

North American Centennial of *Die tote Stadt*

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November 2021 marks the centennial anniversary of the first American performance of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's opera *Die tote Stadt*. Presented by the New York Metropolitan Opera Company, the production was not only its US premiere, but the first American performance of any of Korngold's stage works.¹ It also marked the return of the German language to Metropolitan productions since the US entered World War I in 1917, allowing audiences to hear *Die tote Stadt* as the composer originally conceived it. Additionally, the Moravian soprano Marie Jeritza made her New York debut in that same premiere, singing the role that Korngold had composed for her.

Less well-known is that both *Die tote Stadt*'s premiere and Jeritza's debut in New York were the realization of one man's ambitions, reaching back nearly a decade. Additionally, a city whose critics in the past had more often than not belittled – and at times even denigrated – the youthful composer's earlier works, instead seemed generally to warm to the music of his opera.

The Dead City

Korngold began composing *Die tote Stadt* in 1916, the same year his first two operas saw their successful world premieres in Munich. He had been searching for a new story suitable for an opera when his father, the well-known music critic Julius Korngold, by chance ran into the Viennese playwright Siegfried Trebitsch. A good friend of the elder Korngold, Trebitsch had many years before translated into German the theater piece *Le Mirage* by symbolist author Georges Rodenbach, and in 1913 had published his translation as *Das Trugbild* (The Mirage). Trebitsch suggested the play might be adapted as an opera. When the young composer later read the stage work he was immediately taken with it.

Le Mirage is an adaptation by Rodenbach himself of his earlier 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte*. The story concerns a man who mourns for his dead wife. One day he miraculously meets a woman on the street who could pass for his deceased beloved. He impulsively invites her to his house and seduces her. Filled with guilt, and angered by her sacrilegious handling of a braid of the wife's hair which he keeps in a case as a relic, he strangles the woman with the braid. The opera reworks the storyline to make most of the drama into a dream sequence, thereby softening the tone of Rodenbach's original, and ends with a feeling of hope for the protagonist.

Korngold began composing the music in 1916, but summons to military service around that same time eventually suspended the



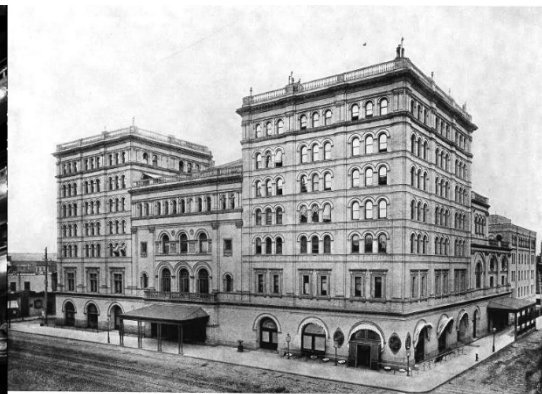
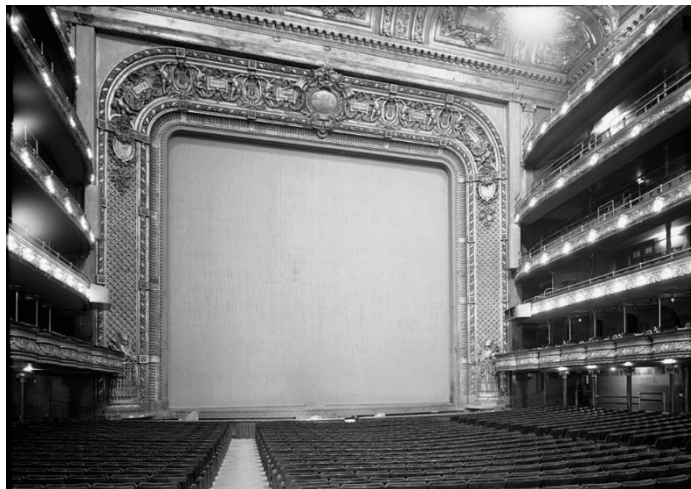
¹ Other Korngold stage works would not appear in North America for another six years: *Der Ring des Polykrates* (Feb 1927), *Der Schneemann* (May 1927), and *Violanta* (Nov 1927).

project. By 1918 up until the end of the War he composed little, and work on the opera ceased entirely. By the end of the year he had begun composing again in earnest, completing the draft of the opera the following year, and commencing orchestration.

In early February 1920 the Berlin office of the International News Service released a single, unassuming statement: “Erich Wolfgang Korngold is working on a grand opera entitled *The Dead City*.” This initial announcement seems to have been the only public reference in the US to the opera up to its premiere in December, and surely caught the attention of the powerful New York magnate Otto Kahn.

Otto Hermann Kahn (1867 – 1934) was President and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Metropolitan Opera from 1918 to 1931, but had been a major stockholder since 1903. He was an important patron of the theatrical arts and of contemporary music, showing an enthusiasm for Strauss, Ravel, Milhaud, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and others. Since 1916 Kahn had been urging the production of Korngold’s works.² By August 1919 Kahn was working to restore German opera at the Metropolitan, urging acquisition of rights to recent works by Strauss, Schreker and Korngold.^{3,4} When Korngold completed his opus one year later, plans were already in motion for the New York premiere of Korngold’s latest opera.

Korngold completed the full score of *Die tote Stadt* on 15 August 1920 when he was only 23 years of age. Brendan Carroll describes the immediate rush to secure rights to the premiere, with opera houses in Vienna, Hamburg and Cologne vying for the distinction.⁵ In the end the opera was given a rare double world-premiere on 4 December 1920 in Hamburg and Cologne, and soon after took the continent by storm. That same autumn the Metropolitan Opera also began negotiations for the exclusive rights to the North American premiere.



Metropolitan Opera House and stage ca. 1921.

² Matz, Mary Jane. *The Many Lives of Otto Kahn*. The Macmillan Company (New York), 1963. It is not clear if Kahn’s encouragements were limited only to operatic repertoire. The coincidence in the timing of his advocacy is perhaps noteworthy, since Korngold’s first operas were premiered in March 1916.

³ Collins, Theresa M. *Otto Kahn: Art Money, and Modern Time*. University of North Carolina Press (Chapel Hill, NC), 2002: 130.

⁴ Operas by German composers returned to the stage in 1920, but were performed in English; *Die tote Stadt* initiated the return of the German language.

⁵ Carroll, Brendan G. *The Last Prodigy*. Amadeus Press (Portland, OR), 1997.

Metropolitan Acquisitions

On 01 November 1920 Korngold signed an agreement with the Metropolitan in which – for five-hundred US dollars (US \$7,660.00 in 2021 dollars) – the opera company reserved the option for exclusive performing rights in both the US and Canada.⁶ According to the terms of the contract, if the Met chose to stage the work during its 1921-22 season, the opera company would have exclusive performance rights in North America through the end of April 1924. The contract was signed, and by April 1921 rumors of a Metropolitan production were flying on both sides of the Atlantic. One month later those rumors were confirmed.

Giulio Gatti-Casazza (1869 – 1940), General Manager of the Metropolitan from 1908 to 1935, made an excursion to Europe for the summer every year. His months abroad offered opportunity to scout out new operas and new artists to present in New York. Immediately preceding his departure each May, Gatti-Casazza gave a press conference to announce plans for the coming season. That particular May in 1921 his announcement spoke of the new productions *Le Roi d'Ys* (Lalo), *Snegourochka* (Rimsky-Korsakov), *Così fan tutte* (Mozart), *Loreley* (Alfredo Catalani), and “...*Die tote Stadt*, in German, libretto by Paul Schott, taken from *Bruges le Morte*, by Rodenbach, music by Erich Wolfgang Korngold.” Later in that same press release he noted the Met’s recent engagement “...of Mme. Marie Jeritza, of the Vienna Opera, a famous artist, who has scored great successes in some of the most important European theaters.”

At the time of the announcement Jeritza had been on the Metropolitan’s radar for nearly a decade. While traveling abroad in late 1912, Kahn attended the world premiere of Strauss’s opera *Ariadne auf Naxos* on 25 October 1912 at the Stuttgart Staatsoper in Germany. The female lead was the young but extremely promising soprano Maria Jeritza, then in the infancy of her career, and Kahn was suitably impressed. The War interrupted any plans to entice her into a US appearance, but by early May 1921 the Metropolitan had secured both the opera and the singer for whom it was composed.

Preparation

Gatti returned to New York City on 6 October 1921 from his usual summer abroad. Within days details regarding the production began appearing: Marie Jeritza will make her American debut in *Die tote Stadt*; the season’s first novelty will be *Die tote Stadt* during the first or second week of the season; the production will be conducted by Artur Bodanzky; and so forth. It was also rumored early on that the composer himself would visit the US to conduct his masterpiece, but this plan was never realized.

The full cast was finally announced on 7 November 1921: Korngold’s opera would be interpreted by Johannes Sembach as Paul; Jeritza as Marietta; Robert Leonhardt as Frank; Marion Telva as Brigitta; and George Meader as Victorin, as the principal singers. As late as 13 November, Sembach was still being advertised in New York papers for the role of Paul, yet he would never sing the part. In his review of the *Lohengrin* performance on 16 November, Henry E. Krehbiel noted in the *New York Tribune* that “Mr. Sembach appeared in the titular role in place of Mr. Harrold, who will create the tenor role in the new opera, *Die tote Stadt*, next Saturday afternoon, a part originally entrusted to Mr. Sembach.”⁷

⁶ This payment only reserved the right to perform the work; the contract allowed for additional payments if the opera was actually scheduled and performed.

⁷ Sembach had contracted diphtheria in December 1920, which caused him difficulties in maintaining his performance schedule for many months to follow. Presumably this was a factor in the last minute change.

Orville Harrold (1877 – 1933) was a native of Cowan, Indiana and began singing as a teenager. He started performing in operettas in New York City in 1906, and with the help of Oscar Hammerstein I, he branched out into opera in 1910. He spent the last six years of his career – from 1919 through 1924 – with the Metropolitan Opera. Though ostensibly a last minute decision, casting Harrold as Paul was apparently a wise choice: he would receive consistent praise for his excellent portrayal of the role.

The Premiere and Its Reception

Die tote Stadt was introduced to the New York public on Saturday, 19 November 1921 at a matinee performance. Specific details about the staging, particularly photos or images, are very limited, but the Met production did employ special effects to enhance its staging. What can be gleaned from reviews and other sources implies similarities with some recent 21st century performances with which we ourselves may be familiar today: trick lighting effects, gauze drops, transparent walls, and magic pictures. But use of effects invites potential mishap, and reports the following day tell of “unfortunate technical slips” at the close of the first act, and relate how “...most of the lights and some of the gauze misbehaved.” These technicalities did not prevent the opera from leaving a favorable impression, however, as the audience was noted in several reviews as giving the production a definite stamp of approval. Harrold and Jeritza reportedly enjoyed up to eight or nine curtain calls following each act.



The published reviews were mixed, however. Critics were inconsistent in their appraisals, sometimes bordering on near-contradiction. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reviewer observed “the boy [Korngold] knows how to write operatic music that is always apt and always colorful and tuneful,” and that “[Korngold] believes in melody and in straightforward lyric flow.” A second reviewer referred to “Mr. Korngold’s ear-splitting orchestral pranks.” W. J. Henderson wrote in the *New York Herald*, “this is an extraordinary score to have been written by a youth,” but then later in the same article complained that the music was too much, too long, and too heavily orchestrated. Still another reviewer wrote Korngold is “...a consummate master of orchestral idioms... but his score shows a lamentable paucity of original thoughts.” Praise on one hand, and criticism on the other. Even the libretto was alternatively praised (“the book is well-conceived, has dramatic value and is free of extraneous material”) and condemned (“the libretto is not a masterpiece – it is repellent, in fact”).

Despite all the diverging opinions, there were some commonalities. To one degree or another the critics all acknowledged Korngold’s mastery (“he can orchestrate as few contemporaries”; “he is a brilliant technician”), and though typically disdainful of the then-modern trends in dissonance, they generally admired his “skill of making his dissonances seem possible and effective, [fusing] them into something that seems the natural expression of his thought”. Critics also agreed on the quality of the music: “A

remarkable score...can be the only verdict after hearing Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* performed for the first time in America."⁸

Perhaps the one consistent criticism revolved around Korngold's writing for the voice. William Murray wrote that "the chief weakness...lies in [Korngold's] scoring for the human voice...all the singers engaged in yesterday's performance never achieved less than heroic effects." His and similar critiques are mitigated, however, when noting that "[Bodanzky] could not keep the orchestra quiet enough to permit all the voice music to be heard."⁹ Volume and power aside, the vocal parts were frequently described as exacting, uninterrupted, and ungrateful.

In the end, though, at least one New York critic graciously recognized his own place: "[*Die tote Stadt*'s] future here depends on the public, not on any critical estimate, and, with as much deference as possible to an editorial promulgation recently put forth, it is none of the critic's business whether a play or an opera is likely to be a success."¹⁰ The Metropolitan staged *Die tote Stadt* a total of eight times during the 1921-22 season, and a further four times the following season. The opera then disappeared from North American stages. Not until a chance meeting fifty years later would the opera find its way back to an American theater, and once again take the stage by storm.

We close this 2021 retrospective with a rather insightful observation published in *Musical America* at the close of 1921:

That there would be extremes of opinion with regard to "The Dead City" was to be expected, but irrespective of New York's final verdict, the Korngold work is of much more significance than ordinarily attached to a successful or unsuccessful novelty, because it is the one new lyric drama mounted in New York in several seasons that mirrors to any tangible extent the trend of contemporary opera. In subsequent novelties of the year, though several may transcend "The Dead City" in popular appeal, there will be well defined and familiar types – the styles of Mozart, Wagner, early Verdi, Massenet, and his confrere, Lalo: Catalani and Rimski-Korsakoff – all long since accepted into the operatic fold, and assigned more or less specific places there.

The Korngold work, if for no other reason, is notable for what is to be seen on the other side of the door which has been opened, if only a little, by its first representation at the Metropolitan Opera House. Beyond that partly opened door are the Schreker music-dramas, "Der Schatzgraber," "Irrelohe," "Die Gezeichneten"; Braunfel's "Die Vogel", Bittner's "Die Kohlaymerin," and Pfitzner's "Palestrina," in which, so we are told, modern teutonism in music finds more characteristic expression than is asserted in the eclecticism of young Korngold.

⁸ "Die tote Stadt Pleases New Yorkers", *Musical Courier* (New York), 24 Nov 1921: 5.

⁹ Henderson, W.J., "Jeritza Sensation as Singer and Dancer in Korngold's Opera *Die tote Stadt*." *New York Herald*, 20 Nov 1921: 17.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Appendix: Metropolitan Performances of Die tote Stadt**1921-22 Season**

19 Nov 1921 (Sat)	2:00 pm	Metropolitan Opera House
24 Nov 1921 (Thu)	8:15 pm	the Met
5 Dec 1921 (Mon)	8:15 pm	the Met
23 Dec 1921 (Fri)	8:15 pm	the Met
3 Jan 1922 (Tue)	8:00 pm	Brooklyn Academy of Music
11 Jan 1922 (Wed)	8:15 pm	the Met
28 Jan 1922 (Sat)	8:15 pm	the Met
28 Mar 1922 (Tue)	8:00 pm	Academy of Music, Philadelphia

1922-23 Season

29 Nov 1922 (Wed)	8:15 pm	the Met
9 Dec 1922 (Sat)	2:00 pm	the Met
28 Dec 1922 (Thu)	8:15 pm	the Met
26 Feb 1923 (Mon)	8:15 pm	the Met

METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE
OPENING NIGHT TOMORROW, 8:15.
TRAVIATA. Galli-Curci, Berat, Galli; Gigli, De Luca, Moranzoni.
WED. 7:45—LOHENGRIN, Easton, Matzenauer; Harrold, Whitehill, Blass, Leonhardt, Bodanzky.
THURS., 8:15—LUCIA. Galli-Curci, Egner; Gigli, Danise, Mardones, Bada, Papi.
FRI., 8:15—TOSCA. Farrar; Martinelli, Scotti, Malatesta, Ananian, Moranzoni.
SAT., 2 (First Time)—DIE TOTE STADT (The Dead City), Jeritza (debut), Telva; Sembach, Meader, Leonhardt, Laurenti, Bodanzky.
EVE., 8 (Pop. Prices)—FAUST. Easton, Ellis, Berat; Chamlee, De Luca, Rothler, Wolff.
THANKSGIVING DAY BUTTERFLY
MATINEE AT 2.
 Farrar, Fornia; Martinelli, Scotti, Moranzoni. Scat sale begins Tomorrow, 9 A. M.
BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC.
TUES., Nov. 15, at 8. CARMEN, Farrar, Sundelius, Galli; Martinelli, Mardones, Martino, Wolff, **HARDMAN PIANO USED.**

New York Times advert from 13 Nov 1921, still listing Johannes Sembach in the cast.

Photo credits:

Metropolitan Opera proscenium: Historic American Buildings Survey (Library of Congress)

Metropolitan Opera exterior: New York Public Library Collection

Harrold and Jeritza: Bain Collection (Library of Congress)