

The American Premiere of Korngold's *Symphony in F-Sharp*

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A brutal Arctic air mass made its way across the upper American Midwest in late January 1977. Between Thursday, January 27th and Sunday, January 30th wind gusted to 40 mph, dropping the already *minus* 11°F temperatures to a wind-chill of negative 64°F. That Friday snow was whipped around, forcing schools to close and blocking roads. Yet the weather did not deter the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra from its concert schedule that weekend, which included the American premiere of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Symphony in F-Sharp*, op. 40.

Korngold had composed his *Symphony* between 1947 and 1952, and first turned to Vladimir Golschmann and the St. Louis Symphony for its premiere. Golschmann and the SLSO had impressed Korngold in 1947 with their world premiere of the Violin Concerto, and may have initially scheduled the *Symphony*'s premiere.¹ Ultimately they did not perform the work. The world premiere was instead given in Europe by the Vienna Symphony Orchestra on October 17, 1954 under the direction of Harold Byrns.² It was followed by one performance in Graz in the spring of 1955 and another in Munich the fall of the same year. Beginning in the latter half of 1955, Korngold again tried to arrange an American premiere of the *Symphony*, but without success. A single performance in 1972 by the Munich Philharmonic conducted by Rudolf Kempe was the only other performance prior to that cold Wisconsin weekend in 1977.

Since 1968 the Milwaukee Symphony had been directed by Kenneth Schermerhorn, who was credited with bringing the orchestra to national prominence. In his twelve years with the MSO, he raised their quality and professionalism. He led them in their debut at Carnegie Hall, their first international tour, their first recording, and in their first performance of contemporary music.³ By the mid-1970s the Symphony had gained a reputation for giving premieres of contemporary works. During the 1976-77 season alone, the orchestra gave the first performances of Lester Trimble's *Panels VIII*, and Marga Richter's *Blackberry Vines and Winter Fruit*, in addition to Korngold's *Symphony*.

MILWAUKEE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
KENNETH SCHERMERHORN
Music Director
JAMES PAUL
Associate Conductor

PHILIPP HIRSHHORN
Violinist
Jan. 28, 11 A.M.
Jan. 29, 8:30 P.M.
Jan. 30, 7:30 P.M.

MOZART: "Abduction from the Seraglio" Overture
PROKOFIEV: Violin Concerto No. 2
KORNGOLD: *Symphony in F Sharp*
"AMERICAN PREMIERE"

Tickets — \$4.50 to \$12.00
PAC Box Office, Gimbel's & Sears
MATINEE DROP-IN
Thurs. Jan. 27, 2:00 P.M.
Gen. Adm. \$1

Performing Arts Center
For Reservations Phone 273-7121

Advertisement for the US-premiere of Korngold's *Symphony in F-Sharp*. [Source: Milwaukee Sentinel, Jan. 24, 1977.] Note the misspelling of Korngold's name – the error was corrected for the advertisement published on Jan. 28, 1977.

¹ Personal email from Brendan Carroll to the author, 9 Dec 2019.

² Despite reasonable critical reviews, the performance disappointed the composer significantly. See Carroll, Brendan. *The Last Prodigy*, pp. 346-8, 354-5.

³ <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/milwaukee-symphony-orchestra/>, accessed Nov. 16, 2019.

Schermerhorn's decision to program Korngold's *Symphony* was most likely several years in the making. In 1971 RCA had released *The Sea Hawk*, the first in its *Classic Film Scores* series, which opened the door for a renewed interest in Korngold's music. The following year RCA released the *Symphony in F-Sharp* performed by the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Rudolf Kempe. Then on New Year's Eve 1973 he married the opera soprano Carol Neblett. Just four months later the New York City Opera announced Neblett as the lead in their new production of Korngold's opera *Die tote Stadt*.⁴ If Schermerhorn was not previously familiar with Korngold's music, he surely had opportunity to become so. This culminated on Sunday, January 18, 1976 when he conducted the Milwaukee Symphony in a concert that included his wife singing two arias from *Die tote Stadt*.

The announcement of the first American concert performance of Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Symphony in F-Sharp* appeared on July 22, 1976 in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*. By that time the MSO had also arranged to participate in the Carnegie Hall Corporation's International Festival of Visiting Orchestras – then an annual event – as the same July announcement also noted “the orchestra then will take Korngold's symphony to New York City...for its first concert hearing there.”⁵ The Festival that season included 19 different orchestras, four of which were European. The Milwaukee Symphony was scheduled for its second Carnegie Hall appearance on Thursday, April 28, 1977 at 8 PM in the Main Hall.

The official US premiere of the F-sharp symphony took place on Friday, January 28, 1977, at 11:00 AM in the Orchestra's home venue, Uihlein Hall.⁶ The concert also included Mozart's Overture to *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and Prokofiev's *Violin Concerto #2 in g minor*, featuring guest violinist Philipp Hirshhorn. The premiere was part of the Friday Morning Coffee Prelude series, newly established for the 1976-77 season. The events in this series began at 10 AM, and included complimentary coffee and rolls, and an informal fashion show. A full symphony concert featuring the same program as that weekend's subscription concert was given at 11 AM, preceded at 10:30 by an informal lecture on the music to be played, presented by Schermerhorn.

Lawrence Johnson's review the next day did not have the dismissive quality of the many reviews of the *Violin Concerto* premiere three decades earlier, but it was not exactly glowing either. Though noting the bad weather probably deterred many from attending, he implied the programming was most likely responsible for the perhaps “...lowest [turnout] in Milwaukee Symphony history.” According to Johnson only a couple hundred attended, a mere ten percent of the capacity of the house. Despite Dimitri Mitropoulos' opinion in 1959 that Korngold's *Symphony* represented the ideal modern work, Johnson heard the work in 1977 as an unexpected echo of a dead, late Romanticism. “Without Bruckner, Strauss and Mahler, Korngold's *Symphony* would have been unthinkable,” he wrote. He also heard reflections of Stravinsky, Prokofiev and Shostakovich. In Johnson's view, the andante was the most compelling movement: “Tremendous in its emotional force, the movement soars on majestic brasses, the agile interplay of woodwinds and stratospheric violin choirs. Under Kenneth Schermerhorn's direction, the Milwaukee Symphony molded those sonorities with stunning subtlety and power.”

⁴ “City Opera Lists 6 New Stagings.” *New York Times*, 25 Apr 1974.

⁵ “Two Premieres Added”, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, 22 July 1976: 5. Also, at least as early as 5 Sep 1976, the *New York Daily News* reported that Schermerhorn and the Milwaukee SO would appear in Carnegie Hall that season and “...will give one of the season's most-awaited premieres – ... Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Symphony in F-Sharp*.”

⁶ There was an open rehearsal the day before at 2 PM.

Prior to their Carnegie Hall performance, the Milwaukee Symphony gave a “dress” performance in Glassboro, New Jersey on April 25th. Appearing in the Wilson Concert Hall at Glassboro State College that Monday evening, they presented their planned Carnegie Hall program of Korngold’s *Symphony*, Wagner’s overture to *The Flying Dutchman*, and Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on theme of Paganini* with pianist Earl Wild. Reviews of the April concerts were mixed. In reviewing the Carnegie Hall concert Harold Schonberg wrote that Korngold “...obviously wanted to show the world he could do more than compose film music. ...[The Symphony] has no real personality though. Beautifully constructed, handsomely orchestrated, it goes expertly along without saying anything.”⁷ Robert Baxter claimed on April 26, however, that the New Jersey performance was exciting and very convincing; “Korngold’s symphony is an impressive work that...is a finely crafted, rather conservative score. The dirge-like, slow movement attains a grandeur and brooding majesty reminiscent of Bruckner.”⁸

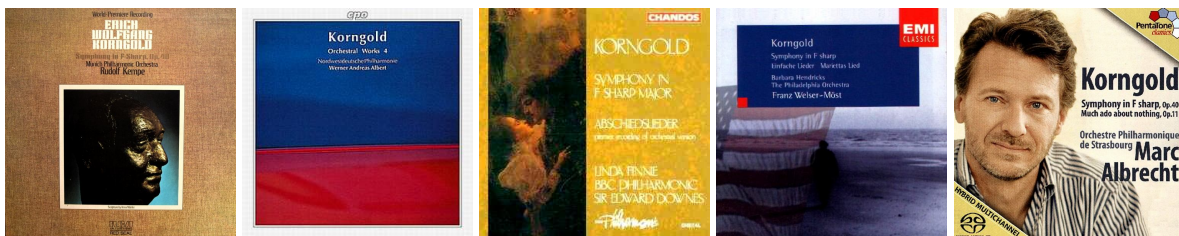
Bill Zakariasen took a middle ground: “There was great affection given by conductor and players to Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s *Symphony* in F sharp – a New York premiere 27 years late. If it isn’t quite ‘the perfect modern work’ Dimitri Mitropoulos once hailed it, Korngold’s opus is still nobly moving. Its dedication to the memory of FDR implies the composer attempted a 20th century ‘Eroica,’ and in many ways he succeeded.”⁹

Author’s Note

The brief historical perspective above was inspired by the recent Chandos recording of Korngold’s *Symphony*, performed by the Sinfonia of London, conducted by John Wilson, and its recent accolade as BBC Music Magazine’s “Best Orchestral Recording” of 2020. In addition, the recording has received rave reviews (Gramophone Magazine, BBC Music magazine, The Telegraph, and at least three reviews on the website www.musicweb-international.com, to name a few). The accompanying CD booklet contains newly written liner notes by Korngold biographer, Brendan G. Carroll. This essay is intended to complement those liner notes.



Selected previous recordings



- München Philharmoniker, Rudolf Kempe, RCA (1972)
- Nordwestdeutsche Philharmonie, Werner Andreas Albert, CPO (1988)
- BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Edward Downes, Chandos (1992)
- Philadelphia Orchestra, Franz Welser-Möst, EMI (1995)
- Orchestre Philharmonique de Strasbourg, Marc Albrecht, Pentatone (2010)

⁷ “Milwaukeeans Play Korngold Symphony.” *NY Times*, Fri, 29 Apr 1977: C-28.

⁸ “Milwaukee Symphony is Becoming Orchestra to Watch.” *Courier-Post* [Cherry Hill, NJ] Tue, 26 Apr 1977: 11.

⁹ “From Out There in Wisconsinland.” *New York Daily News*, Sat, 30 Apr 1977: 10.