark: "Marietta … gives literal voice to Paul's own fantasy of his dead wife's return, matching its purple words to a lumbering, massaged and manipulated waltz."[86] Though the song is not intended to mock Paul's pain, the scene as a whole serves as a rather discomfiting exegesis of how the character's grief has distorted and even, to a greater or lesser extent, dehumanized him.

[84] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics," 641.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.

Perhaps Korngold's ironic distance from nostalgia and its Austro-German cultural associations with death-worship was in part informed by the fact that he himself did not, as it were, buy into the rhetoric inherent to the view of eternity touted by the cultures of either Bruges or Vienna. As a non-practicing Jew, as far as Korngold was concerned, morbid fixation on an afterlife that could not conclusively be proven to exist at the expense of day-to-day life was not only a destructive, but also a pointless waste of the only existence humankind could be even partially sure of possessing. The wry manipulation of waltz-rhythms contributes to the impression that the Lautenlied may be aimed at a very particular audience. As Steinberg remarks:

> The dead city is now Vienna. Viennese nostalgia is duly represented by waltzes, which are as present in *Die tote Stadt* as in Johann Strauss' *Fledermaus* (1874) and Richard Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911). In fact, however, the waltzes resemble those of another Strauss opera, *Elektra*, which is more replete with waltzes than his waltz-opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, but in a disguised, distorted and highly ironic manner.[87]

The waltz becomes an even more integral part of the social commentary in Act II, in which "Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen", also known as the Pierrot-Lied, not only serves as the centerpiece of the opera's hallucinatory episode, but also signals to the audience that Viennese nostalgia is coming under direct scrutiny.

William Cheng identifies the Pierrot-Lied as the innermost of "four nested diegetic realms"[88] contained within the opera's narrative structure. If the universe containing *Die tote Stadt*'s mise-en-scène takes the form of a nightmare, Fritz's elegiac rhapsody in three-quarter time becomes the chimerical sun around which the other worlds contained within the drama revolve. These realms are

[87] Ibid., 640.
[88] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 117.

identified, in order of successive depth of fantasy, as "(1) the opera's so-called 'real world' (the 'reality' of which remains uncertain throughout the narrative); (2) Paul's dream world (the 'un-reality' of which is likewise contestable); (3) the dance troupe's rehearsal preparations for *Robert le diable* (and – following Fritz's song – the staging of a brief scene from that opera); and diegesis."[89] As the opera follows what David McKee refers to as the "disjunctive logic"[90] of a dream, it makes a kind of sense that, within Paul's frenzied grief-stricken dreams or hallucinations, one fantasy would lead into another without much explanation or preamble. True to the nature of dreams, this particular deviation from the main narrative requires only the slightest push to launch a completely separate scenario, unrelated to events as they have occurred up until the next fantasy's point of departure.

In this case, the impetus is Marietta's flirtatious request of a song from her fellow thespian, Fritz, to whom she only refers as 'Pierrot', and with whom she plays a kind of mutually agreed-upon flirting game, the authenticity of which is never made clear. In the stage directions for the scene, Marietta and her troupe enter the "piazzetta" on which her residence is located, having traveled the Bruges canals via a boat festooned with lanterns. Fritz is identified as "the Pierrot", and is apparently still in that costume as the troupe makes its entrance.[91]

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[89] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 117.
[90] David McKee, "Die tote Stadt" *The Opera Quarterly* 20 (2004): 314.
[91] "Man hört die sich in Booten lachend und singend nahende Tänzergesellschaft. PAUL verbirgt sich hinter den Bäumen rechts. Der nächtliche Himmel hat sich aufgeheitert; Mondschein. Ein Boot, mit Lampions beleuchtet, fährt durch den Kanal. Im Boote: VICTORIN, der Regisseur, FRITZ, der Pierrot, nich im Kostüm und mit seiner Laute von der Vorstellung her, LUCIENNE und JULIETTE, die Tänzerinnen, in Abendmänteln über dem Ballerinenkostüm, Graf ALBERT. Zwei weitere Boot emit Mitgliedern der Tanzgesellschaft kommon nach. Die diesen Booten

As the actor/dancers are supposed to be about to rehearse a scene from *Robert le diable*, Meyerbeer's opera on medieval Norman themes, the sight of a commedia dell'arte stock character is somewhat incongruous; however, as Marietta belongs to what gives every appearance of being a traveling repertory company, the presence of a fully costumed Pierrot is not wholly absurd under the circumstances. On the other hand, the actors could just as easily enter costumed as the cast of *Hamlet*, but why do it? The specific presence of a Pierrot, however, betrays a conscious choice on the part of the composer and librettist to include an iconic character, one that resonates on many different levels with different audiences and in different contexts.

In this particular setting, the character Fritz wears many different hats while only occupying a single costume, that of the naïve and wistful Pierrot, a perpetually sympathetic character whose romantic aspirations are nearly always doomed to failure. Specifically because Fritz/Pierrot has no reasonable equivalent in Rodenbach's novel, his creation and inclusion in the plot is perplexing but also compelling. This is not Pierrot's first appearance in a Korngold stage work; the thirteen-year old composer made his debut in 1910 with the one-act balletic pantomime *Der Schneeman*, peopled almost exclusively with commedia dell'arte characters. Significantly, Pierrot is not only the hero of this early work, but in a twist on the usual order of things, the young innocent manages not only to get the girl but also to outwit the competition in so doing.

Entstiegenen bleiben im Hintergrunde. Die ganze Szene traumhaft wie die vorigen, stilisiert burlesk. Bald streng rhythmisierte Bewegung, Bald Erstarren zu Bildhaftigkeit. Reicher bunter Wechel in Stellung und Gruppierung. Spiele des Lichts." Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt: Oper in 3 Bilden, Opus 12, Klavierauszug von Ferdinand Rebay* (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1920,) 87.

Pierrot is usually the object of his audience's sympathy, mainly as the vessel into which we communally channel individual feelings of defeat, disillusionment and pangs of disappointed love. In *Der Schneeman*, however, the audience is given the opportunity to cheer for the underdog and have the rare pleasure of seeing him succeed. *Der Schneeman* does, however, for all its success, represent Korngold's juvenilia. Despite the sophistication of its music and adroit presentation of a subject with relatively mature overtones,[92] the choice to make a victor of the perennially luckless Pierrot can be as easily ascribed to boy composer seeking to impose a childlike sense of poetic justice as much as a decision to turn tradition on its head in order to make a broader dramatic point.

The Pierrot of *Die tote Stadt* is, however, a different animal entirely. In the sense that this Pierrot is automatically assumed to be the hapless victim of love, he is more traditional. But unlike the Pierrot of *Der Schneeman*, this poor unfortunate possesses nothing of the exuberant vitality of a young innocent blissfully unaware of his own limitations in going up against a mightier foe, and paradoxically all the more likely to succeed in his ignorance. The Pierrot of *Die tote Stadt*, on the other hand, is arguably the most problematic character in the entire opera. The action may be taking place in Paul's head, but the appearance of Pierrot represents the central, enigmatical dream-image that even Paul might be at a loss to understand. Again, in keeping with the aforementioned disjunctive logic inherent to dreams, Pierrot is the kind of figure one imagines popping up in

[92] In the context of *Der Schneeman*, Pierrot's rival for Columbine's favors is her guardian and uncle, the drunken oaf Pantalon, who maintains a jealous prurient interest in his niece throughout, limiting her exposure to the outside world.

a series of unsettling nightmares; perhaps, once Paul has left Bruges at the close of the opera's narrative, he will choose to immerse himself into the nascent field of psychiatry, spending countless hours on the therapist's couch in an effort to understand what it all means.

That is, of course, so much fanciful speculation. The material point is that Korngold chose to incorporate Pierrot in a specific incarnation for a more deliberate purpose than the simple introduction of an exquisite hit tune. First, one considers the societal implications of Pierrot; as Harald Haslmayr notes, Pierrot was not only an iconic figure in Viennese and Austrian *Karnevalzeiten*, the culturally Catholic tradition of communal feasting and carousing prior to observing the strictures of Lent, but he was also a familiar face in Viennese lore year-round, and the subject of considerable fascination from artists of the progressive *Jung Wien* milieu. Instantly recognizable by members of the culturally Catholic "South German" population, Pierrot would have spoken to them on a level that culturally Protestant Northern Germans would not as readily apprehend.[93] Moreover, members of the *Wiener Moderne* culture focused a great deal of creative energy on the Pierrot image, for the achievement of various aesthetic, dramatic, and socially critical ends. In the context of the Viennese *fin-de-siècle* through the interwar period, Pierrot begins to adopt increasingly sinister and macabre overtones, in line, of course, with the city's cultural *Weltschmerz*,

[93] Harald Haslmayr, "'Es träumt sich zurück': *Die tote Stadt* im Licht der österreichischen Nachkriegkrisen", in *Erich Wolfgang Korngold: Wunderkind der Moderne oder Letzter Romantiker?* ed. Arne Stollberg (Munich: Richard Boorberg, 2007), 182-83.

and his relation to contemporary society becomes less allegorical and more direct.

For example, *Pierrot Hypnotiseur*, a tragico-satirical pantomime from 1892 by Richard Beer-Hofmann, features a Pierrot who experiences a mid-life crisis just at the peak of his career as a scientist and academic; in an attempt to recapture his youth and vitality, he turns to an enigmatic incarnation of Columbine, now pregnant by an abusively alcoholic Harlequin.[94] At first Pierrot uses hypnosis to make Columbine entirely submissive to his will; however upon freeing her from mental slavery, he finds that, when possessed of her own volition, she still loves the reprehensible Harlequin. Unable to stand the double-insult of Columbine's rejection and her mistreatment at the hands of Harlequin, Pierrot ends both their sufferings via a murder-suicide.[95] Pierrot was also a favorite image of the dramatist Arthur Schnitzler, who used this more violent interpretation of Pierrot in various pantomimes and stage productions between 1903 and 1910[96]. The suicidally-depressed Pierrot was also a subject for the poetry of Richard Schaukal, whose 1902 volume, *Pierrot und Colombine, oder das Lied von der Ehe*, explores the despondent, death-envious Pierrot in verses of subdued, poignant melancholy.[97] The Viennese adoption of Pierrot as the bearer of *Weltschmerz* continued, of course, with Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* in 1912, and would also receive an ironic nod over two decades later from Alban Berg,

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[94] Haslmayr, "'Es träumt sich zurück'," 183.
[95] Waltraud Wende-Hohenberger, "Das Verlorene Ich: Richard Beer-Hofmanns Pantomime *Pierrot Hypnotiseur* (1892)" in *Richard Beer-Hofmann (1866-1945): Studien zu seinem Werk*, ed. Norbert Otto Eke and Günter Helmes. (Würzburg: Konigshausen und Neumann, 1993), 156.
[96] Haslmayr, " 'Es träumt sich zurück'," 183-84.
[97] Ibid., 184.

when he chose to clothe the titular femme fatale of *Lulu* in the guise of the luckless *commedia* idealist.[98]

The deeply morose interpretations of Pierrot that preceded *Die tote Stadt* are not likely to have passed unnoticed by the young Korngold, whom Carroll describes as having an uncommonly precocious intellect even outside of the realm of music, and who had "already absorbed a vast literature" by his late teens.[99] Moreover, the details of Pierrot's appearance in *Die tote Stadt* suggest the composer's intimate acquaintance with the character's lore, and that Korngold is engaging in an ongoing Austro-Viennese cultural discourse in his treatment of this iconic figure. Moreover, the presence of Pierrot helps telegraph to the audience—at least to the hometown audience—that although the story might take place in Bruges, it is deeply significant to Vienna and to Austria, as well.

In light of Vienna's major importance as the birthplace of psychoanalysis, it is worth noting that Korngold's Pierrot seems to be a physical personification of an identity crisis. The Pierrot of *Die tote Stadt* is clearly an actor in costume—who has been given the unimaginative name of "Fritz" in the score and libretto—but despite being possessed of an identity ostensibly separate from Pierrot, the actor is never addressed by anything other than his character's name.[100] Furthermore, even though we are aware that Fritz is a member of the troupe of actors, he never seems to be out of character. From his very first utterance he waxes lyrical on the subject of frustrated love; though these odes are presumably

[98] Hutcheon and Hutcheon, "The 'Phenomenal Image' In Opera," 68.
[99] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 117.
[100] "Fritz" is an unremarkable first name for an Austrian, commensurate to being called "John" or "Joe" in English, underlining the lack of importance attached to the actor's identity outside his role of Pierrot.

directed toward Marietta, they are always non-specific in detail, and surrounded by jocular interjections from other troupe members.[101] Because we are aware that Fritz is still an actor in costume, however, we are unsure whether or not his interactions with her might contain some grain of truth. Given that all the action is set within Paul's nightmare, one might presume that if Korngold had wanted a straightforward Pierrot present at the actor's gathering, he could easily have just placed one there (along with any other incongruous stock nightmare characters such as pink elephants and old crones, if he could find a dramatic use for them.) Instead, he deliberately muddies the waters of the audience's perception, explicitly presenting a powerful symbol *as depicted by a person*, but denying the person behind the symbol any real dramatic significance.

What the person loses in significance, however, the symbol gains tenfold. In other incarnations, even in the aforementioned works of the *Jung Wien* community representing a darker fate for the character, Pierrot represents his basic commedia dell'arte personality—albeit an extreme and desperate version of it—but not much else; in *Die tote Stadt*, however, the Pierrot scene is a miniature meta-theatrical tableau. Marietta, hitherto ruling both the scene and her cohorts, issues a command to Pierrot for some music, specifying "Pierrot, auf!/Du triffst es fein! Ein Deutscher bist du/bist vom Rhein!"[102] Immediately there is a seismic

[101] In response to the troupe's general adulation of Marietta, Fritz/Pierrot stands aside and strums his lute, singing "Mond, vernimm der traur'ge Litanei/Mit wem brach sie mir heute wohl die Treu?/Das Herz der Unbeständigen is nimmermehr zu bändingen." Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt*, 95-6.

[102] "Come on, Pierrot! You'll suit just fine! You are a German, you come from the Rhine!" We may assume, given the highly Viennese Catholic baggage Pierrot carries with him, that Marietta is urging Pierrot to *play* the German, rather than designating his origins. Pierrot's self-consciously obsequious reply compounds the impression, as he elaborately offers his services to suit the

shift in the scene's energy: as soon as the Rhine is mentioned, the orchestra alludes to the opening of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, followed by a deep, servile bow from Pierrot, corresponding with a marked shift in tempo as the orchestra grinds to a near-halt right as Pierrot delivers his reply: "Da ihr befehlet, Königin/fügt gern sich Pierrots treuer Sinn."[103]

Example 1: This allusion, seemingly conjured by Marietta's mention of the iconic German river, carrying with it the power to bewitch all present. Thus endowed by the mystical powers of sacred German art, Pierrot casts his own musical spell with "Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen", newly composed by Korngold to resemble, like Marietta's Lautenlied, a sentimental ballad awash with longing to reclaim the past. Unlike the Lautenlied, however, the nostalgia of the Pierrot-Lied also invokes the memory of a distant, idealized homeland. While in its original context the leitmotif in question firmly establishes the tonic of E-flat major, this paraphrase takes the form of an extended dominant seventh-chord, although the passage does not project a clear tonal center, and the paraphrase thus appears, as it were, out of nowhere—contributing to the ironic depiction of mystical powers inherent either in a mention of the Rhine, sacred German art, or both.[104]

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whim of the "queen"—that is to say, if Marietta wants Pierrot to be a German, a German he will be. (Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt*, 109.)

[103] "At your command, my queen. Pierrot offers his faithful service." Erich Wolfgang Korngold. *Die tote Stadt*, 109-10.

[104] Ibid., 109.

Example 2: The first appearance of the Rhine motif in the Prelude to Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. In its original form, the motif is notated in 6/8 time, as opposed to the paraphrase shown in the previous example, sped up and condensed into 3/8 time, converted into a kind of musical shorthand, just long enough to serve as a wordless, ironic "magic spell." [105]

From this moment forward, Pierrot is in complete command, not only of the scene but also of everyone onstage. The stage directions indicate that all members of the troupe turn to Pierrot, their eyes riveted to him, transfixed and completely in his thrall.[106]

The Pierrot-Lied itself now begins, its enigmatical text worth quoting in its entirety:

FRITZ:	
Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen	Through my longings, my delusions
Es träumt sich zurück	I dream my way back
Im Tanze gewann ich,	To the dance in which I won,
Verlor ich mein Glück.	But also lost, my happiness.
Im Tanze am Rhein,	Dancing along the Rhine
Beim Mondenschein	By the light of the moon,
Gestand mirs aus Blau-aug	Those blue eyes confessed to me
Ein inniger Blick.	With a single, tender glance.
Gestand mirs ihr bittend Wort:	They confessed in pleading tones
O bleib, o geh mir nich fort,	"Oh stay, oh do not leave my side,
Bewahre der Heimat,	Do not renounce your homeland
Still blühendes Glück—	And this gently flowering happiness—"
Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen,	My longings, my delusions,
Es träumt sich zurück.	I dream my way back.
Zauber der Ferne	The magical allure of the unknown
Warf in die Seele den Brand,	Sparked fire in my soul,

[105] Richard Wagner, *Das Rheingold, Vollständige Klavierauszug von Karl Klindworth*, (Mainz: B. Schott's Söhnen, 1861), 5.
[106] Stage directions read: "Die andern phantastisch um ihn gruppiert, zumeist vorgebeugten Hauptes, starr die Augen auf ihn gerichtet. Unbeweglich wie im Traum!" (Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt*, 110.)

Zauber des Tanzes	The enchantment of the dance
Lockte, ward Komödiant.	Lured me to play the fool.
Folgt ihr, der Wundersüssen	Led by her marvelous sweetness
Lernt unter Tränen küssen	I learned to kiss through tears

SOPRANE:
Ah!

FRITZ:

Rausch und Not	Intoxication and denial,
Wahn und Glück,	Illusions of happiness,
Ach, das ist Gauklers Geschick…	Ah, that is the jester's fate.
Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen	My longings, my delusions
Es träumt sich zurück,	They transport me away,
Zurück,	Away,
Zurück…	Away…[107]

As the song ends, Pierrot kneels down at Marietta's feet, and with this second overt gesture of submission, ends his mesmerizing hold over all present. In an unmistakable parallel to Beer-Hofmann's *Pierrot Hypnotiseur*, Korngold's Pierrot displays the power to hypnotize, but having spellbound his audience, renounces his power and is once again subject to the rejection (and in Marietta's case, ridicule) of the ostensible object of his affection.

The peculiar thing about this particular episode of hypnosis is that it seems entirely wrought by music. The brief, partial quotation of the Rhine theme sets a mystical tone. Following Pierrot's deferential assent to Marietta's request for a Rhine-song, he in turn assumes a surrealistic absolute power over his audience, his spell working over a brief interlude of rapidly ascending figures in the piano, clarinets, flute and piccolo. By the time this interlude has concluded, the company is entirely in Pierrot's power, to remain so until, and only until, he surrenders power back to Marietta. The song itself may be written in three-

[107] Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt*, 110-14. Translation is my own.

quarter time and meant to maintain the general character of "sentimental dance music,"[108] but Korngold's signature shifts of rhythm and tempo, to say nothing of the glacial pace at which the song begins and to which it eventually returns, hardly make this a waltz in of Viennese character, though the oblique reference to the city and its subservience to German tradition becomes increasingly pronounced as the enraptured troupe are held captive by the implied mystical powers of the distant Rhine.

Further compounding the filigreed irony is the ecstatic outburst from a group of offstage sopranos just at the moment of the song's climax; a moment which, if it were not so seamlessly integrated into the song's melodic line, would lend itself to broad parody. There is nothing overtly grotesque about this song, as Korngold's ravishing melodic writing is tastefully and judiciously accompanied (always excepting those extraneous sopranos), yet the entire tableau hints at decadent grandiloquence. As previously mentioned, Korngold, though fond of commanding immense forces in the pit, explicitly avoided extravagant orchestration unless there was a specific dramatic impetus for it; an un-texted twelve-bar vocalise from an offstage chorus of sopranos, right as the aria reaches its climax, seems excessive by anyone's standards unless it is dramatically justified. This seems particularly true when one considers that this passage, occurring ostensibly at a moment in which emotion surpasses the limitations of text, could easily be taken over by the orchestra without any damage done to the

[108] Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt*, 110.

song's structural integrity;[109] in the context of the opera, however, the sopranos are dramatically essential specifically *because* their entrance is so obviously unnecessary.

Particularly given the otherwise judicious use of exceptionally large musical forces, this outburst strongly suggests that Korngold has deployed it as a self-conscious dramatic device; it is almost as though, having enraptured the company with his mystical melodies of the Rhineland, Pierrot has worked his audience into a state of sensual excitement so intense that it must climax in an orgasmic exclamation, wryly depicted by the disembodied sopranos exulting in a melodic line that moves steadily upwards, lingers for a moment or two on the top note, and then gradually releases downward, emitting a little sigh as it dies away.[110]

[109] In stand-alone recordings or concert presentations of the Pierrot-Lied, this is exactly how the soprano part tends to be handled, with no apparent loss to the inherent beauty of the vocal line.
[110] Without reading too literal a connection between the composition and the composer's biography, the temptation to see a mild parody of the father's "sacred Art"-oriented conservatism in the son's expressly more progressive writing is almost irresistible, remembering that although Korngold the elder played a role in the creation of the libretto, he had absolutely no role in the writing of the music, and could not have vetoed instances of melodic or harmonic irony even if he had detected them.

Example 3: The ecstatic soprano outburst at the climax of the Pierrot-Lied, an ironic parody of the worshipful cult of sacred German art.[111]

It is one of the more direct moments of self-deprecating musical wit in an opera that serves up its satire with such deadpan and inherently graceful musicality that it is all too often taken entirely at face value. It is in this vein that Korngold's music has been descried as "sacroporn",[112] or "shopsoiled goods from the Bayreuth bargain-basement";[113] such descriptions, toothsome as they are, fail to admit the possibility that music already so dense and multilayered might harbor shades of meaning beyond the obvious charms of sensuous melody. Moreover, they evidence that same pernicious trend that continues to run through

[111] Erich Wolfgang Korngold. *Die tote Stadt*, 113.
[112] Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 4, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 550.
[113] Robin Holloway, "The Beautiful and the Banned", *The Musical Times* 134, (1993): 404.

Korngold's reception history, that is to say, the automatic assumption that the depoliticized child prodigy never grew up and was certainly incapable of taking himself anything less than seriously.

It would be a different matter if Pierrot's musically orgiastic tableau resulted in a kind of ecstatic transfiguration of all present; then we might well be in the presence of some kind of third-rate twentieth-century Wagnerian forgery, in which the power of music alone is enough to produce an alchemical reaction in the human soul, turning a heart of base metal into a golden one. But alas for Pierrot and his comrades, the song is just one more delusion, and when it ends, all is as it was before the music began. Nothing has changed, nothing has been achieved; Pierrot cannot retrieve his lost happiness, Marietta will go on teasing and entrapping her sexual prey with heartless abandon, and no amount of self-delusion will bring back Paul's dead Marie.

It is worth noting that both the Lautenlied and the Pierrot-Lied, twin peaks of the opera's deliberate and self-aware nostalgia, are interrupted by harsh exclamations from Marietta, the embodiment of life and crude reality. Having been, as it were, medicated by melody, audience and onstage characters alike are apt to find these interjections most unpleasant; this is a deliberate musical and dramatic device, as the shrill voice of reality is needed in order to disrupt the beautiful but ultimately destructive fantasies that may have arisen in both

groups as a result of the bewitching power of nostalgic melody.

Example 4: Following the final refrain of the Lautenlied, sung by Paul and Marietta together in close harmony, a ten-bar miniature postlude seems to extend the song's hypnotic effect indefinitely, until Marietta commits the first of several symbolic sacrileges against the past, interrupting the final cadence of the dying melody before it has faded away.[114]

[114] Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt*, 40-41.

Example 5: As the repeated final word of the Pierrot-Lied, "zurück" dies away (*morendo*, as notated in the score), and Pierrot himself surrenders his magical-musical power and himself at Marietta's feet, she once again disrupts a sweet, moribund melody, this time with a highly chromatic, extraordinarily ominous passage in which she grants the pathetic Pierrot permission to kiss her. Significantly, on the word "küssen", the strings jump into a higher register, frantically quivering as if to suggest the imminent danger brought about by the clash of past and present.[115]

In an apparent musical parable for Vienna, Marietta's raw, coarse, often insincere *Lebenslust* is destined to be at odds with the elegant, if anxiously retrospective *Weltschmerz* implied first by the Lautenlied, with its morose and fatalistic text anticipating the lovers' separation by forces as yet unknown, and secondly by the Pierrot-Lied, in which the speaker obsesses over two lost ideals simultaneously: callow youth spent in a far-off homeland, and disappointed, long-lost love, both of which have been mythologized by the distance of time and space. Marietta's interjections may be harsh and jarring, and she herself may be common and even

[115] Ibid., 114.

vulgar, but she boasts one irrefutable claim over the morbid nostalgia of Paul's self-created religion, and that is that she is wholly and undeniably *alive*; though she is certainly callous and superficial, she may at least boast that she does not actively seek out destruction and decay, as Paul does.

If, however, the opera were to send the message that any kind of life, no matter how tawdry, was better than no life at all, we might presume that Paul would never have strangled Marietta at the climax of his nightmare, or at any rate that he would abandon himself entirely to sensual pleasures upon awakening. In the end, he rejects both stagnant and ruinous *Weltschmerz* by abandoning the Temple of the Past (and indeed, the dead city as a whole), as well as the caprices of the most decadent form of *Lebenslust* embodied by Marietta.

None of the above would be possible without the all-important dream structure, which is so potent because it sets up a unique relationship between the audience and the *Die tote Stadt*'s protagonist. Except for a few minutes at the very beginning of Act I, consisting of the expository conversation between Frank and Brigitte, Paul is omnipresent up until the opera's conclusion. We, the audience, experience everything after Frank and Brigitte's ipso facto prologue exclusively from Paul's point-of-view; Paul becomes our avatar in the world of the opera, and we are incapable of understanding the action in any other context. There is no dramatic irony possible in the opera because the plot essentially takes on the character of a first-person narrative, and we are therefore incapable of experiencing or understanding anything before our onstage representative

experiences it or understands it.[116] We awaken from the nightmare vision at the same time as Paul, and also at the same time as Paul, realize that we have in fact been dreaming all along.

It is this structure that enables Korngold to perpetrate his ultimate act of rebellion—the rejection of the longstanding Austro-German culture of destruction and death-worship, while simultaneously questioning the wisdom of well as the Modernist policy of negation and disavowal of the past. Realizing at last the inherent hazards presented to himself and others through his obsession with the past, and freed from his deprivation-born murderous fixation on the raw, pulsating life represented by Marietta, Paul is finally able to let the melody of the Lautenlied, musical shorthand for the idealized past, die its natural death and come to a conclusive end. This apotheosis does not constitute a refutation of the power and authority of all that is dead and gone, but rather a peaceful and respectful leave-taking, in which all debts to the past are acknowledged and then forgiven. As Cheng remarks, "In presenting Paul's escape from the opera's diegetic realms as a ritual of mourning and healing, Korngold's narrative arguably conveyed to its early audiences the ideological perils as well as the revitalizing powers of musical spectacle in the wake of cultural fallout."[117] In actively choosing to struggle with life, an infinitely more formidable foe than death, Paul renounces his own obsession with the latter, as well as the dictates of a society (Bruges standing in for Vienna) that propagate and cultivate such an

[116] I use the term "dramatic irony" in the sense that the audience is informed of a character's circumstance before the character him or herself is aware of it; such a circumstance is therefore not possible when the audience's point of view is limited to that of a single character.
[117] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 119.

obsession. In yet another act of subversion, Korngold discreetly compels the audience, and by extension, society, to follow Paul's lead; having done just that for the better part of three acts, the audience, for all intents and purposes, has no choice.

We often assume that counterculture must always consist of a minority movement that follows a scorched-earth policy in the attempt to rid the current establishment of its various evils; most of the time, the counterculture manifests as either radically liberal or radically conservative, with policies and ideology in direct conflict with the opposing majority seeking to maintain a peaceful status quo. However, in a time and place in which both the conservative and progressive poles of the intellectual continuum favor policies of destruction (in this case, a conservative policy of historically-informed self-destruction versus a progressive policy of destruction of the past), perhaps the most subversive act an artist-intellectual can perpetrate is the advocacy of a wholesale embrace of life over death, and of the peaceful coexistence of past, present and future in one balanced, creative whole. In such an environment, thankfully rare though it may be, radicals on either end of the spectrum become the status quo, while the centrist, by virtue of sheer moderation in all things, becomes the renegade; *Die tote Stadt* is the work of just such a peaceful dissident.

Chapter Four: *Auferstehn*

On 4 December, 1920, *Die tote Stadt* was given two simultaneous world premieres in Hamburg and Cologne, and was an astonishing instant success. Trying out the opera abroad was a decision reached in large part out of political pragmatism; Korngold's own city was full of his father's professional enemies and victims, most of whom would have liked nothing better than to see the wunderkind's first full-length stage work fail miserably. Thankfully, few such intrigues surrounded the German cities that competed for the honor of staging the work, and thus the twenty-three year old composer was able to maximize potential for good advance press by having a double-first night. Triumph seized, he returned home armed with overwhelmingly glowing out-of-town notices, having thus forestalled the venom of his father's adversaries. *Die tote Stadt* premiered in the city of its birth the following month, January 1921, where "Korngold scored the only unquestionable success of any composer during the five-year reign of Richard Strauss and Franz Schalk at the Vienna Staatsoper."[118]

Korngold's career achievements had never been so enviable as they were in the days following *Die tote Stadt*'s Viennese premiere. His work was simultaneously described in such presumably contradictory terms as Modern but not political, sumptuous but not decadent, timely but not topical. Of course, he was given the dubious distinction of being a *Volksblütmusiker*, an all-around homegrown Austrian composer without any apparent philosophical nonsense in the German style about him or his music. Giger comments, "Most other works

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[118] Andreas Giger, "A Matter of Principle: The Consequences for Korngold's Career," *Journal of Musicology* 16 (1998): 545.

were considered either too modern (such as Zemlinsky's *Der Zwerg* or Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten*) or too philosophical (such as Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten* or Schmidt's *Fredigundis*). These criticisms meant that the composers treated social problems symbolically and with sexual metaphors or focused on the conflict between mind [*Geist*] and feeling [*Gefühl*] in their work."[119] In light of all the symbolism and sexual metaphors running rampant throughout *Die tote Stadt*, it is rather extraordinary that Korngold escaped the criticisms leveled at the various composers Giger mentions; this, after all, was an opera replete with themes that would have been deeply relevant and familiar to its first audiences, as Germany and Austria both struggled to regain their balance in the wake of losing "the war to end all wars." William Cheng points out that

> The enthusiastic initial reception of *Die tote Stadt* in Austria and Germany can perhaps be attributed, at least in part, to the resonances between the opera's *mise-en-abyme* depictions of trauma and the post war conditions of the early 1920s. … Just as Paul must learn to abandon the false comforts of his fantasies, so audience members had to forego, at the end of each performance, their absorption in theatrics and return to face the dead cities and dead Maries that loomed outside the cozy confines of the opera house.[120]

Like Paul, this audience of disillusioned, grieving Austrians and Germans, robbed of their proud imperial-era identities, might well choose the cold but familiar comforts of death-worship; indeed, in light of events leading up to the next world war, one may argue that the majority of the population did just that. But Korngold's opera seems to suggest the adoption of the exact opposite approach: the dead Maries that Cheng references may have floated like an infernal host of specters above ancient Vienna, impossible to be ignored, and yet

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[119] Giger, "A Matter of Principle," 547.
[120] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 119-20.

Korngold insisted that they must not be allowed to interfere with life, lest further destruction should follow. Because this twentieth-century morality play was dressed in such rich musical material, however, the critical establishment could easily ignore *Die tote Stadt*'s societal implications and portray the opera as pure escapism offering nothing but a smorgasbord of sensual thrills.

Perhaps, even while the critics were praising Korngold to the skies and compounding his popular success, they were simultaneously invoking the old prejudices that continued to depict the composer as incapable of socio-political awareness, let alone commentary. Willam Cheng comments:

> Korngold's naïve, myth-shrouded image has historically served as what one might call a hermeneutical fail-safe for patrons and critics of *Die tote Stadt*. For it is unlikely that the opera – with its abundant symbols and timely themes of loss and trauma – was regarded as inherently problemless or aphilosophical by its contemporary audiences.[121]

It is entirely possible that if *Die tote Stadt* had been written by another composer, one unburdened with the image of a perpetually-innocent prodigy—or worse, a technically brilliant idiot savant—the opera might have been thrown into the same critical lion's den as the works of Zemlinsky, Strauss or Schreker from the same period that dared to soil the Viennese operatic stage with topical material.

In light of his later-life and posthumous reputation, it is worth noting that many of Vienna's radical avant-garde admired the young Korngold and thought *Die tote Stadt* to be a particularly fine piece of work, fully in keeping with the Modernist zeitgeist. One of his more prominent avant-garde proponents was Alban Berg, who might well have formed a professional association with

[121] Cheng, "Opera *en abyme*," 143.

Korngold at one time or another, were it not, once again, for the interference of the tyrannical Julius. Edwin Eisler, dramaturg at Graz opera house and a contemporary of both composers, recounted the following:

> Berg really admired Korngold, especially for his fabulous technical mastery. I think he admired *Die tote Stadt* for its all-pervading feeling of "Weltschmerz" and its remarkable orchestration. But his attempts to form an artistic friendship, to take the young composer under his "wing" as it were, were completely thwarted by Korngold's father, who I think was horrified at the thought that his son (who was around twenty at the time) would become infected in some way by Berg's ideas.[122]

In retrospect, it is a great pity that such an association was never formed, as, in addition to fruits such a relationship might have borne, it might also have spared Korngold some of the negative consequences of the adult composer's immediate association with his father in the public consciousness.

After *Die tote Stadt*, it did not take long for Korngold to begin to lose favor with Austrian critics, who sooner than later had to acknowledge that the composer was not, in fact, the problemless prodigy so easy to pigeonhole as a novel curiosity. Korngold's next opera, *Das Wunder der Heliane*, premiered in 1927, was so explicitly allegorical that it became impossible to argue that the composer was not hesitant to "abuse" the opera stage by philosophizing. Excepting the eponymous Heliane, the opera features a cast of characters known only by their most salient characteristics, i.e. the Stranger, the Ruler, and so on. It takes place in an unnamed, mythical autocracy and its plot revolves entirely around the miscarriage of justice by an absolute monarch who is unable to experience love. This was too abstruse for the majority of the public and most of the critics, and *Heliane* failed to make much of an impression.

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[122] Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 44.

Various other factors contributed to Korngold's rather swift fall from grace between 1922, (the year after *Die tote Stadt* premiered in Vienna and the end of the zenith of Korngold's combined critical and popular acclaim), and the 1938, when the Anschluss forced Korngold and his family to relocate to Hollywood for the foreseeable future. No longer seen as a child forced to bend to the whims of a stubborn and tyrannical parent, Korngold found himself increasingly guilty by association with his father in the latter's feuds and professional scandals, even to the extent that performers who had suffered the full force of Julius Korngold's contempt often refused to appear in Erich's operas by way of protest.[123] Julius' negative influence continued to be felt in Erich's relationship with his fellow composers. Despite having previously garnered positive attention from the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music), the younger Korngold found that in his own dealings with the group, his father's reputation preceded him. Giger comments,

> Julius Korngold's innumerable attacks against atonality and the Schoenberg circle, which controlled the Austrian chapter of the ISCM, did not help to establish a good working relationship between his son and the society. Although Erich tried to stay away from the hostilities, the ISCM began to associate him with the ideology of his father, to whom president Edward Dent referred as the most dangerous enemy of modern trends.[124]

This is a particularly unfortunate state of affairs given that Dent had been one of Erich Korngold's earliest and most vociferous champions in the years leading up to and comprising the First World War. But such was the ire Julius Korngold aroused that many of the critical and journalistic establishment simply could not forgive Erich for being his father's son; in the case of ISCM, as Giger goes on to

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[123] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 97.
[124] Giger, "A Matter of Principle," 561.

say, "[Erich's] dissociation with the prestigious society prevented him from belonging to the international elite."[125]

It would be unfair and inaccurate to lay all the blame for Korngold's professional decline on his father's doorstep; the composer himself made various career choices, many perhaps ill considered, without regard for his reputation in the eyes of both his peers and his public. He cherished a lifelong affection for the operettas of Johann Strauss, Jr., and continued to adapt and present them, regardless of the admonitions of his wife and other close associates who rightly predicted that public association of Korngold with the Waltz King would result in critical scorn for the former's own compositions. Ever the stubborn optimist, Korngold took on the commissions partially because they provided a steady source of income but also because he simply found them to be "great fun."[126] Korngold's adaptations of light opera, coupled with the failure of his own *Heliane*, may have inspired his decision to write a more middle-brow opera, resulting in the disastrously outdated melodrama *Die Kathrin*, all but ignored when it first premiered in 1937 on the eve of Austria's political unification with Germany. Korngold's work with Max Reinhardt in the mid-1930s led to his first Hollywood commission, to adapt Mendelssohn's score to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Reinhardt's 1935 film adaptation of his own stage production. This commission won the composer the esteem of the American film industry, as well as provided him with a place to go when the Anschluss forced him and his family into exile; in terms of Korngold's career as a serious composer, however,

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[125] Ibid., 562.
[126] Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 100.

his long association with Warner Brothers drove the very last nail in the composer's professional coffin. Steinberg elaborates:

> Korngold's emigration to the United States and his composition of film music produced his 'double exile'. In Los Angeles, fellow émigré composer Ernst Toch quipped maliciously, 'Korngold has always composed for Warner Brothers, only he was at first unaware of the fact.' This view informs contemporary analyses as well."[127]

Though Toch's spiteful viewpoint did in fact become common currency in describing Korngold in the latter days of his career, and to a great extent continues to this day, particularly in the critical and academic communities, his work has undergone extensive positive reevaluation, dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s, a trend which to date shows no signs of abating.

The presently emerging Korngold renaissance has taken root slowly over the past several decades, but its growth has been consistent and steady. The primary sphere of activity has been in Korngold's adopted country of the United States, where Frank Corsaro's production of *Die tote Stadt*, staged at New York City Opera in 1975, eighteen years after its composer's death, sparked a renewal of interest in Korngold's works outside of his body of film scores, most of which maintained continuous popularity with aficionados of that genre, even while offending the sensibilities of a critical establishment that only recently has been able to reconcile film composition with serious artistic achievement. Beverly Sills, NYCO prima donna *par excellence,* helped perpetuate the success of Corsaro's production by reintroducing the practice of singing "Glück das mir verblieb" as a virtuoso concert solo. In Korngold's heyday the piece had been a favorite vehicle

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[127] Steinberg, "The Politics and Aesthetics," 644.

of the famously sensuous Maria Jeritza, originator of the dual role of Marie/Marietta, as well as Lotte Lehman, one of Jeritza's main rivals. The Corsaro staging of *Die tote Stadt*, together with the 1975 Erich Leinsdorf/Münchener Rundfunkorchester full recording of the opera with Carol Neblett and Rene Kollo,[128] breathed new life into German opera's "last hit tune" and has since come into favor with some of the most prominent artists of the present-day operatic milieu, including Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, Barbara Hendricks and Anne-Sofie von Otter; the piece has become something of a musical calling-card for Renée Fleming, whose various concert performances of the song constitute a large part of her Internet presence on social media websites such as YouTube. To a slightly lesser extent, a similar trend has arisen among leading baritones who have chosen to adopt "Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen" as a concert piece, after Hermann Prey (Pierrot in the Leinsdorf recording) popularized the practice; notable recent interpreters include Thomas Hampson and Gerald Finley.

Korngold's popularity with leading artists has naturally led to an increased presence of *Die tote Stadt* on the international opera scene. To the work's frequent detriment, however, its resurgence in popularity has coincided with the rise of *Regietheater*, in which the stage director's conceptualization—or more often, re-conceptualization—of the opera often results in willful misinterpretation of its message. Moreover, stage directors in the postmodern

[128] Until recently the only commercially available recording of the opera in its entirety, Leinsdorf's interpretation remains the gold standard of full performances of *Die tote Stadt* yet committed to disc.

age, though perhaps drawn to the opera for the beauty of its music and outsized dramatic possibilities, feel compelled to "correct" Korngold's inherent optimism, as if he couldn't possibly have really *meant* the opera to end on a hopeful note. Less than a decade after Corsaro's production in New York, director Götz Friedrich's 1983 production for Deutsche Oper Berlin chose to revise *Die tote Stadt* to directly oppose the message of life conquering death. Matthew Rye explains:

> Friedrich's conception of the plot is a pessimistic one – a valid reinterpretation of the drama, I suppose, but slightly at odds with the musically glowing ending. Not only does Paul murder his friend Frank in their argument in the second act (the canal provides a convenient repository for the body), but as the curtain closes on the last act as – conventionally – Paul walks off into the sunset of a new life freed from his morbid obsession with his dead wife, here he is seen just to be turning a pistol to himself."[129]

Other than these few changes to the plot, Friedrich's concept for the production is fairly straightforward, even cleverly economical;[130] alas, the one major change he makes serves to undo the *raison d'être* of the entire opera. It's no great matter to kill off Frank in the second act—after all, he'll be restored to life in the third just as will Marietta—indeed the worst it can do is lessen the shock value of Marietta's murder later on, as the audience will have already been warned that Paul's state of mental imbalance extends to the capacity to murder. By suggesting Paul's imminent suicide, the entire opera becomes an extended manifestation of nihilism, overblown and grotesque in its necessarily pointless

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[129] Matthew Rye, "Raising the Dead: Die tote Stadt by Korngold," *The Musical Times* 137, (1996): 33.

[130] For example, the wordless outburst with which offstage sopranos are meant to punctuate the Pierrot-Lied is instead sung by the troupe, still enraptured by the melody. This alteration saves bother with the extra singers but does not change the fundamental dramatic point of the exclamation.

excesses. Also, from a purely dramatic standpoint, the image of the tenor James King, in costume as Paul, seated in his armchair, staring at the pistol held in his trembling hand, is completely out of character of the music that closes the opera, in which the last chords of the Lautenlied are finally allowed to play out to their conclusion, granting resolution and absolution through a serene perfect authentic cadence. Cathartic release in the music plays against completely undecided action; because Paul never actually holds the gun or reaches for the trigger in such a way that we are even partially sure that he is about to end it all, the effect is confusing at best and ridiculous at worst.

Still, Friedrich's production seems perfectly logical when contrasted with Inga Levant's 2001 production for Strasbourg's Opéra du Rhin, which adopts so wantonly revisionist a tone as to imply mockery of the entire opera; indeed, one wonders why Ms. Levant chose to stage the opera at all, if she found it so completely lacking in fundamental merit. At its best, *Regietheater* uses a directorial concept to challenge audience assumptions about a particular stage work, and shed new light on familiar material, provoking both thought and feeling in the process.[131] At its worst, the movement grants free license to the stage director to use as many outlandish technical tricks as possible, stretch the

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[131] Ben Winters notes, "One of the most popular approaches among amongst revivals of the later twentieth and twenty-first centuries (though now seemingly on the wane) is to make specific connections between *Die tote Stadt* and Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 film, *Vertigo.* … For anyone familiar with [the film] and its sources, the narrative parallels that motivate the linking of Marietta with the character of Madeleine are admittedly obvious." (See Winters, "Strangling Blondes," 55.) While this approach imposes a concept on the opera, it does so constructively, insofar as the audience is more likely to be familiar with *Vertigo* than either *Die tote Stadt* or *Bruges-la-morte*; thus, they are more likely to both follow the opera's action and to cross-reference it to their own experiences, either directly or indirectly. Alas, like many good but overused ideas, the *Vertigo* concept has now become a something of a cliché.

limits of taste, and to shock or discomfit the audience simply because one can, often spending the whole of a ludicrously inflated budget in the process. Levant's staging falls firmly into the latter category. Among the production's many distracting, inscrutably-reasoned gimmicks are a group of stylized nuns who disrobe halfway through the Pierrot-Lied to reveal pole-dancer costumes beneath their habits; a Paul so blatantly insane (his makeup and costume suggest the Hunchback of Notre Dame, an impression not helped by heavy eye-makeup and the constant presence of a doll-sized effigy of Marie, to which he confides all his anxieties) that one wonders why Brigitte hasn't long since called the authorities for fear of her own safety; a Frank who gropes Brigitte during her monologue in Act I and makes an unexpected appearance as a devil-cum-cleric in Act II, and a troupe of players who resemble an unholy exchange program between the casts of the Broadway musical *Rent* and the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Surely the dual *pièces de résistance* in this rhapsody of willful misinterpretation are a chubby pre-teen boy—meant to represent the child Korngold—who appears out of thin air within the Temple of the Past in order to accompany the Lautenlied in Act I, and the retooled ending, in which, upon finishing the line "Hier gibt es kein Auferstehn", Paul turns and fatally stabs himself, stumbling upstage just far enough to douse a waiting doorway marked "NO EXIT" in a downpour of his own blood as he slumps down in death.

In contrast to the Friedrich production, this combination of suicide and transcendent harmonic resolution does work on some level—after all, what is more final than death? However Levant's gesture is so conspicuous in its

subversion of the libretto and score—complete with self-congratulatory references to Sartre and other writers to whose pessimistic aesthetic she implies Korngold ought to have adhered—that the calm resolution of the final measures juxtaposed with the bloody sight of Paul's lifeless body imply a cynicism completely incompatible with the composer's own ethos. Thankfully, not every production of *Die tote Stadt* staged in recent decades openly distrust the composer to make his own artistic choices; many have seen fit not to tamper with the ending or excessively alter plot points in order to suit a director's vision incompatible with the themes of the opera. On the whole, however, it would appear that the Korngold's reputation as a blissfully ignorant overgrown prodigy dogs him even into the twentieth-first century; one is hard pressed to think of another stage composer whose works are routinely edited with such freehanded condescension.

Insofar as it is possible to be both Modern and optimistic Korngold is so—through *Die tote Stadt* he demonstrates a willingness to embrace the future, but not at the expense of discarding the lessons of the past. Tonality is no longer considered a dirty word by innovative composers of new music, the age in which film composers were automatically tainted by association with the nascent art form has more or less come to a close, and the creation of music that pleases both the connoisseur and the neophyte no longer the cardinal sin it was considered in the past century; and yet, for all these factors and with all his early successes, Korngold still lies somewhere on the periphery of the twentieth-century Western cannon. Until both the public and the critical establishment are willing to

concede to him full responsibility for his own compositions and their underlying philosophies, however, the periphery is exactly where Korngold is doomed to stay.

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