



Erich Wolfgang Korngold

A portrait for piano

Ramon van Engelenhoven

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| 1 | Ich ging zu ihm from Das Wunder der Heliane, Op. 20 Act II * | 7:32 |
| | Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 2 | |
| 2 | Moderato | 8:28 |
| 3 | Scherzo. Allegro impetuoso | 8:08 |
| 4 | Largo | 7:18 |
| 5 | Finale. Allegro vivace | 5:52 |
| 6 | Love Scene from The Adventures of Robin Hood * | 7:14 |
| 7 | The Sea Hawk * | 27:59 |

* arranged by Ramon van Engelenhoven

Total playing time 1:12:35

About the album

It must have been some seven years ago that I first discovered the music of Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1857-1957) and I remember feeling absolutely overjoyed. I immediately felt an incredible connection to his music and it was honestly a sensation that I could only remember from discovering classical music in my early childhood. It more or less shocked me though that this had happened through my interest in symphonic film music rather than the classical music world that surrounded me, where at the time he seemed to be hardly known. As I am writing this in 2024 I am reminded of how classical music is seemingly not unsusceptible to trends, despite the fact that we sometimes like to pretend otherwise. Not too long ago, I spoke about Korngold with a colleague of about my age. He referred to him as a 'well-known classical composer' and I was frankly quite taken aback by it. That things have been different in the past is quite an understatement, and it is thanks to a tough battle that has been fought by so many advocates over the last decades that we finally get to play (and hear!) his music again.

Much as been written about Korngold's life and the terrible effects that his dominant father had on his career, along with rampant antisemitism and ultimately the stigma of being associated with Hollywood. I would rather rejoice the fact that his music has withstood these irrelevant matters after a period of neglect. Thankfully, we now live in a time where musicians want to play his music and audiences want to hear it, much like his early days as a young composer in Vienna. These are probably the most essential elements for any music to survive.

I do feel it is important to illustrate the incredible gaps in history that Korngold bridged. Here we have a composer who received career advice from Gustav Mahler as a young boy while decades later he was scoring movies with Ronald Reagan in them. Inadvertently this does raise fundamental questions about the nature of music and composition. What is high art, and what is entertainment? Do we adhere to the myth of the composer-genius or do we see him/her merely as a talented craftsman? The answers to these questions may differ from person to

person. However, I must say that time and again it never ceases to amaze me what kind of mental gymnastics people are able to pull off in deciding what is 'real' music and not — what should be taken seriously and what can be easily disposed without considering.

I think that Michael Haas, in an extraordinary article on forbiddenmusic.org, put it beautifully when he wrote that *"What set Korngold apart from his contemporaries was his ability to compose serious music that was popular"*. For some of these contemporaries, and especially for the leading avant-garde composers after the Second World War, this very notion must have been fundamentally paradoxical. To quote Arnold Schoenberg: *"If it is art, it is not for all. If it is for all, it is not art."*

In recent years the narrative surrounding Korngold has shifted from him primary being a 'film composer', with an implied stigma, to him simply being a composer who also wrote film music (as did Shostakovich and Prokofiev, by the way, but not for Hollywood). The current narrative is obviously the correct one when we look at all of the music he wrote throughout his lifetime.

One might then quickly come to the conclusion that his concert music and operas represent his most 'true self' as a composer, if such a thing exists at all, since here he was not restricted to the exact timings of writing for the screen. However, one could also make a case for his film music being closest to his heart, because here he was free from the demands of being a 'modern' composer having to keep up with his time — it seems to me that in film he could simply write the music that he loved to write, stylistically speaking. Ultimately it speaks to Korngold's immense talents that he was able to be successful in both the world of the concert hall and the cinema.

Personally I wouldn't want to live without either of them and thankfully I don't have to decide on any of its worth. It made me realize when contemplating this album, that I wanted to highlight the multiple facets of his career: concert music, opera and yes, film music. That meant I had to transcribe quite a bit of music for the piano which in Korngold's case seemed to be very fitting. He was a force of nature

at the piano, as can be heard in the existing recordings of his playing; moreover, it's important to note that he composed at the piano and could play all of his symphonic music. While in no way I can claim that my transcriptions sound like Korngold himself at the piano, I was very much inspired by his recordings and I was pleasantly surprised by how natural the music sounded at the piano when reducing the full symphony orchestra.

The music

I decided to open the album with *Ich ging zu ihm*, an aria from the opera that Korngold claimed was his magnum opus: *Das Wunder der Heliane* (1927). It could be said that he was truly at the height of his powers when he composed this intoxicating music and it was this piece that started my fascination for Korngold. When I made the transcription, I decided to add a few lines music from the opening of Act I to precede the aria, inspired by the introduction to the famous Wagner/Liszt transcription of *Isolde's Liebestod*.

The next piece is quite frankly one of the most mind-boggling achievements of a composing child prodigy that I know of, the *Piano Sonata No. 2, Op. 2*. It was composed between June and December 1910, when the composer was only thirteen years old. Structurally, the piece is confidently written in a sort of Brahmsian way, yet the harmonic language and use of colors already seem to be distinctively Korngold's own. Interestingly, reviews in the Dutch press at the time described the piece as being 'too modern' for their tastes — which may surprise some given Korngold was seen as 'not modern enough' at the end of his life. The piece was premiered and championed by Arthur Schnabel, who spoke very highly of it, and the composer also recorded the third movement in 1951, which tells me it must have been a special piece to him. It makes me very happy to contribute a new recording as I absolutely love the piece and had so much joy in preparing it.

Next we move to a piece of film music, the *Love Scene* from *The Adventures of*

Robin Hood. Actually, while this is a film cue, one of the themes was taken directly from *Sursum Corda, Op. 13*, a symphonic poem written in 1921 and dedicated to none other than Richard Strauss. What may come as a shock is the fact that this fairytale-like music was written during a deeply troubling period in Korngold's personal life. As his family was escaping Austria after the *Anschluss* had taken place, Korngold was writing the score for *Robin Hood* in California. It is a reminder that a composer may sometimes write music that is completely unrelated to their own feelings.

The album closes with a large suite that I compiled and transcribed featuring music from from the film *The Sea Hawk*. The soundtrack features so many highlights, many of them thematically connected like an opera or a symphonic poem. Sadly, most of this extraordinary score is never performed and hidden away in the movie itself or the soundtrack recording. I was so fortunate to be able to get access to the original orchestrations used for the film recording to select what music I wanted to use and to be able to accurately transcribe it. While the piece is in one track on the album, I envisioned it in five movements:

- I. Main Title and Introduction (from 0:00)
- II. First Encounter on the Boat (from 7:14)
- III. To England and Panama (from 13:30)
- IV. Battles and Duels (from 18:58)
- V. Reunion and Finale (from 22:45)

The result hopefully flows like a kind of tone poem and I sincerely think that one doesn't need to see the film to follow the narrative of the music, which contains so many moments of beauty and exhilaration.



Acknowledgments

This album could not have been possible without the help of so many. I would like to thank John Mauceri, Kathrin Korngold-Hubbard, Leslie Korngold and John Waxman for their tremendous efforts in helping me obtain permissions for my arrangements and getting access to the right materials.



My gratitude also goes to Schott Music for granting me permission to record *Ich ging zu ihm*, to the University of Southern California for allowing me to study the original *Sea Hawk* scores, to Jos de Lange for helping me prepare the recording, to Duco de Vries for his amazing photography, to Royal Theater Tuschinski for allowing our photo shoot, and Stichting Cymbeline and Dutch Classical Talent for financially supporting this project.

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Brendan Heintz

founder & senior recording and mastering engineer

Equipment used on this recording

Microphones

Josephson C617 with Microtech Gefell MK221 capsules *main mics*

Josephson C42 *height mics*

Microphone preamplifiers

Grace Design m801mk2

AD/DA conversion (11.2MHz 1bit)

Merging Technologies Hapi mkII

Merging Technologies Anubis

Grimm Audio CC2 *master clock*

Weiss Engineering Saracon *samplerate converter*

Monitoring

Grimm Audio LS1be *main loudspeakers*

Grimm Audio SB1 *subwoofers*

KEF LS50 Meta *height loudspeakers*

Hegel C55 *amplifier*

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Computer Audio Design GC3 *ground conditioner*

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Credits

Recording & mastering engineer **Brendon Heinst**

Editor **Hans Erblich**

Cover photography **Duco de Vries**

Artwork **Brendon Heinst**

Liner notes **Ramon van Engelenhoven**

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Recording location **Grote Zaal, Muziekgebouw Eindhoven (NL)**

Recording format **11.2MHz 1bit in 5.1.4-channel immersive**

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