

Placing Korngold

Aesthetic Trends in Art Music during the Twentieth-Century

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Erich Wolfgang Korngold was born in 1897, in Vienna. The second son of a high-ranking music critic, Julius Korngold a music critic with the Viennese newspaper *Die Freie Presse*, Erich's prodigious musical talent placed him and his family at the centre of high art society, when a parallel avant-garde society of cabaret, film and small theatre was also growing in popularity and prestige. Both culture societies expressed disquiet over the future of their cultural heritage. The means of their expression would prove indicative of the where the fissures within that culture lay.

Korngold's life spanned the two World Wars which proved for some to be an undeniable force for radical change to their artistic idiom. Composers such as Schoenberg, Webern, Hindemith and Krenek became absorbed in creating and promoting new tonalities which could, they argued, be aligned with older traditions. Korngold was one of many exceptions in that he remained true to his contemporary idiom, described by himself as an extension of natural evolutionary processes. Initially promoted by his father as the only truly natural use of tonality, Korngold's musical style is attributed equally to his unique character and to his musical guardians, Gustav Mahler, Alexander Zemlinsky and Richard Strauss. Erich never wavered from his belief that music should cope with the horrors of his time by serving to elevate the soul rather than drag it down. When being able to delineate creative development into early, middle and late styles was a still an officially recognised measure of the true artist, Korngold's musical style merely matured intact, essentially romantic, effusive, luxurious, and most significantly, harmonious.

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As a child prodigy, and with the endorsement of composers Mahler and Richard Strauss, conductors Walter and Nikisch and musicologist Hanslick, and the relentless advocacy provided by his father, Erich Korngold was expected to contribute and even perpetuate the Great Tradition and ongoing line of Great Viennese Composers which could be traced back to Haydn and Mozart. While still an adolescent, he was to be everything to all men: the successful, pure, modern and experimental synthesis of the high and middle idioms. He would provide the next generation and his elders with leadership in a culture which looked for leaders, the “great men” who revered the past and created the future in its image. The reception given to his early works confirmed this view although the critical fraternity¹, also expressed some doubts over firstly his ability to sustain the quality of his work into adulthood, and secondly the authenticity of his work.

The general ambivalence within musical society, demonstrated by the attitude of composers such as Schoenberg to the inherited tonal style, suggests some loss of confidence in the future of the Great Tradition. While Julius Korngold and his ilk were looking to preserve and renew the classical tradition, that tradition itself was becoming more populist. For example, in the early twentieth century, the music-going public believed that Johann Strauss’s *Die Fledermaus* was more quintessentially Viennese than Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*. From an official standpoint this was both a welcome and a dangerous trend against a symphonic tradition. In that hierarchical society, those who could most afford to commission orchestral forces defined what was valued as good music. Audiences who attested

¹ Ernest Newman. “The Problem of Erich Korngold” in *The Nation*. VolXI No 21. 24 August 1912. 767-8. Richard Aldrich. *Concert Life in New York. 1902-1923*. New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1941. Paul Bechert. “Korngold, Strauss and Others: ‘Subjective Criticism’” in *The Musical Times*. London, 1 August 1922. Vol 63. 547-9. Paul Bechert. “New Chamber Music and Instrumental Works” in *The Musical Times* Vol 64. 1 May 1923. 364. Paul Bechert. “Korngold’s New Quartet” in *The Musical Times*. Vol 65. 1 March 1924. 269-70. Paul Bechert, “Erich Korngold’s New Opera” in *The Musical Times*. Vol.69. 1 January 1928. 78-9. Max Kalbeck. “Erich W. Korngold’s *Violanta* und *Der Ring des Polykrates*” in *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, 11 April. Vienna: 1916. Hiram K. Moderwell. “Erich Korngold – Prodigy and Artist” in *The Harvard Musical Review*. 1913. 1 (10):7.

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in their numbers to the popularity of classical music compromised the claim such works had to being an expression of elitism.

The reception given to Korngold's 3rd opera, *Die tote Stadt* (1920), acknowledged as his greatest success by audiences and critics, strongly suggested that Korngold's position in the tradition, endorsed by an early biography², was secure. But in the 1930s, when he turned to making arrangements of operettas by Johann Strauss and others he was seen by high brow critics³ to be taking risks with his reputation. Although his craft was not in question, there was real nervousness that he dabbled in this material because he was not up to creating high art. Korngold's 4th opera, *Das Wunder der Heliane* (1927) composed in Wagnerian proportions, was treated with scepticism, compounded by a not unfounded suspicion that Korngold was benefiting undeservedly from the support of musicians of influence, such as his father. Korngold's move to Hollywood (1934), then the epitome of America's cultural desert, merely confirmed in the eyes of critics from both sides of the Atlantic⁴ who rated his music as superficial, sentimental and overblown balderdash, that Korngold was no longer worthy to be held up as the next Great Man in the classical tradition. Viewed as precocious rather than prodigious, inconsequentially luxurious, dated and disingenuous Korngold had betrayed them and therefore himself, his craft and his culture.

For a growing number of musicologists and critics, that role had been taken by Schoenberg, who at least since 1916 had been working towards the creation of a new music he traced back to Bach, an earlier and therefore more authentic German tradition than the lyric tradition of

² Hoffmann, R.S. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Wien: Stephenson. Moser L., 1922. Erich was 25 years old

³ Adolf Weissmann. *The Problems of Modern Music*. Tr M.M. Bozman, Intro E. Dent. London: Dent, 1925. Aldrich (*Concert Life in New York*) Bechert (1922). David Ewen (ed) "Erich Wolfgang Korngold. 1897 –" in *Composers of Today*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1934. 144-6.

⁴ Oscar Thompson. "Korngold, Eric (sic) Wolfgang" in *The International Encyclopedia of Music and Musicians*. New York: Dodd Mead, 1944. 949.1-2. Olin Downes. "Korngold's Quartet Given" in *New York Times*. 24 January 1935. 22.1 Ewen (*Composers of Today* 145) Q.L. Riemann. "Korngold, (Julius)" in *The Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* Ed Colles. London: New MacMillan, 1927. Vol III. 46-7.

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Mozart. At least some of Schoenberg's appeal was that he was creating something radically new, which was seen by many to be necessary in the straitened circumstances of European high culture between the Wars. Korngold's relatively unchanging style was seen as simply escapist rather than didactically revolutionary. As a mark of the popular and greater appeal accorded to Korngold in comparison with Schoenberg⁵ questions were raised about the real integrity of Erich's music.

Despite the doubts expressed in the years between the wars, the Great Tradition of the nineteenth century had almost as widespread support as did its revolution. However, the need for an hierarchy continued to be a symptom not only of the power granted to music but also of the danger perceived in independent exploration. While the imperative for new and challenging expression dominated and while Schoenberg's austerity captured some sympathy from across musical society, it was generally suspected by the powers that be, that Korngold's apparently voluntary and demonstrably pragmatic shift to Hollywood⁶ was proof that he had always belonged in the theatres of low middle, mass society.

Musicologists adopted the Schoenbergian perspective. To compose music that audiences found readily accessible was an indication that the composer lacked the kind of contemporary authenticity which in keeping with the popular and challenging insights of Darwin's theories of evolution, could only be appreciated in the future. Furthermore, these were times in which transparent allegiance to higher and purer causes was

⁵ "Die berühmtesten Oesterreicher. Das Ergebnis unsres Preisausschreibens" in *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*. 15 August 1930. Nr224. 4. The newspaper's readership returned Korngold 7th and Schoenberg 12th of twelve artists of Viennese citizenship. These twelve men included only four musicians. The most popular musicians, Richard Strauss and Max Reinhardt, were excluded on the grounds of their nationality. It would appear that Julius Korngold was responsible for the misrepresentation of the results which has persisted through the twentieth century. Julius placed Schoenberg equal with Korngold, naming them "the two greatest living composers". See Marian Poole *Placing Korngold*. MA Thesis University of Otago, 2004. Ch 3. 50-71.

⁶ During the American Great Depression, Hollywood was the fourth largest industry in USA and a significant employment Mecca for musicians.

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necessary if not vital. Schoenberg's exile to the USA in 1934 despite his prestigious position with the Berliner Hochschule, confirmed that the division in attitudes was not one between America and Europe but between different schools of thought within Western culture as a whole. During and after the Second World War and almost global economic depression America was seen to enjoy a youthful energy and exuberance denied a European continent that had endured physical and political ruin but still saw itself as the universal progenitor of real art.

For some, Korngold had always remained in a valid strand of the Great Tradition. Representatives of popular culture were generally dismissive of elitist principles. Between the wars in Vienna, Korngold's popularity in opera and operetta had made him important and his genius for audience appeal was described in the language of the Great Tradition. Similarly in Los Angeles, film reviewers used the same terminology to express the value they found in a somewhat mythologised and belittled lyricism. Hollywood's first production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, while not the masterpiece fit for Shakespeare's high-art stages, showed Warner Bros as well as America's music and film critics⁷ that Korngold's fundamental gift continued to be his ability to conjure up the Romantic nostalgia which had come to stand for his heritage. Margaret Harford⁸, Los Angeles art music critic, was perhaps not alone when she confessed her preference for lyricism over the aridity of the avant-garde. Even New York critics who remained cautious of Johann Strauss' appeal were grateful for his impact on their theatre's viability when art music concerts survived via a beneficent society.

⁷ Verna Arvey. "Composing for the Pictures by the Noted Austrian Master Erich Korngold" An interview in *The Etude Music Magazine*. January 1937. 15-6. Joseph O'Sullivan. "Current of Song Moves Story Along in *Give Us this Night*: Korngold shows how Screen Operetta can be Done" in *Motion Picture Herald*. 14 March 1936. 18. Bruno Ussher has published in G.D. Hamann's collection *Music in the Films, 1937-1941. Dr Bruno Ussher*. Los Angeles: Filming Press Today, 2001. James Francis Crow "Anthony Adverse: Reviews of Previews" in *Hollywood Citizen News*. 9 May 1936.

⁸ Margaret Hartford. "Evenings on the Roof: New Quartet Presents Works by Korngold and Toldi" in *Hollywood Citizen News*. Tuesday 4 January 1949. 13.

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By the 1950s and 1960s⁹, Vienna's and Los Angeles' critics seemed to agree that Korngold's appeal was a positive mark of his talent and that his synthesis presented something refreshingly new and a welcome return to beauty. While the ivory towers on either side of the Atlantic remained sceptical of film music's contribution to art, a new fraternity of film writers¹⁰ invited evaluation of the art in film music as an enjoyable combination of nineteenth-century symphonic idiom with twentieth-century harmonic flexibility.

From the 1970s analysis of Korngold's legacy in film music provided a resource for a disciplined approach to the genre. Film music musicologists¹¹ from Los Angeles and Vienna shared an enduring pride¹² in the Great Tradition. For largely sentimental reasons they initiated research into a music they regarded as unjustifiably neglected. At the same time, analysis of Schoenberg's legacy by art musicologists provided evidence of the genius in his constructions as well as an educational resource for the next generation. New Yorkers, Berliners and Schoenberg's ardent supporters¹³ took the view that both if and because the Great Tradition had found a comfortable home within the Hollywood

⁹ Schoenbrg died in 1951 and Korngold in 1957.

¹⁰ Anthony Thomas "Music by Erich Wolfgang Korngold" Album Review in *Films in Review*. March 1962. 177-8. Rudy Behlmer "Erich Wolfgang Korngold – Established some of the Film Music Basics Film Composers Now Ignore" in *Films in Review* No182, 1967. 86-100.

¹¹ Jodok Freyenfels. "Abendglanz im Jugendstil: Anmerkungen, Gedanken und Erinnerungen zur Biographie Erich Wolfgang Korngolds" in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. 133;628. 33 November 197. Roy Prendergast. *Film Music: A Neglected Art: A Critical Study of Music in Films*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1977. 39, 70, 253. Tony Thomas. *Film Score: The View from the Podium* San Diego. Tony Thomas, 1979.

¹² Joseph Marx. "Zur Erinnerung an Erich Wolfgang Korngold" in *Oesterreichische Musikzeitschrift* 22: July 1967. 424-5. Reprinted from *Neue Oesterreich* 14 October 1950.

¹³ Roger Sessions. "Problems and Issues Facing the Composer Today" in *Musical Quarterly*. No2 Vol46, 1960. 159-71. Wilhelm Pfannkuch. "Korngold, Julius Leopold" in *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart*. Ed Friedrich Blume. Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel, 1958. Band 7. 1629-32. Nicolas Slonimsky. *Music Since 1900*. London: Dent, 1938. Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt "Zur Problematik der Musikkritik" in *Arkiv für Musikwissenschaft*. Vol 19, 1952. 195-203. Ethan Mordden. "The Last Days of Romanticism" in *Opera in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978. 109-111.

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machine, Korngold had betrayed his early genius. Korngold's disconcerting eclecticism, in their view, bore no consistent resemblance to a pure art. Each group articulated its perspective with determination; the latter revealed a passionate sense of justice, and the former, a more moderate sense that an injustice had been done.

Corsaro's 1975 staging of *Die tote Stadt* appears to have been a catalyst for the critical fraternity. Corsaro employed minimalist staging with a filmed backdrop perhaps with the intention of representing a Berlin style film noir. While some New York critics were shocked by the association of high and low genres, others¹⁴ confessed that the pleasure they shared with the audience was due as much to music's sentiment as to its technical complexity. For them, the successful union between those qualities was worth the risk of breaking with formality. The use of projections provided a destabilising and provocative yet plausible connection between the Great Tradition and the music associated with the silver screen.

By the 1980s the idea that there could be a sole authority on creative value had lost currency. Intellectual curiosity turned to issues provoked by what was ultimately revealed as Eurocentricity. Musicological writers¹⁵ coming from several different perspectives began to argue against hierarchy and for a more relative approach to understanding musical experiences. The dividing lines between high and low and between European and non-European musics were becoming blurred. It was just

¹⁴Horst Kogler. "Reports: Ghent" in *Opera News* 34: 11 April 1970. 28. Barry Fantoni "Fields of Korngold" in *New Society* (UK). 2 August 1973. 288. Harold Schonberg. "City Opera 'Tote Stadt' Exploits Film Technique" in *The New York Times*, 3 April 1975. 44:1

¹⁵ John Guillory. "Making of the Modern Canon" in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Eds Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. Chicago : Chicago University Press, 1990. 233-49. Brendan Carroll. "Korngold, Erich Wolfgang" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Ed Stanley Sadie. London: MacMillan, 1980. Vol10. 210. Harold Truscott. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold's Concerto for Piano (Left Hand) in C Sharp Op17 (1924): An Analytical Essay*. Paisley, Scotland: Wilfion Books, 1985. Christopher Palmer. "Film Music" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Ed Stanley Sadie. London" MacMillan, 1980 Vol 6 548-57. Fred Steiner and Martin Marks. "film Music " in *The New Grove Dictionary of American Music* Ed Stanley Sadie. New York: MacMillan, 1986. Vol II, 118-125. Christopher Small. " On the Decline of Music" in *Music of the Common Togue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music*. New York: Riverun Press, 1987. Ch12.

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as inappropriate to rank musical theatre against a concerto as it was to judge Black African in terms of White European music. In the meantime, revival circuits for Korngold and others of a lost and victimised nineteenth-century tradition were seen on one hand to break down twentieth-century prejudices and on the other to verify Modernists' negative reactions to Romantic trivia. An analysis¹⁶ of Korngold's art music recognised the schizophrenic world in which Erich had worked. Cultural hegemony was recognised as a determinant of value which took its criteria from outside the materials of music. Korngold became the epitome of the forgotten Romantic hero and as such, the last of his line.

By the 1990s, music dictionaries¹⁷ which specialised in popular genres were published by university presses. Several factors were operating in the consideration of the Great Tradition's role in film and Schoenberg and Korngold were more generally seen as being equally valuable. Film music analysts¹⁸ confirmed that Korngold's scores provided performance difficulties and structural complexity commensurate with art music. Using complex Marxist language¹⁹, they argued that Korngold's film music could and should be approached from a musicological perspective. They proved that Korngold's Hollywood career was not reflection of a decline in his talents, but rather of the shift of aesthetic affiliations from Vienna to The Second Viennese School and, after

¹⁶ Truscott (*Korngold's Concerto for Piano*)

¹⁷ Peter Gammond. Ed. "Korngold, Erich Wolfgang" in *The Oxford Companion to Popular Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991. 321. Kurt Gänzl "Korngold, Erich Wolfgang" in *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994. 791.

¹⁸ Royal S. Brown. *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Kathryn Kalinak. *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1992. Anahid Kassabian *Hearing Film. Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music*. New York: Routledge, 2001. Robbert van der Lek "Concert Music as Reused Film Music: E.W. Korngold's Self-Arrangement" tr Mick Swithinbank in *Acta Musicologica LXVI/2* July-December 1994. 78-112

¹⁹ Marxist complexity were used by Theodor Adorno "On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening (1938) reprinted in Andrew Arato and Elke Gebhart *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* 1990. Hans Eisler. *Composing for the Films*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1947. Reprinted as Theodor Adorno and Hans Eisler. *Composing for the Films*. Intro Graham McCann. London: Atlantic Highlands, 1994.

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the war, from Europe to America. Their analyses of his scores used art music principles to reveal significant correlation between the materials in Korngold's two genres and therefore verified his creative integrity. The Great Tradition had once dominated film production aesthetics and still held significant public appeal.

Art musicologists²⁰, while recognising the value in Korngold's film-music, and forgetting the genre's perhaps vital interdependence, argued that the artistic value of film music depended on whether or not it could succeed autonomously, removed from the populist stigma associated with Hollywood. The dilemma for art and film musicologists continued. Art-music biographers confessed their film-music leanings and held on to their distinctions between high and low cultures, but were prepared to discuss the dilemma of film composers who wanted to be associated with high art while gaining from pure entertainment. Film biographers, with less tradition to uphold, confessed their classical music leanings and credited Korngold's reputation in both art worlds without feeling any need to take account of modernist or Schoenbergian imperatives. Any compromise solution between these equally credible authorities who seemed almost determined to talk passed each other, meant that Korngold was best seen as a somewhat misplaced high-art film composer.

Critics²¹, occupying the no-man's-land, seemed bemused and confused. Their rationalisations foundered on dichotomies, of lifting a commercial product out of the trashcan, Korngold's position of being a conservatory-trained dean of Hollywood and the dominant yet

²⁰ William Dace. "Review of Robbert van der Lek. *Diegetic Music in Opera and Film: A Similarity between two Genres of Drama Analysed in Works by Erich Wolfgang Korngold*" in *The Music Review* Vol 53 No3 August 1992. 223-6. Suzanne Rode-Breyman *Between Two Worlds? Oder über die Streicherkammermusik eines Opern-und-Film-Komponisten: Kammermusik zwischen den Weltkriegen: Symposium 1994*. Wien: Doblinger, 1995. 198-213. John Mauceri. "The Music Which has no Name" in *Cue Sheet* Vol XII/2 April 1996. 7-12.

²¹ Tamar Witkin. "Book Review *The Composer in Hollywood* by Christopher Palmer" in *Musical Quarterly*. Summer 1991 Vol 75 No2. 218-9. Alex Ross. "A Serious Composer Lives Down Hollywood Fame" in *The New York Times* 26 November 1995. Vol 145. 2. Terry Teachout. "I heard it at the Movies. Popularity of Film Scores" in *Commentary* November 1996. David Mermelstein. "Maverick Comes to Mosey" in *The New York Times, Sunday* 4 May 1997. 17.

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unpalatable idiom of the Schoenberg triumvirate. They remained doubtful about the contemporary merits of Korngold's idiom while commending the bravery and perhaps the cavalier attitude of musicians who crossed taste boundaries.

These vying perspectives expose the irony but explain Korngold's personal desire to simply retrace his steps. He hoped to regain a reputation in a 1950s art music world when he already enjoyed sovereignty in the art world of film. The issues present at the start of Korngold's career had retained their currency.

Nevertheless, in the 1990s, while Korngold's dilemma remained unresolved, both sides accepted that Korngold's popularity was the means by which he had avoided oblivion. Although some questioned its value as an expression of contemporary culture, his music was heard in the concert hall as a welcome intrusion onto what was recognised as cultural hegemony.

For much of the twentieth century Korngold's place was seen as the one which had subsided. From being the art-music Wunderkind he moved into the position of operetta arranger, and then across the Atlantic and across the American continent to a new location and position as a Hollywood composer. His progress was generally regarded as a movement down from high to low art. Korngold's forays between high and low cultures across the cultural man-man's-land, were regarded as rather foolish and probably futile attempts to preserve his early high status. This interpretation was, by and large, governed by a particular perspective among an ascendant group of art-music power-brokers: that the Great Tradition of Western tonal symphonic music had reached an *impasse* during the First World War from which recovery was possible only through the avoidance of the apparently exhausted idiom of harmony. This perspective retained its validity at least partly because it met their need to control the high moral ground through the perhaps self-fulfilling belief that any value in popularity was limited. Apparently devoid of critical facility the general public, the masses, were readily seduced by

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trivia cynically employed by such industrial hegemonies as Hollywood. Meanwhile, acceptance of Viennese largesse declined in Hollywood firstly because retaining full orchestras became too expensive for the studios and secondly because popular sentiment sided with a growing ethno-musicological interest in America's indigenous and rural musics²². Finally, Korngold's return to Vienna in the late 1950s to what he thought fondly of as his audience, could not reverse the reality of a culture and a city in ruins. The promise of Korngold's early popular genius, to lead the power-brokers and to create a synthesis between the old and the new, was broken firstly when the musical elite distanced themselves from an harmonious future for their art and argued that Korngold's popularity was proof that he had lost his calling and secondly by historical events on both sides of the Atlantic.

By the end of the century, however, a different perspective was emerging. Writers were beginning to suggest that the Great Tradition had succeeded in renewing itself in a quite different way. The nineteenth-century Romantic tradition of emotional tonal symphonic music, opera and operetta had migrated to Hollywood where it continued to flourish in the genre of film music. From this perspective, Korngold had indeed fulfilled his promise, and his place, despite and because of his relocation, had not changed at all. According to this model, the dominant social formation in music is not the musicological and critical elite, but the music-loving public. In the nineteenth century the public had taken over the role of audience from the aristocratic elite through their collective discretionary spending. They populated the concert halls and the opera houses and thus determined the development of the canon, and allowed its viability to evolve through the cinema as well.

Where we place Korngold depends, therefore, upon which perspective we wish to take. Each is a model for continuity and renewal,

²² For Example: Aaron Copland's banjo accompaniment to the film "Of Mice and Men" and the anthologies of rural music collected by Charles Seeger and Ruth Crawford.

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and each reflects a significant and surely valid response to crucial events in twentieth-century Western society. Ultimately, the task of placing Korngold tells us as much about the musical world he inhabited as it does about the man himself.

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