

Honoring the First-Rate of the Second Tier

By [FRED KIRSHNIT](#) | December 4, 2007

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If Richard Strauss's designation of himself as the "best of the second rate composers" is accurate, then what do we do with Erich Wolfgang Korngold? On Thursday, 50 years to the day after Korngold's demise, a group of former and current Metropolitan Opera instrumentalists presented an evening at the Bruno Walter Auditorium that suggested that we must continue to honor his memory.

Korngold wrote the Cello Concerto in 1946 for the Hollywood potboiler "Deception" with Bette Davis as a killer pianist, Claude Rains as her composer victim, and Paul Henreid as the love interest cellist. In the film, the concerto is only six minutes, most of which are spent in the rapid fugato section and a "Flight of the Bumblebee"-style cadenza for Henreid. For concert use, however, he expanded the work to double its celluloid size. Samuel Magill, who put together and headlined this program, played this alternately exciting and lovely piece about as well as anyone can.

Mr. Magill has a brilliant tone and remarkable dexterity, handling this showy work without pandering. He adopted a rather restrained approach to the more lyrical passages and perhaps could have employed a bit of portamento to give the cello's two song-like sections a Viennese flavor, but his straightforward interpretation was highly effective. Pianist Linda Hall had to mirror an entire orchestra and did so convincingly. Paul Wittgenstein was a minor performer from a major family who had a disproportionate influence on the music of the first half of the last century. After he lost his right arm in the Great War, he commissioned piano music for the left hand from Strauss, Reger, Schmidt, Britten, and, of course, Prokofiev and Ravel. Korngold wrote two works for Wittgenstein, a concerto and the work mounted this evening, the complex Suite for Piano Left Hand, Two Violins and Cello. The piece begins quite like the Ravel, with ominous rapid chords and an elongated solo for piano. The most striking movements are the grotesque waltz, the totentanz, and the section simply titled Lied, which presents the beautiful melody "Was du mir bist" with no embellishments.

Fiddlers Elmira Darvarova and Ann Lehmann joined for a wonderful realization of this most Viennese of works, imbued with that sort of rotting flowers nostalgia that Strauss referred to as "beautiful dirt." The foursome truly captured the unique mood of the piece, reminding one of another Korngold film score, the Austrian sections of "King's Row," where Vienna is remembered as a vibrant capital now living in the past. Ms. Hall was impressively dramatic and lyrical by turns and, unlike Wittgenstein, could turn her own pages.

The score of this exceptional piece is owned by the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and some pages of crabbed script were on display in the lobby. What a great service to not only house such collections — this particular one is that of Wittgenstein himself — but also to occasionally let the music see the light of day. The Morgan across town does this as well.

No memorial would be complete without Korngold's greatest hit, the haunting melody of Pierrot's Tanzlied from his opera "Die Tote Stadt," the work that catapulted the young composer onto the world's stage. Mr. Magill used the 1920 arrangement that Korngold fashioned for cello and piano as a loving tribute to an old soul caught in a young body, a 19th-century European trapped on a 20th-century continent, separated forever by oceans and dictators from his beloved world gone awry.

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A case can be made for nominating the Quintet for Piano and Strings of Johannes Brahms as the most beautiful in the entire chamber repertoire. Brahms himself would not have thought so, undoubtedly preferring the Mozart effort for the same combination of instruments, but it is exactly his reverence for the past that engendered this superb valedictory work. On Thursday evening, one of its best interpreters on the planet teamed with a fledgling group at the Rose Studio under the auspices of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center. David Shifrin is a master of this type of wistful clarinet playing and proved within just the first few measures of the opening Allegro that he is a profound shaper of phrases. His excellent performance came as no surprise; quite frankly, I would have been astounded to hear a less than outstanding rendition. His tone conveys just the right shade of nostalgia, just the proper hue of regret. Perhaps he could have done a little more with dynamic contrast in the Adagio, but this is more a matter of personal taste. Certainly for the first three movements, his playing was close to sublime.

What was indeed surprising was the delicious play of the young Escher String Quartet, only recently at the Manhattan School and now accepted into the bosom of the society as part of Chamber Music Two. In this most gorgeous of string writing, the aspirants — second violinist Wu Jie, violist Pierre LaPointe and cellist Andrew Janss — seemed right at home, and it was positively decadent to listen to something so ravishing as the sound of first violinist Adam Barnett-Hart. Though I had declined the wine the society serves at these soirees, I felt intoxicated through much of this performance.

There are two shows a night in this series and I attended the later one. This may have been a factor in the downturn of quality for the final movement, a Con Moto variation suite in the ancient Baroque style. It was the inclusion of these types of older forms that created trouble for Brahms in Vienna, even costing him his post at the philharmonic because he refused to program a significant amount of contemporary music, including, ironically, his own. Clearly Mr. Shifrin was tiring by this time, his elocution blurring as the minutes ticked away. But overall, this was still an enchanting performance.

A listener can easily attend concerts regularly for 20 years and never hear any of the B Flat Major Clarinet Quintet of Carl Maria von Weber, but parts of it were played on two separate occasions in New York last month. First, the musicians from the Simón Bolívar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela rather mysteriously performed the second movement of the piece followed by the first in Queens, and now Mr. Shifrin and friends intoned the fourth movement as a de facto encore for their recital. Unfortunately, this rendition was quite a shabby one; missed rhythms in the viola at the outset were a harbinger of slurs and gaffes to come. The clarinetist was in trouble more than once and my guess is that his lip had simply tired to the point of recalcitrance. A poor way to end such a fine effort in the Brahms, but there it is. By the way, if anyone out there knows of an upcoming performance of the third movement, please let me know. I would love to say that I have heard this entire piece live.