

Brendan G. Carroll. *The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Portland, Oreg.: Amadeus Press (an imprint of Timber Press), 1997. 464 pp. ISBN 1-57467-029-8 (hardcover).

Fifteen or twenty years ago such composers from the German-Austrian cultural milieu of the early twentieth century as Ferruccio Busoni, Franz Schreker, and Alexander Zemlinsky were usually mentioned in footnotes if at all. Recordings and reprints of scores are now increasingly available; performances have become more frequent, and the scholarly literature is no longer limited to a handful of items. Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957) is another composer from that milieu whose time seems to have come. In his case, recognition goes beyond the scholarly community because of his reputation as a composer of film music. An example of how Korngold's life and music are now reaching audiences not conversant with music scholarship is the announcement in late 1997 of an American show entitled "Korngold—He Haunts My Heart: A Tale of Vienna and Hollywood."

Research on Korngold's life and music has to date been mostly associated with Brendan G. Carroll, whose 1975 dissertation was on Korngold's opera, *Violanta*. He then contributed the Korngold article to the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and in 1983 was instrumental in founding the Erich Wolfgang Korngold Society (Paisley, Scotland). The next year, he published a short monograph entitled *Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957): His Life and Works* (Paisley: Wilfion Books, 1984; 2nd impression, 1985). Over the years, he has also contributed liner notes to recordings of Korngold's works. *The Last Prodigy* seems to have been his life's work. Carroll has spent the last twenty-five years doing research, writing letters, and conducting interviews with friends and associates of the composer. During that time, however, other scholars were beginning to demonstrate that the Viennese composer was increasingly considered worthy of scholarly investigation: indeed, since 1987, more than ten theses or dissertations have been completed, mostly in England and Germany. In 1996, Jessica Duchon—whose thesis on *Die tote Stadt* was completed at Jesus College (Cambridge) in 1987—published an abundantly illustrated monograph about the composer, directed at a general readership, as part of Phaidon Press's 20th-Century Composers series.

Carroll's biography of Korngold is based on 300 hours of taped oral history involving musicians, actors, writers, and others—even the composer's governess—as well as the reminiscences of Korngold's two sons, Ernst Werner (1925–96) and Georg (1928–87). The book, which begins with a foreword by the elder son, also relies heavily on two sources: first, a short biography written by the composer's widow, Luzi von Sonnenthal (1900–1962), and published as *Erich Wolfgang Korngold: ein Lebensbild* (Vienna: Elisabeth Lafite und Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1967); and second, the memoirs of his father, the celebrated music critic Julius Korngold (1860–1945), issued as *Die Korngolds in Wien: der Musikkritiker und das Wunderkind* (Zürich: M&T Verlag, Edition Musik & Theater, 1991). The correspondence between father and son, amounting to "many thousands of letters," is used extensively,

although the recently discovered correspondence library from Korngold's home in Vienna (some 2,000 letters) will have to wait a second edition of the book to be taken into account. While working on the book, the author had privileged access to Korngold's music while assisting in the preparation of the "serious" musical manuscripts for deposit at the Library of Congress in 1980. (The scores and parts, including original sketches, for the film music written for Warner Brothers are located in the Library of the School of Cinema-Television at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles.)

The book comprises twenty-four chapters grouped into the following six sections: "The Early Years: 1897–1913"; "A Born Opera Composer: 1913–1918"; "The 'New Music' and the Aftermath of War: 1919–1923"; "The New Dark Age—Hitler's Rise to Power: 1924–1933"; "From Vienna to Hollywood: 1934–1944"; and "The Return to Absolute Music: 1944–1955." Interspersed throughout the book are forty-nine photographs and illustrations as well as six excerpts from scores or manuscripts. Twenty-three pages of endnotes follow. Unfortunately, the publisher has chosen not to provide the useful "Notes to pages ..." as running head, a convenience for which readers are always grateful. A more annoying procedure, from a scholarly point of view, is the absence of page numbers in references to books. One finds dozens of references to "Julius Korngold 1991," which is of no help at all when one wants to find the location of a statement in a book of more than 300 pages. It is difficult to understand, and approve of, this editorial decision. The author (or his publisher) probably wanted to make the book more appealing to nonspecialist readers by relegating much material to the notes; one cannot help thinking that many bits of information would have been better placed in the text. For example the author writes that Mickey Rooney broke his leg during the filming of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and had to be assigned a stunt-double (p. 242), but the gentleman's name (Georgie Breekstone), and only that, is given in the notes. All the superfluous to-and-fro becomes both frustrating and, eventually, infuriating.

Carroll includes a list of Korngold's complete works with comprehensive first-performance details (pp. 396–406), to which one might have wished to add specific locations rather than just cities. A "Select Bibliography" (pp. 407–14) provides what may be, despite the title, the most complete listing so far published, with the possible exception of those appended to dissertations. The discography (pp. 415–36) is said to contain "all the known commercial recordings," including piano roll recordings but not the recordings of the operetta arrangements (except those conducted by the composer). One may be agreeably surprised to see that so many recordings have been produced, especially since 1972. The two-column layout, unfortunately, is less than ideal and makes the list rather difficult to consult; judicious use of different fonts and/or various type sizes would have been helpful here. There is a detailed index, with subentries for the composer's works as well as for various features of his musical language. Inexplicably, however, it fails to provide entries for the composer's father and wife. The typography is clear and reasonably free

of mistakes; however, one finds several instances of lines that do not extend up to the right margin, at least in my copy (e.g., pp. 385 n. 30 and 388 n. 20).

This eminently readable biography of Korngold is most welcome as it provides a huge amount of carefully researched information gathered in one place. Its publication, which has been in gestation as much time as the composer has needed to be lifted from oblivion, comes at a time when there is a clear interest in his music. Unfortunately, Korngold is no Busoni or Schoenberg, i.e., a composer with a sizeable written production dealing with numerous aspects of music composition, theory, and aesthetics; furthermore, despite the superb craftsmanship and the often compelling beauty of his music, he did not contribute to the development of musical language. As a result, this biography of Korngold, while it is interesting, even fascinating, for what it tells us on the activities of a respected composer, first in Vienna as a child prodigy and then in Hollywood as a film music composer, rarely goes beyond a careful and detailed chronicle of events. This problem, of course, is not really the author's fault. One of the book's pluses is the ample space devoted to showing the negative effect that the father, a "defender of tradition" and the "self-appointed opponent" of the New Viennese School (p. 44), had on his son's career by constantly fighting battles in a city where gossip and intrigues were rampant. Korngold often had to conduct his own operas without a fee following the resignation of a conductor angered by Julius's comments (p. 74). There is now a need for another study which would provide a complete overview of the works; this, obviously, would have considerably reduced the present book's readership and greatly increased its number of pages. Carroll fortunately provides brief discussions in the style of program notes. Someone must now take the flame; hopefully this new book will not be as long in the making as *The Last Prodigy*.