Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major, Op. 35

ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD

B. May 29, 1897 in Brno, Czech Republic
D. November 29, 1957 in Hollywood, California

First performed on 15 February 1947 in St. Louis by Vladimir Golschmann and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra with Jascha Heifetz as soloist.

Scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, trombone, timpani, percussion, harp, celesta, and strings. (approx. 24 minutes)

Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Violin Concerto* would not exist as such if were not for Felix Mendelssohn's music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* In 1934, the Warner Bros. studio engaged Korngold, the renowned composer of the opera *Die Tote Stadt*, to transform Mendelssohn's incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into a film score for a movie of the Shakespeare play. Needless to say, the circumstances that brought a Viennese opera composer to a movie studio better known for its gangland flicks were unusual and had much to do with to the film's "guest" director, theater impresario Max Reinhardt. Such a lavish, strange, and expensive project would never be repeated at the studio, but Warner Bros.'s ardent requests that Korngold continue as a film composer resulted in one of the most distinguished film music careers in Hollywood. Favoring the swashbucklers with Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland, Korngold scored such films as *Captain Blood, Anthony Adverse, The Adventures of Robin Hood, The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex, The Sea Hawk, Kings Row,* and *Deception*, among others.

As his time in Hollywood preceded the advent of the commercially-released orchestral soundtrack album, Korngold sought to extend the life and exposure of his film music by incorporating it within compositions for the concert hall. (Composers such as Sergei Prokofiev and Ralph Vaughan Williams did this as well.) Korngold's Violin Concerto exemplifies this procedure to an extreme in that nearly *all* of the melodic material is drawn from his film scores.

Although the concerto was not premiered until 1947, Korngold actually began work on the project in the late 1930s. Consequently, the concerto's thematic material is drawn from his films of that era. The concerto begins with a theme used in the main title of *Another Dawn* (1937), a reportedly dismal film whose chief merit was that it marked Errol Flynn's fourth starring role and Korngold's third original Hollywood score. In the concerto, the film's melody is transformed into a wistful gem, carried from the very opening bar by the solo violinist in a lyrical gesture that stretches luxuriantly upward before resting on G#, a charged and poignantly dissonant note in the home key of D major. The secondary theme of the movement is drawn from *Juarez* (1939), where it expresses Carlotta's love for her husband Maximilian - the doomed monarch of Mexico. As opposed to a conventional sonata form in which the two themes are expected to

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contrast in style and tone, Korngold's freer form (which eschews the typical development section in favor of a cadenza) emphasizes the two themes' similarities - their lyrical, bittersweet character, expressed through gentle dissonances, expansively supple phrases, and the violin's delicate and brilliant upper register.

The second movement is based on themes from *Anthony Adverse* (1936), the film score for which Korngold received his first Academy Award. Interestingly, the treatment of the film's central love theme is radically reconceived in the concerto. Its square rhythms and solid harmonic foundation are replaced by a free, meandering fantasy through which the violinist drifts on arabesques, leaving behind any sense of metered pulse. Although an excerpt of the theme's original form appears towards the end of the movement, even this is buried in the orchestral accompaniment, an all-but-forgotten seed from which the second movement springs.

The finale is an ebullient frolic based loosely on the theme and variations form. The main thematic material is drawn from *The Prince and the Pauper* (1937) and preserves the spirit of this light-hearted film about two boys who switch places to learn how the other half lives. In contrast to the pervasive lyricism of the first two movements, the finale is a mad-dash scramble as orchestra and soloist trade virtuosic passages. The movement rarely takes itself seriously: in the final measures the orchestra grinds to a halt on a grating, minor second dissonance before finishing with a resounding, "all's well" D major hit.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed Korngold's Concerto for Violin and Orchestra in D major on July 10, 1988 with John Nelson conducting and Ida Haendel as soloist.

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Program note by Nathan Platte, doctoral candidate in musicology with a focus on film music at the University of Michigan.

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