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*. *(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.

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