A Deliciously Decadent ‘Dead City’

By PETER G. DAVIS

Erich Wolfgang Korngold's 1920 opera "Die tote Stadt" ("The Dead City") is a perfect example of what use to be called "movie music" but in the very best sense—a luminous symphonic sound, luscious romantic themes and explicitly suggestive musical effects that instantly define time, place and dramatic gesture.

And why not? For Korngold spent the latter period of his creative life, the 1930’s and 40’s, as the dean of film composers. Between 1934 and 1947 he wrote 18 movie scores, two of which, "The Adventures of Robin Hood" and "Anthony Adverse," brought him Academy Awards.

Actually, "Die tote Stadt," which the City Opera is reviving Wednesday night, is a product of the 1920’s, when Korngold was the wunderkind of Vienna’s musical world. The City Opera's production will use films instead of the customary scenery and backdrops to capture the deliciously decadent, hallucinatory tone of the plot—a singularly appropriate piece of poetic justice considering Korngold's unusual double career.

The scene of the opera is the Belgian town of Bruge toward the end of the 19th century. The central character is Paul, a young man whose wife, Marie, has recently died. Paul now lives alone in a gloomy studio brooding over her portrait and a lock of her hair that he has preserved in a crystal box. One day, Paul encounters an amoral dancer, Marietta, who resembles Marie in every physical respect. He becomes obsessed with the girl and plunges into a weird fantasy life.

The portrait of his dead wife comes to life and she pleads with him to remain true to the memory of their love. But Paul only becomes more deeply involved in his tortured vision of Marietta until—in a moment of frenzy—he strangles her with the lock of Marie’s hair. (How they resemble each other exactly, he gasps over Marietta’s corpse.) The grisly deed wrenches Paul back to reality—it was all quite literally a dream and, to the opera’s smash-hit tune first heard in Act 1, he sings gratefully, "A dream has destroyed my dream," as he prepares to leave his "dead city," forget the past and build a new life. Exactly what that "new life" is going to be remains ambiguous. In Frank Corsaro's production for the City Opera there is reportedly little doubt that when Paul goes out the door he is intent on re-establishing a relationship with the real Marietta rather than the woman of his imagination.

Whatever else it may be, "Die tote Stadt" is a work of extraordinary poignancy, for Korngold was barely out of his teens and already a famous composer when he wrote the opera. Not only is the score astounding for its easy command of a complex post-romantic idiom, but for its success in conjuring up the perfect musical image to complement each lurid detail—"for a boy of 20 to be wise in the ways of necrophilic eroticism as he was in the latest techniques of early 20th-century composition is unsettling to say the least.

The music contains a little bit of everything in it. In 1920—Richard Strauss, Lehár, Puccini, Debussy—but Korngold makes it all work on his terms. Marietta’s famous barcarolle and the nostalgic Tanzlied are elegant examples of operetta kitsch at its most seductive, while the singing portrait and the duet between Paul and his friend Frank for the key to Marietta’s apartment are straight out of "Pulcinella Hofmann" but no less effective for that (the entire opera, in fact, owes a great deal to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s length). Echoes of Strauss are heard on almost every page: the quintet of Marietta’s companions clues the opera’s lush orchestral coloration would not have been possible without Strauss’s extension of Wagnerian chromaticism.

For these reasons alone Strauss must have been particularly nettled by the triumph of "Die tote Stadt" in Vienna. Not only that, Erich Korngold was the son of that city’s most influential music critic, Julius Korngold, and Strauss, who had just assumed joint directorship of the Vienna State Opera with the conductor Franz Schalk, had little choice but to stage a highly acclaimed new opera by the local young sensation if he wanted to keep the good side of the press. Despite all the typical