

A Marvelous Marietta

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NEW YORK — In the past 15 years Erich Wolfgang Korngold's concert music has enjoyed a renaissance in performance and on disc. So it's puzzling that his mystical, M-|ber-Romantic opera *Die tote Stadt* is still absent from most major opera houses.

Korngold is known primarily for his brassily exuberant Warner Bros. film scores, such as *The Sea Hawk* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, for which he won an Academy Award in 1938. Less widely known is his remarkable musical precocity as a child in Vienna. Korngold began composing at age 7, and by 17 he had written his first opera. His third opera, *Die tote Stadt* (*The Dead City*), written when he was 24, created an international sensation in 1920. Yet nearly as quickly as it had risen, the popularity of *Die tote Stadt* fell, and by the 1950s Korngold's greatest opera was largely forgotten.

Adapted from the Symbolist novel by Georges Rodenbach, the opera is set in the dark medieval city of Bruges, Belgium. Paul, who cannot get over the recent death of his beloved wife, Marie, meets the flirtatious dancer Marietta, his wife's exact double. Paul is deeply torn between his spiritual loyalty for his dead wife and his more earthy desires for the sensual Marietta. After an extended fantasy sequence, Paul realizes he must leave Bruges and start living his life anew without his obsessions with the dead.

The gloomy fin-de-siecle decadence of Rodenbach's novel found a brilliant exponent in Korngold, whose lush Romantic music fit the strange yet compelling story like a glove. Though the commedia dell'arte bits of Act II wear a little thin, Korngold's lustrous score abounds in inspired passages; the celebrated first-act showpiece, *GIM-|ck, das mir verblieb* (*Marietta's Lied*), became the *Nessun dorma* of its day. Once heard, the simple, arching melody is unforgettable; it is perhaps the most drop-dead-beautiful duet from a largely unknown opera. The poignant solo reprise at the end, when Paul decides to leave Bruges and the shrine to his dead wife and start life in another city, is heart-rending.

The fantasy sequences and general weirdness of *Die tote Stadt* almost beg for special effects. Yet the 1975 Frank Corsaro-Robert Chase production, revived this season at New York City Opera and heard Thursday night in all its multimedia excess, now seems chaotic and wildly overdone. A quarter of a century ago Korngold's fame was at a very low ebb, and there's an unavoidable sense of a production trying too hard to make a case for the opera. The filmed projections of Bruges' actual monastic buildings are a nice touch but quickly prove too much of a good thing. Garish, constantly changing scrim projections detract from the stage action, and the jumpy filmed excerpts merely induce motion sickness.

Even with the hyperkinetic visual barrage, Korngold's music and intimate story remained in the forefront. With a sterling cast, City Opera provided the requisite vocal firepower for this demanding music. At first blush, the gifted yet matronly Lauren Flanigan seems an odd choice for the role of Marietta, the erotic dancer. Yet Flanigan is such a superb actress and uninhibited stage presence that her cavorting and dancing about almost convince you that she is indeed the sexy, slinky woman who could lead Paul to his moral doom.

Vocally, Flanigan was superb. The high leaps of Korngold's brutal lines held no terrors for her, and that gorgeous Act I show-stopper had its full effect, beautifully sustained, reducing the audience to hushed silence. The charismatic American soprano is a rarity among modern opera singers in that she holds little back onstage, with a joy in performing that is infectious. Flanigan's brief, heel-kicking exit dance at the curtain call of Thursday's closing performance was delightful. (South Florida audiences will get the chance to hear and see Flanigan in February, when she makes her local debut in Florida Grand Opera's production of Marc Blitzstein's *Regina*.)

Decked out in spectacles, a receding hairline and a bad mustache, John Horton Murray as Paul at times seemed so faceless, it was as if a nebbishy Lincoln Center accountant had wandered onstage. Yet despite the caricatured get-up, Murray sang well and acted with understated dignity. Though clearly husbanding his resources for that final solo, the tenor made the heartache of Paul's farewell register with ardent feeling. Mezzo Lori-Kaye Miller was a rich-voiced Brigitta, and baritone Keith Phares provided a wonderfully Viennese rendering of Pierrot's Act II song.

The New York City Opera Orchestra can't quite summon up the opulence that Korngold's luxurious music demands -- how wonderful it would be to hear the Met Orchestra play this opera! Still, company music director George Manahan directed the tortuously difficult score with uncommon skill and sensitivity, and the musicians responded with intensity and commitment.

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