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MUSIC

## MUSIC; Must Sweet Always Yield To Sweat?

By BERNARD HOLLAND

"DIE TOTE STADT" got rough treatment from forward-looking commentators when it returned to the New York City Opera recently. Korngold's opera is certainly not "Tristan und Isolde" or even "Moses und Aron," but operating on its own modest scale, it remains a gracefully executed piece of stagecraft. Its music, though illustrative, is more than mere illustration. Its story balances fact with fantasy, and the use of an opera company within an opera company offers nice allusions to appearance and reality.

What troubles the heavier thinkers of the music world, I suspect, is that "Die Tote Stadt" goes down like ice cream. Its smooth, welcoming harmonic language -- like Richard Strauss on tranquilizers -- offers no resistance. "Where is the challenge?" its critics ask. Anything this accessible this quickly must have something wrong with it. Substance implies depths, and depths necessarily take time to plumb.

The calendar may also be an irritant. Korngold's opera dates from 1920. Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire" was already eight years old, Stravinsky's "Sacre du Printemps" seven. In science, as reflected in literature, art and music, the 20th century represented the march of progress: things evolved, grew, got better, smarter, purer. This tame and lovely little piece is like a misplaced sign on the road forward. Had "Die Tote Stadt" appeared 30 years earlier, it would not have elicited a peep from the avant-garde. Yesterday's delicacy becomes today's decadence.

For better or worse, the adjective "challenging" has become central to contemporary music criticism. Revolutionary activity in the worlds of harmony, style and format, stretching even to questions about what music really is, has taken the form of many gauntlets thrown down in front of the listener: this is my art, conceived in my way; I challenge you to understand it. This is the Beethovenian I-write-for-posterity syndrome carried to its (perhaps) logical conclusion. The burden of comprehensibility shifts from composer to audience.

Not that challenges can't be salutary. Playing across the plaza of Lincoln Center during the run of "Die Tote Stadt" was a Metropolitan Opera revival of Berg's "Lulu." Digging for "Lulu" can be rewarding and may even be necessary. Unlike Berg's first and more pungent opera, "Wozzeck," his second conceals a cool, removed and more calculated design: a world of horror reduced to geometry, in which characters and events advance to a central point and retreat from it in perfect symmetry. "Wozzeck" may in the end be the better opera, but its companion piece deserves the intellectual sweat we sacrifice to it.

Yet if challenge yields rewards, lack of challenge need not deny them. When composers either worked for noble houses or were self-employed, instant communication put bread on the table in a way that a

Webern canon never will. What could be more immediate than a Chopin waltz, and what more filled with craft and inspiration? The concept of "no pain, no gain" has moved from the gymnasium to the concert hall, where it may not necessarily belong.

The mild-mannered way of "Die Tote Stadt" does not keep it from some lovely moments. Pierrot's long and doleful aria in Act II was touchingly sung by Mel Ulrich in the performance I heard. The City Opera's much-improved orchestra did not get past a workmanlike level, but the luxurious instrumental touches that Korngold brings to the theater made themselves known.

Erich Wolfgang Korngold was one of those spectacular child prodigies in the manner of Mozart and Saint-Saëns. His prepubescent compositions were gushed over by Strauss, Mahler, Puccini and Sibelius. He was writing orchestral pieces as an early teenager, operas when he was 17. Conductors and intendants fought over the privilege of putting on "Die Tote Stadt." Its premiere had to be shared simultaneously by Hamburg and Cologne.

Korngold's second bout of fame came in Hollywood, where he wrote the film scores for saber rattlers like "Captain Blood," "The Sea Hawk" and "The Adventures of Robin Hood." Hitler did not drive Korngold to southern California. He was already there, having arrived at the invitation of Max Reinhardt some four years before the hardly hostile takeover of his native Austria in 1938. In later years, Korngold had second thoughts about his glamorous path and tried hard to recapture the serious qualities of his youth. He died in Hollywood in 1957.

MUSICOLOGY as currently practiced in Central Europe tries hard to blame America for degrading the talents of one of its own, much the way it turns up its nose at Kurt Weill's ventures into American musical comedy. The reasons, I suspect, go deeper than music and in both cases are false. Weill sought to be the master of the new world in front of him and did very well at it. Korngold's command of luscious orchestral sound and his easy melodiousness seemed destined for Hollywood from the start.

"Die Tote Stadt" may be the best of his early-period work, and I hope that current minders of the avant-garde do not hold a grudge against its history of huge success around the world. The opera virtually disappeared in the middle of the century, a victim, I suppose, of harder and tougher ways of musical theology.

But in recent decades, "Die Tote Stadt" has reappeared on the wave of a new Romanticism. The great majority of new composers have given us the slick, the self-indulgent and the pandering, but Korngold's piece retains a certain authenticity. It reminds us that ice cream can be beautiful. It depends on how you make it.

Photo: Lauren Flanigan in the New York City Opera production of "Die Tote Stadt." (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)