Korngold and his World

Or perhaps the title ‘Korngold and his World’ would be more appropriate – because this eminently un-pigeonholeable composer straddled the most unlikely of musical styles whilst working in the most contrasting of compositional spheres. What’s remarkable is that Korngold’s musical voice is consistent and unmistakable across the genres he worked in, and it’s a voice which fifty years on from his death remains, in the words of this composer’s biographer and long-time champion Jessica Duchen, ‘warm, tender, regretful, idealistic and fully human.’ ‘Korngold’, she continues, ‘had it all’.

If the conservatism of Korngold’s music critic father can be seen at all in his music then perhaps it’s in his harmonic language; they might not be atonal or overtly dissonant, but Korngold’s harmonies are riveting and highly romanticised. The opening bars of his fourth opera Das Wunder der Heliane (1927) constitute the immediate opening of a duet to another world, and as the score continues, Wagner, Puccini and Debussy are all recognisably present, alongside uncanny prophetic of the career of John Williams.

After visits to the USA in the early thirties Korngold was snapped up by Warner Brothers in 1934 (seven years after Heliane) with whom he signed a deal unprecedented for a world-renowned composer; a plethora of scores (and two Oscars) followed. Korngold was pioneering a new style of film music scoring that coloured the action on screen, whilst employing a cinematic answer to the Wagnerian concept of the leitmotif (a musical theme associated with a dramatic one). For the studio, he was proving one hell of a catch.

But Korngold was straddling two worlds. He was desperate to retain his concert and operatic presence in Europe and after the Second World War turned his back on the studios to concentrate on chamber and orchestral works, for which he plundered his dozens of film scores for thematic material. He returned to Vienna in 1947, but was unprepared for the musical climate that awaited him – styles in the city had moved on. His return was a failure, and he died ten years later in Hollywood, believing himself forgotten in Europe.

Join us and you’ll discover that Korngold’s world is all his own – and what an alluring world it is.
The Importance of Shostakovich

If last year’s Shostakovich centenary celebrations proved anything, it was that our appetite for the composer’s music is near inexhaustible. There’s a power and immediacy to Shostakovich’s scores. This is an involving, honest and distinctive voice – the symphonic voice, one might say, of the twentieth century.

Shostakovich’s life is talked about almost as much as his music is played, with disagreements and paradoxes at every turn. And it is easy to see why the discourse rages around his extraordinary catalogue of works: how could a man who was so profoundly depressed during his life produce the relentless flow of joyous ecstasy that is the final movement of the First Piano Concerto, for example?

The Fifth Symphony, a towering masterpiece in the composer’s catalogue, has attracted more than its fair share of commentary. Is the suggested suppression of the symphony’s climax intended to match that of the people? Or perhaps the work is more personal than that. There’s a quote in there from Bizet’s Carmen, a reference perhaps to the woman who had rejected Shostakovich in favour of a man of that name during the composer’s writing of the symphony. Is the violin’s two hundred and fifty times repeated note – ‘X’ – representing ‘me’ in the Russian system of notation – a desperate plea from Shostakovich that we recognise his personal trauma?

The Seventh Symphony’s statement is unequivocal and desperately powerful: a picture in sound of the suffering of the 3.2 million people trapped in Leningrad during the city’s blockade at the hands of the German army during the Second World War. This is music of immense power and devotion, and an indescribable live concert experience. But what exactly did the composer mean by his lengthy Boléro-like march – the relentlessness of the Nazis or the indefatigable spirit of the people of Leningrad?

In the end, the one important answer is staring us in the face. Yes, the music is about Shostakovich the man, his times, his city. But it’s also about us, whoever we are. It’s about love, survival and joy, and that’s why we’ll never tire of Shostakovich’s scores, Anti-West or anti-East! We can argue about it until the end of time – and so we should – but if we don’t recognise the humanity and joy in Shostakovich’s music, then we’ve really missed the point.
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To experience the opening bars of Das Wunder der Heliane is to be shown through a door to another world. Korngold takes us into a dreamlike land, its chronology and geographical co-ordinates unspecified, and the destinies of its loveless inhabitants uncertain. Korngold sculpts for this world an intoxicatingly ravishing score that seems to be heven from a new material. There’s mystery too in the opera’s very inception: the writer Hans Kallinck had apparently written his story Die Heilige with the intention that Korngold set it to music, but alas he never met the composer, nor did Korngold know of this when he stumbled upon the text by chance, deciding immediately that it would form the basis of his next opera. The composer regarded the resulting setting of The Miracle of Heliane – a psychological drama of sexual desire and repression – as amongst his most significant. In it he achieves an extraordinary synergy of dramatic and musical mysticism whilst gifting his singers with operatic moments that echo the finest from the pens of Strauss and Wagner. The arrival of Heliane’s world in London is long overdue.

Wednesday 21 November 2007 | 7.00pm
Korngold Das Wunder der Heliane
Sung in German with English surtitles

Royal Festival Hall
Vladimir Jurowski conductor
The performance will last for 3 hours and 30 minutes including two interludes.

Patricia Racette Heliane
Michael Hendrick Stranger
Andreas Schmidt Ruler
Ursula Hesse von den Steinen Messenger
Willard White Porter
Robert Tear Blind Judge
Andrew Kennedy Young Man

6.00pm – 6.30pm
FREE Royal Festival Hall Auditorium
The life and works of Erich Wolfgang Korngold, a talk by writer and Korngold biographer Jessica Duchen.

Vladimir Jurowski, Principal Conductor, London Philharmonic Orchestra © Richard Cannon