

Korngold's *Kathrin* by Forbidden Music

Korngold à Musiques interdites

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KORNGOLD'S *KATHRIN* BY FORBIDDEN MUSIC

MUSIC The Forbidden Music Festival in Marseille is an excellent opportunity to take some forgotten musical gems off the shelf that have been kept from the stage by totalitarian regimes. Such was the sad fate of *Die Kathrin*, an opera Korngold set out to perform in Vienna in 1938, but which was silenced by the Nazis.

Regardless of what some people may think today, in a time when men and women feel tempted to offer a certain degree of power to people for whom Culture is not only largely secondary but, under the most fallacious of pretexts, an enemy to be killed in all priority, it should be reminded that totalitarianism always leaves a lasting mark. It is incredibly difficult to reconstruct what was removed. The Nazis showed this for all eternity. Not only did they, in the most spectacular of ways, assassinate the most promising talents (such as Pavel Haas as he arrived at Auschwitz in 1944, after having exploited his talent at Terezin), they also hammered the term *Entartete Musik* (degenerate music) in regards to a vast number of composers who never retrieved the position that was destined to be theirs within the History of Music. Erich Wolfgang Korngold was an emblematic figure of such physical as well as linguistic extermination.

A student of Zemlinsky (he could have been less fortunate!) and admired by Richard Strauss and Puccini (no less!), Korngold fit perfectly in line with 20th century composers and contributed his touch to the end of the Romantic movement, whilst being confronted to the emerging Serialism. Falling naturally within the great Romantics, much closer to *The Woman without a Shadow* than to *Pierrot lunaire*, his ●●●

- music finally became audible at the beginning of the new millennium.

But what a treacherous path it has been! Judged a first time by the Nazis who ordered his music to be burned (fortunately, thanks to the intervention of Weinburg, his second editor, nothing came of it), Korngold was perhaps even more the target of judgement until very recently. We still recall the condescending gibes in news articles in 1975 at the release of the splendid RCA recording of *Die Tote Stadt*, the opera that made him famous at age 23. It was the same serial (serial music?) attitude, within the French upstanding musical society of the time, at the release of the sophisticated *Violanta* at CBS in 1980 (a blessed time when operas were presented in a pretty box with a libretto in at least three languages). It was difficult in such conditions to serenely listen to a music that was claimed to be bombastic, a monstrous avatar of Strauss' tragedies, qualified as – the supreme insult – “film music”! Admittedly, film music did not inspire the same respect it does today: sophisticated sound-tracks in several of Resnais' films, ultramodern music by Jerry Goldsmith for the blockbuster film *Planet of the Apes*, and on the other hand, a unanimous recognition of the outstanding melodist that was Georges Delerue... It has taken quite a long time for the roofs of musical chapels to finally crack...

Korngold of course was a precursor in the field of blurring the genres, in which he excelled. Fleeing Nazi barbarism, he settled permanently in America where he had already proven his worth and was an admired composer in Hollywood, another daunting status. He composed five operas: *Der Ring des Polykrates*, *Violanta* (1916), *Die Tote Stadt* (1920), *Das Wunder der Heliane* (1927) and *Die Kathrin* (1937). His death, in 1957, prevented him from finishing a sixth one. Because of the vocal demands they require (Siegfried and Minnie, nonetheless), Korngold's operas are rarely staged. One explanation lies in the difficulty of the operas, namely due to the sophisticated opulence of a musical discourse that is more Zemlinsky than Wagner, and is thereby avaricious of significant melodies, with a less immediate impact from the librettos. Nevertheless, opinions are changing and with each new performance of *Die Tote Stadt*, his most famous opera, comes new-found enthusiasm and respect.

Fifty years after the Nazi anathema, during the mid-1990s, the label Decca began a new collection of recordings they audaciously baptised *Entartete Musik*. The



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– The Republican Guard Symphony Orchestra, led by Sébastien Billard.

label offered the legendary splendour of their sound recordings to the magnificent outcasts. Thus appeared floods of unknown names and new sounds enabling *Sarlatan* by Pavel Haas, *Die Vögel* by Brauenfels or *Die Gezeichneten* by Schrecker to brush up against *La Walkyrie*, *Così fan tutte* or even *Les Troyens*, whose authors had already more than left their mark in the History of Music. This magnificent collection rendered obsolete Korngold's first editor's frightful assertion: “Jews do not have any creative power.”

The Forbidden Music Festival in Marseille, in partnership with the Austrian Cultural Centre in Paris as well as the Opera House in Marseille, is thankfully in line with the same approach. Taking advantage of Michel Pastore's infallible erudition (he is namely a producer, scheduler, director, librettist...), he counts within his honorary committee prestigious names such as Laure Adler, Elie Wieser, Renée Auphan, or Stéphane Hessel. Robert Badinter is the guest of honour of this ninth edition. The idea is to make a lasting “Memorial

Ceremony” by reinvesting the very places which saw the attempts made to annihilate memory (in 2007, the Festival took place both in Marseille and Terezin). Conferences, films, recitals, readings, film-concerts, operas all took place in Marseille, an emblematic city if ever there was one. Indeed, Marseille was the exile capital during the Second World War and aims to be the “Symbol of reconciliation.” Having become the European Capital of Culture in 2013, it seemed natural for Marseille to hold this important Forbidden Music Festival.

In 2014, the 9th edition of the Forbidden Music Festival, planned over four days, was interrupted by the performing arts workers’ conflict. Philippe Hersant’s creation coupled with *Pierrot lunaire* as well as the film-concerts *Meyrowitz’s Marseille Barriers* and *La ville sans juifs*, were pushed back to the weekend of 13 September. The French creation of *Die Kathrin*, Korngold’s final lyrical opus, was the only one not rescheduled, maintained on 8 July.

Keeping within the Chart of the Festival, the Prefecture of Marseille wisely chose this opera haunted by the themes of borders and exile. It was indeed in this same court, where some four hundred chairs have now been aligned, that the candidates for exile during the darkest period of our History previously marched. On 8 July 2014, on the top floor, negotiations with the unions carry on into the night and as such replace earlier administrative formalities. On the ground floor, the Republican Guard Symphony Orchestra and seven soloists play *Die Kathrin*, an opera which took its author five years to compose.

The creation of *Die Kathrin* planned in 1938 in Vienna, was cancelled *in extremis* upon Nazi orders and, with the exception of an audio recording realized by the BBC in 1998 with Melanie Diener in the title role, this opera, which remained unreleased in France, has finally found an ideal frame at the Forbidden Music Festival. The frame has however somehow been clipped at its edges by Michel Pastore’s French version. His *Kathrin* has been drastically shortened: its original 2 hours 50 minutes (*Die Tote Stadt* does not exceed 2 hours 20 minutes) has been shortened to 1 hour 40 minutes. The choirs have been suppressed.

This version of the concert has been spatially disposed in a very sober fashion, with merely a few accessories (a revolver, a yellow star, armbands of militiamen in a Lacombe Lucien style) and enhanced by a few pictures (photos, videos, light effects, the titles of the scenes and surtitles scroll on the side of the building). However, after a legitimate questioning regarding such a cut, the evening promised to be delightful.

Far removed from the hallucinated lyricism bordering the fantastic of *Die Tote Stadt*, *Die Kathrin* is an extremely touching work based on a libretto rather classical in its architecture. As with Verdi, the soprano and tenor’s love is thwarted by the bass, and this is when the work reaches something universal. What separates the very good person of the young German Kathrin from her adorable French singer François, is the war. Even though their passion is only just burgeoning, and though, like everyone else, in every country of the World, Kathrin and François only aspire to a simple life (love, a house), this passion will lead them to journey. The Great history invites itself into the Small history, as is the fate of so many human beings not lucky enough

to be born on the right side of the border. This echoes a language border. Korngold maliciously creates a dialogue between French and German in a bilingual music sheet where love is declared in the original language as well as in French: “Je t’aime/ Ich liebe dich.” The theme

of the border continuously surfaces throughout the opera, especially in Michel Pastore’s “theatrical and musical adaptation”. He renames Korngold’s opera (*Die Kathrin* becomes *Kathrin vs. Free Zone*), and deconstructs the initial structure in three acts, replaced here by a succession of the scenes desired by the Austrian composer. He titles them François vs. François, François vs. Kathrin, Kathrin vs. Free Zone, War vs. War, Exile vs. Kathrin, Exile vs. François... This *versus*, meaning either *beside* or *in front of*, says everything about the barriers that rise between the characters of a truly prophetic work, set in Germany, in France and even in... Marseille. There is indeed mention of the Canebière, people make faces like Voltaire, *the Joan of Arc in the Luna Park is the object of mockery*, and finally a simple happy ending on a Hollywood background. We also note the wink to Korngold’s Hollywood career with ●●●

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- the reference to Douglas Sirk's melodrama *Le Mirage de la vie/L'amour d'une mère*, a film which seals Kathrin and François' inaugural meeting. Yes, *Die Kathrin* is a melodrama. Of simple and pure water, which goes straight to the heart.

In fact, little is known about the Republican Guard Symphony Orchestra. Tonight we discover its excellence and its enthusiasm to play this extremely lyrical music. It has reached beyond the paths it usually goes down, as it generally pursues symphonic music, whether in France or whilst on its many tours abroad. Sébastien Billard directs the sixty musicians (yes, there are even strings in the Republican Guard!) with precision, passion, and a true empathy for this music with its great flights, rich in melodies, yet also in subtle harmonies. One cannot help picking out all the influences: Puccini and his *Bohème* for the initial exchanges between François and Kathrin or her first aria... later on, the perfect fifths of *Barrière d'enfer*, Strauss and his *Femme sans ombre* on "Je veux aller à lui", a near copy of "Ist mein liebster dahin?" of the Empress, but also the 5th by Mahler in certain trumpets during the militaristic parts or even Shostakovich, another last Romantic who was held in contempt in his time by another totalitarianism.

The cast that came together for this opera is absolutely exemplary. Indeed, Vincent Schirmacher as François has astonishing vocal audacity and is also extremely generous with Puccini's required decibels. We hope he may be able to maintain for a long time such a tool which undoubtedly requires special care. He is presently the most spectacular revelation, truly all strings aside, of this unknown *Kathrin*. His partner is equally magnificent: Elisabeth Fleshl is incredibly at ease in the challenging part of the role title, for which she delivers vocal lines with honey-like legato, her breath lasting every challenge with smooth enchanting sounds. Her last dress reminds of an Isolde figure. Klemens Sander is no less wonderful and his nasty Malignac in the style of Scarpia (listen to his creed "Hunt, seduce, own"), displays perfect articulations and vocal grandeur. Also, his physical resemblance to a certain Jonas Kaufmann serves his scenic engagement perfectly. All three come from the Volksoper in Vienna, where they splendidly ensure the numerous titles role of the season.

The Romanian soprano Liliana Faraon plays a Chou-Chou with an intoxicating voice. Her execution would make a perfect Musetta. Wilfried Tissot,

accustomed to the Marseille Opera House audience, performed brilliantly the numerous interventions of small roles which Michel Pastore assembled together into a single character called The Witness. Beautifully rich interventions and perfectly measured, for Alexandre Csoma's first appearance on stage in the role of François. A highly popular name in this opera, since it is also the name of the child Kathrin conceived with... François.

Even shortened, the Forbidden Music Festival 2014 was a success. Indeed, this amputated *Kathrin*, however beautifully arranged, and recorded on Tuesday 8 July, makes us want to listen again to the works we already know by Korngold, as well as the ones we do not yet know of course, namely with a complete version of *Kathrin* on stage. We do not doubt this will come. The ultra positive heroine is a character who honours humanity. Today, during a rather difficult time, we would be mistaken to be hard-hearted, or annoyed even, with Kathrin's views: "In the heart of darkness shines the light of hope", "Love adversity for it carries your own solitude." This Kathrin has nothing of "degenerate", of course.

In Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau's beautiful film, *L'arbre et la forêt*, the hero, a survivor of the camps, responds to the people who are surprised by his unaltered passion for Wagner's music by stating: "The Nazis took everything from me. They cannot above this take Wagner from me."

We understand that today, at a time when Memory produces here and there worrying signs of vacillation, the Forbidden Music Festival sadly deserves an essential place.

So, may Forbidden Music last a long time! So that there may never again be any more forbidden music. ■

Jean-Luc Claret

(Translation: Sarah Voke)

→ Learn more

◆ Erich Wolfgang Korngold's opera *Die Kathrin* was composed in 1937. One year later, it was cancelled in Vienna by the Nazis. On 7 October 1939, the opera was finally staged at the Royal Swedish Opera in Stockholm.

◆ In July 2014, Michel Pastore created *Die Kathrin vs. Zone Libre*, a dramatic and musical adaptation of Korngold's opera, for the Forbidden Music Festival in Marseille.