

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Much Ado About Nothing Suite, Op. 11

Erich Korngold

Erich Korngold was one of history's most extraordinary prodigies, rivaled in the annals of child composers only by Felix Mendelssohn and (arguably) Mozart. He was born into a musical family: his father, Julius Korngold, was a noted music critic who befriended and then succeeded Eduard Hanslick on the staff of Vienna's *Neue Freie Presse*. Music came naturally to him. His mother, asked later in life about when her son began playing the piano, replied, "Erich always played the piano." In fact, he never had more than basic training on the instrument (curiously, since his father could have opened doors to the most renowned studios in Vienna), but it's not clear that regimented study would have improved what already seemed to be absolute fluency at the keyboard. He never pursued a performing career, but people who heard him play remarked on how he seemed almost organically connected to the keyboard. Ultimately his musical interests were not those of a piano virtuoso. Repeating a piece over and over and rendering its notated details to perfection seemed not to hold his attention. He was a creator rather than a re-creator, and his natural route was a more improvisatory approach that allowed him to adapt a piece to express momentary inspirations.

In 1906 his father convinced Gustav Mahler to assess the nine-year-old boy. After hearing Korngold play his (now lost) cantata *Gold* at the piano, Mahler declared him to be a genius and recommended that he be put under the compositional care of Alexander von Zemlinsky. In 1910 Korngold's ballet-pantomime *Der Schneemann* (*The Snowman*)

was produced to astonished acclaim at the Vienna Court Opera. By then he had already completed his Piano Trio (Op. 1) and he would momentarily finish his Piano Sonata No. 2, which the pianist Artur Schnabel immediately put into his concert repertoire. Two years later Korngold produced his Sonata for Violin and Piano; again, it was Schnabel who took up its cause, programming it in joint recitals with the eminent violinist Carl Flesch. Composers all over Europe were awed by their young colleague: Richard Strauss, Giacomo Puccini, Jean Sibelius, and many others scrambled for superlatives to describe what they heard. By the time Korngold was 20 his orchestral works had been played by the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra (Arthur Nikisch conducting) and the Vienna Philharmonic (Felix Weingartner conducting),

IN SHORT

Born: May 29, 1897, in Brno, Moravia (now the Czech Republic)

Died: November 29, 1957, in Hollywood, California

Work composed: summer of 1918 through 1919; dedicated to the conductor Egon Pollack

World premiere: January 24, 1920, with the composer conducting the Vienna Symphony Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: February 1, 1941, Bruno Walter, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 31, 1992, Leonard Slatkin, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

among other orchestras, and his operas *Der Ring des Polykrates* and *Violanta* had been premiered at the Munich Court Theatre, with Bruno Walter on the podium.

Korngold continued from strength to strength, and in 1934 the theater director Max Reinhardt invited him to travel to Hollywood to compose the soundtrack for his film adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a fortunate invitation. Hollywood agreed with Korngold, and Korngold, being Jewish, assuredly would not have agreed with Austria had he remained there. During this second phase of his career he created masterful symphonic scores for some 20 motion pictures, including *Captain Blood*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Anthony Adverse* (which brought him his first Academy Award), *Robin Hood* (which earned him his second), *The Sea Hawk*, and *Kings Row*. Many

a Korngoldian turn of phrase would be assumed into the *lingua franca* of film composers in ensuing decades.

The composer had first met Reinhardt in 1910, when they both attended the premiere of Mahler's Symphony No. 8, in Munich. By that time, Reinhardt, who was 24 years Korngold's elder, had overseen several theaters in Berlin and was the subject of a newly minted biography. He first directed Shakespeare's comedy *Viel Lärmen um Nichts* — or, as The Bard called it, *Much Ado About Nothing* — in 1912, at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. When he was asked to direct that play at the Vienna Volksbühne in 1918, he invited Korngold to compose incidental music. The production grew and grew, requiring a larger theater by the time it opened on May 6, 1920, at the Schönbrunn Palace Theatre, with Korngold leading mem-

A Selection of Suites

Korngold completed his incidental music for *Much Ado About Nothing* well before Max Reinhardt's production opened in May 1920. More than three months earlier, he had extracted a five-movement orchestral suite from the score and premiered it to acclaim. It comprised short movements to accompany specific bits of the play, in which the Paduan lord Benedick wages a "merry war" with noble Beatrice — a game of wits and wiles that resolves in their admission of love. Following the spirited, ingratiating overture are a gentle (if winking) scene in the bridal chamber of Hero (the female half of a secondary love plot), a mock-serious scene with the pompous constable Dogberry and his wilting lieutenant Verges, a peaceful garden-scene intermezzo, and a hornpipe meant to accompany a masquerade.

Korngold's score drew resounding applause when the play opened at Schönbrunn Palace, and still more when the production moved to Vienna's Burgtheater, racking up some 80 performances — after which it moved to the Residenz Theater in Munich. The composer went on to arrange the suite further, into versions for violin and piano (four movements, without the Overture) and for solo piano (three movements, without the Overture and Intermezzo).



A dapper Korngold in 1916

bers of the Vienna Philharmonic through his score.

Instrumentation: flute (doubling piccolo), oboe, clarinet, bassoon, two horns, trumpet,

trombone, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, triangle, orchestra bells, tambourine, switch (rute), harp, harmonium, piano, and strings (without basses).

Sources and Inspirations

Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* has given rise to a respectable number of musical interpretations. Among the classic composers who produced incidental music for productions are Edward German (in 1898) and Johan Halvorsen (1915). Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco wrote an orchestral concert overture *Much Ado About Nothing* (1953), and Ernest Chausson included a "Chant funèbre" (Funeral March) from this comedy, for four women's voices and piano, as the last of his *Chansons de Shakespeare* (1914). Of the two songs Shakespeare wrote into the play, the poem "Sigh no more, Ladies," from the second act, has proved the more popular; art-song settings include those of Thomas Arne, Geoffrey Bush, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Eric Coates, Roger Quilter, Cyril Scott, Arthur Sullivan, Virgil Thomson, and Peter Warlock, as well as choral treatments by George Whitefield Chadwick, Arthur Foote, Emma Lou Diemer, and Ralph Vaughan Williams (who used it in his opera *Sir John in Love*).

The play has gained exposure on the world's stages thanks to operatic versions under the titles *Much Ado About Nothing*, by Charles Villiers Stanford (1901); *Béatrice et Bénédict*, by Hector Berlioz (1862); *Viel Lärm um Nichts*, by Arpád Doppler (1896) and by Hermann Henrich (1956); *Beaucoup de bruit pour rien*, by Paul Puget (1899) and by Reynaldo Hahn (1936); *Mnogo shuma ... iz-za serdets*, by Tikhon Khrennikov (1936; the Russian title actually means "Much Ado About Hearts"); and, adapted into a traditional *huangmei* Chinese opera, *Wu shi sheng fei*, with music by Chen Jinggen and Xie Guohua (1986).



Beatrice (Winifred Emery) and Benedick (Herbert Beerbohm Tree) in a 1905 London production of Much Ado About Nothing