



Happy 125th Birthday, Erich!

by Troy Dixon, May 2022

On 29 May 2022, we mark the 125th birthday of the Austrian prodigy, composer, conductor and pianist, Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Born in the city of Brno, in the Czech Republic (Brünn, Moravia, at the time of his birth in 1897), Korngold was recognized as a musical sensation and garnered world acclaim for his compositional abilities by the youthful age of only thirteen. He authored chamber compositions, orchestral works, Lieder (songs) and more before his twentieth year. Incidental stage music in the late 1910s and early 1920s prefigured his Hollywood film scores of the '30s and '40s. After retiring from the film industry, he produced a series of late concert works – generally under-appreciated at the time – before his rather early death in 1957 at the age of only sixty. Korngold composed five operas during his career, his most famous being *Die tote Stadt*, premiered in 1920.

The other day I found myself wondering what birthday wishes and announcements might have appeared in years past. The thought intrigued me enough that – almost more for just fun than anything else – I thought I might do a little investigation. What follows is an overview of scattered discoveries revealed after briefly looking through some historical – and not so historical – published sources.

1910 – December 7 – various US newspapers print birthday wishes to Erich. Unfortunately, as the world is still getting acquainted with the young composer, reporters do not realize they have misidentified his birthday.

Up to 1917 – Each May 29, brief birthday notices were printed annually in many different papers across North America. With the US entering World War I in 1917, all things German were shunned, and Korngold's annual birthday acknowledgements became yet another casualty of war. Public birthday notices for Korngold appear absent until the close of World War II.



1938 – May 31 – Ironically, wireless news reports from Vienna inform the world that Korngold's property "was confiscated today" under orders from the Gestapo. (Presents are to be given *to* someone for their birthday, not taken *from* them.)

1945 – May 29 – *The Pittsburgh Press* acknowledges a few musical anniversaries: Nicolo Paganini (May 27); Mily Balakirev (May 29); Erich Wolfgang Korngold (May 29); and Ignace Moscheles (May 30).



1948 – May 29 – For the next several years, the public is reminded that comedian Bob Hope, actress Beatrice Lillie, composer and conductor Erich Wolfgang Korngold, and boxer Tony Zale all have birthdays today. [Perhaps of interest, additional celebrants include G.K. Chesterton (1874), T.H. White (1906), John F. Kennedy (1917), and the physicist Peter Higgs (1929). In the music realm, also born on May 29 were Isaac Albeniz (1861), Iannis Xenakis (1922), and Danny Elfman (1953).]

1977 – May 28 - WNCN (104.3 FM - New York), billed as "America's Favorite Classical Radio Station," broadcasts an "Anniversary Concert: a birthday salute to Korngold and Moscheles." The

7:00 PM show includes Korngold's *Quintet for Piano and Strings*, Moscheles' *Piano Concerto in G minor*, and excerpt(s) from Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*.¹ (WCNC ceased broadcasting classical music in 1993, leaving WQXR to hold the classical music radio reins.)

1997 – For his 100th anniversary, Korngold was featured as the “Composer of the Week” on BBC Radio 3 from May 26-May 30. The programmes included a broad sampling of Korngold's compositions, and discussions with musicians, biographers, and family members about Korngold's life, times, and music.

Later in 1997 in Paisley, Scotland – home of The International Korngold Society beginning circa 1982 – a centenary celebration was held to honor the composer.

6 The Paisley Daily Express, Wednesday, July 23, 1997

THE EYES OF THE WORLD WILL TURN ON PAISLEY

Famous Hollywood composer's centenary to be honoured at the Abbey



■ KONRAD Hopkins is pictured here with a portrait bust of Korngold he commissioned from Paisley sculptor Sandy Stoddart. A copy is now in the Deutsche Oper in Berlin.

THE eyes of the world are set to turn on Paisley.

The town becomes the focus of celebrations for the centenary of the birth of a renowned composer.

We can reveal the Royal Scottish National Orchestra and the internationally famous virtuoso cellist Raphael Wallfisch will perform a concert of music by Erich Wolfgang Korngold at Paisley Abbey on October 2.

Paisley is the home of the International Korngold Society, and the world centre for the study of the composer's life and work.

Korngold is famed for his scores for many Hollywood blockbusters, including Errol Flynn and Bette Davis vehicles *The Adventures of Robin Hood* and *Deception*, as well as operas and orchestral works.

The concert, which is a stunning artistic coup for the town, is coming about as the result of months of behind-the-scenes work by American-born Paisley man of letters and founder of the International Korngold Society Konrad Hopkins, Paisley Arts Centre director Paul Hogan, musical impresario Scott Cooper, and Kenneth Speirs, the arts and entertainment writer of *Paisley Daily Express*.

A delighted Konrad Hopkins said: "This will be a unique event in the history both of the town and the country. A concert like this will never happen again. It is truly an international event."

Paisley will be joining Korngold's birth-place of Austria, his adopted home of America, and many

WORLD EXCLUSIVE

By Kenneth Speirs

other countries in marking the 100 years since his birth with concerts.

But it is believed Paisley is the only place in Britain to celebrate the anniversary with a full-scale concert.

The event is costing £30,000 to stage. Thanks to the efforts of Paul Hogan, a sponsorship package has been secured from Renfrewshire Enterprise and other bodies to meet the cost.

World-class Royal Scottish National Orchestra agreed to take part in the concert some weeks ago. But it was only yesterday that the much sought-after Raphael Wallfisch confirmed he would take part.

He will play Korngold's outstanding cello concerto. It was this concerto which featured in the Bette Davis melodrama *Deception*.

Oscar-winning

The concert will be conducted by the young American conductor David Abell.

And also included in the concert will be music from Oscar-winning *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *King's Row*, and other works.

The event is a great personal triumph for Konrad Hopkins.

It was in the early 1980s that he founded the society with writer Brendan Carroll, whose biography of the composer is being published by top American house Amadeus Press in the autumn.

Mr Hopkins, a long-time admirer of Hopkins since his boyhood days in America, wanted to set up the society in a bid to revive Korngold's reputation since going abeyance after his death in 1957.

Since its founding, the International Korngold Society has almost single-handedly been responsible for re-instating Korngold to his present position as one of the greatest of all neo-romantic composers.

And thanks in large part to Konrad Hopkins's work, Korngold's music is now standard in the world's orchestral repertoire.

"Almost everyday I get letters from all over the world requesting information on Korngold," he said. "This is gratifying, but it is now getting to much for one person to handle such is the volume of mail."

And he added: "What could so easily have been a tragedy for Korngold has become as a success story. Korngold's music is now being played all over the world more than it ever was in his heyday."

Paul Hogan said: "This is one of the biggest and most exciting events I have ever worked on. It's fitting that it's happening in the arts centre's 10th anniversary year."

"And it has been a pleasure working with Konrad Hopkins, who has kept Korngold's memory alive, and is so knowledgeable and driven about him."

● *Paisley Daily Express* will be giving full coverage of the run-up to the concert, and will feature interviews with all the leading participants in the event.

¹ Presumably the Quintet broadcast was the 1975 Genesis LP recording, by Harold Gray (piano) and the Granat Quartet.