

## **KORNGOLD - Violin Concerto in D major, Op. 35**

Captain Blood, The Adventures of Robin Hood, The Sea Hawk and so many more swashbuckling classic movie scores of the 1930s and '40s all came from the creative pen of composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold! Born in Brno, Moravia in 1897, Korngold was the son of renowned music critic Julius Korngold, was raised in Vienna and, as an incredible child prodigy, well deserved the middle name in honour of that other great child prodigy, Mozart. At the age of 5 he was able to play piano duets with his father, was a seasoned composer by the age of 11 and was described by Mahler as a 'musical genius' at the age of 12.

All was set, it would seem, for a remarkable if conventional career as a composer. And this was exactly how things progressed until the early 1930s with Korngold even accepting a role as professor of composition at the Vienna State Academy. However, with the rapidly changing political and social climate in Europe, Korngold took up the offer to write his first Hollywood movie score and, in 1934, moved to Los Angeles with his extended family. Over the next 10 or so years he wrote scores for 16 movies, winning two Oscars and receiving nominations for two more.

Korngold had been very specific and determined in his resolution to write only film music until Hitler had been defeated. With the end of the Second World War in 1945 he returned to composing music for the concert hall, the first product being tonight's gorgeous Violin Concerto.

After initial cajoling from renowned soloist, and founder of what became the Israel Philharmonic, Bronislaw Huberman, Korngold set about proving to the world that he was more than just a 'soundtrack' composer who got his breaks because his father was a noted Viennese critic. The legendary Jascha Heifetz gave the first performance in 1947 to huge acclaim and his subsequent advocacy and recording brought the work into the standard repertoire.

Dedicated to Alma Mahler, widow of the composer, the concerto not surprisingly leans heavily upon much of the lush romanticism from the movie scores of the previous decade. The solo violin opens the first movement with a soaring account of the melody from *Another Dawn* before taking us to the 1939 movie *Suarez* for the second theme - along the way there's a passing reference to *Alma's theme* from Mahler's Symphony No.6. The second movement, entitled Romance quotes from *Anthony Adverse* before luxuriating in the middle section with a newly composed theme. The finale is a highly virtuosic jig redolent of all those pirate movie scores from the previous decade and employs the main theme from *The Prince and the Pauper*.

## **Mussorgsky - Pictures at an Exhibition**

When the architect and painter Viktor Hartmann died suddenly at the age of 39, shock waves were sent around the cultural community of Imperial St. Petersburg. His close friend Modest Mussorgsky was particularly devastated and, following a commemorative exhibition of more than 400 works of Hartmann's at the Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg in February and March of 1874, was inspired to compose his suite *Pictures at an Exhibition*: most of the works shown at that exhibition are now, sadly, lost. The year 1874 marked the composer's zenith, in terms of public acclaim at least. His opera *Boris Godunov* received nine performances and audience reaction was said to be tumultuous. However, Mussorgsky always suffered when the critics' reaction was negative and his spirits sank even further at this time.

The suite, *Pictures at an Exhibition*, was conceived as a collection of ten short pieces for solo piano, each one depicting a different work in the exhibition. The listener's stroll through that exhibition is marked by a linking 'promenade' theme whose own character varies as the effect created by each picture changes. However, whilst '*Pictures*' is a composition in every solo pianist's repertoire, the vast majority of music lovers are acquainted with this magnificent and original work through one of the several colourful orchestrations that have been created over the years, most frequently that by French composer Maurice Ravel.

After the opening Promenade the first illustration is of '*Gnomus*', described as "A sketch depicting a little gnome, clumsily running with crooked legs." It's not hard to imagine this nutcracker with large teeth and hideous features lurching around trying not to be seen. The next Promenade, thoughtful and reflective, leads us to '*The Old Castle*', where the plaintive chanting of the bassoon and saxophone represent a troubadour singing his song. A brief restatement of the Promenade theme, when the viewer swiftly moves on, takes us to the garden of the '*Tuileries*' near the Louvre in Paris; the avenues are swarming with children and nurses, the latter trying their hardest to stop the children squabbling. Hartmann's friend, the distinguished critic, Vladimir Stasov described the next movement, *Bydlo*, as "A Polish cart on enormous wheels, drawn by oxen." The tuba takes on the solo role of dragging this heavy load through the mud. In Ravel's arrangement, and how we're most used to hearing this, the music starts softly and far away, passes right by then recedes into the distance. Mussorgsky's original though begins '*forte*' with the cart very much in front of us! The fourth and lightest of the Promenades leads into the next two movements, the '*Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks*' and "*Samuel*" *Goldenberg* and "*Schmuyle*" - the latter being a pair of paintings that Mussorgsky actually owned. '*Limoges. The Market*' and '*Catacombs - With the Dead in a Dead Language*' are the next two movements with Stasov describing the former as "French women quarrelling violently in the market" and where in the latter, "Hartmann represented himself examining the Paris catacombs by the light of a lantern."

Into the closing straits now with the final two movements, '*Baba Yaga*' the supernatural folklore figure who flies around in a mortar wielding a pestle to terrify everyone and '*The Bogatyr Gates*', part of a grand design by Hartmann for the city of Kiev... "in the ancient Russian massive style with a cupola shaped like a slavonic helmet."