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OPERA REVIEW

## OPERA REVIEW; A Plot Seems to Vanish Behind Screens and Slides

By PAUL GRIFFITHS

Erich Wolfgang Korngold's "Tote Stadt," which City Opera revived on Sunday, has something in common with the modern computer. There it is, up and running. Visions pass across the screen, this being a production of the opera in which slide projections and film are abundantly used, recalling the composer's later career in Hollywood. But how the thing works is unfathomable, and the original intentions behind it remain utterly mysterious.

Dealing with a plot and characters vaporous to the point of invisibility -- concerning a widower, Paul, who finds an image of his dead wife in the dancer Marietta -- Korngold produced music that spins on, rarely remembering for more than about 10 seconds where it is going, and almost never having a notion why it should be going anywhere in particular. There is a melodiousness the composer had learned from Richard Strauss, a glitter, too. But it is as if "Salomé," "Der Rosenkavalier," "Ariadne auf Naxos" and "Die Frau Ohne Schatten" had all been put into the blender. What comes out is cream of opera.

In 1975, when this production was new, there was probably some point in giving the work another chance. That was a time when the forgotten masters of Austro-German late Romanticism were being rediscovered, and Korngold might have been one of them. But now, when this repertory is far better known, it is very hard to be patient with Korngold and not be wishing, say, for Zemlinsky, or even Schreker.

This is not to fault the musical performance. George Manahan conducts the score with remarkable and commendable tenacity, and the orchestra plays well for him. If the music could mean anything, it would.

In the central role of Paul, John Horton Murray sings with superb strength and brings to his tenor an appropriate tone of agonized futility, a hopeless fervor. He even looks convincingly Flemish. Lauren Flanigan's acting skills are not much required by the role of Marietta. Mel Ulrich uses his cool bass appealingly in the Pierrot song. Others in the cast include Charles Robert Stephens as Paul's friend and Eugenie Grunewald as his housekeeper.

Photo: John Horton Murray as Paul, a widower grieving for his dead wife, in the New York City Opera production of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's "Tote Stadt." (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)