CD Review by Jerry Dubins

KORNGOLD String Quartets: No. 1 in A, op. 16; **No. 2 in E♭,** op. 26; **No. 3 in D,** op. 34. [1] **Piano Quintet in E,** op. 15. [2] **String Sextet in D,** op. 10 • Pacifica Qrt; Orion Weiss[1] (pn); Milena Pájaro van den Stadt[2] (va); Eric Kim[2] (vc) • ÇEDILLE 90000240 (2 CDs: 148:56)

What a feast for the ears! Included in this two-disc Korngold compilation is a goodly portion of the composer's chamber works. One thing I'll mention right off the top is that to fit all of these works onto two CDs, the producers of this set found it necessary to split the String Quartet No. 3 across the two discs, with the first three movements on disc one, and the fourth-movement finale at the beginning of disc two. Whether this could have been avoided, I don't know, but I suspect if there had been a way around it, the producers would have found it.

Performed by one of America's premiere string quartet ensembles, the Pacifica Quartet, and joined by Orion Weiss in the Piano Quintet and by second violist Milena Pájaro van den Stadt and second cellist Eric Kim in the String Sextet, we have here in the Quintet of 1920–21, and the Sextet of 1914–16, two of Korngold's early examples of larger-scaled chamber works, and his three string quartets, which came later (1923), much later (1933), and much, much later (1945), respectively.

There are some interesting things to note about this chronology. First is what I would call "the Beethoven phobia." The string quartet existed on a higher plane, compositionally and aesthetically, than other forms of chamber music. Korngold, and many other composers, were not comfortable approaching the string quartet until they believed they had mastered its less challenging chamber music subspecies. It's not just that Korngold's three string quartets came after his Piano Quintet and String Sextet, but look at the spread between the them: 10 years between Nos. 1 and 2, and 12 years between Nos. 2 and 3.

Second, even the Sextet didn't come until after Korngold had scored a major success with his opera *Violanta* in 1914, and the Piano Quintet didn't come until after he hit the jackpot with his opera *Die tote Stadt*, in 1916–19, which assured his international fame.

Third, it wasn't until well after the end of World War I that Korngold composed his first string quartet in 1923, a particularly pivotal year for music history in general and for musical life in Korngold's Vienna, for it was in that year that Schoenberg published his *Method of composing with twelve tones which are related only with one another*, and completed his Suite for Piano, op. 25, believed to be his first fully Twelve-tone composition. Korngold was not part of Schoenberg's circle of composers and bed-hoppers, but Korngold did maintain a cordial relationship with Schoenberg, in spite of the two men's incompatible ideas on the topic of musical craft and style.

Soon, the two of them would find their aesthetic differences meaningless against the backdrop of rising anti-Semitism. It mattered not a whit to the Nazis that one of them, Korngold, was a guard at the gate, protecting the great legacy of Germany and Austria's musical Romantic, while the other, Schoenberg, was the destroyer, trying to tear it all down. No, all that mattered to the Nazis was that both of them were Jews.

Both composers saw the handwriting on the wall, and both traveled to the U.S. in the same year, 1933, that Hitler was appointed Germany's Chancellor. Korngold's String Quartet No. 2, composed in that fateful year, was one of the last, if not *the* last work he would write before making his first trip from Vienna to Hollywood, at the invitation of Max Reinhardt, to begin a new career, composing scores for Hollywood films.

Unlike Schoenberg, who remained in the U.S. after his arrival, Korngold continued to shuttle back and forth between Hollywood and Vienna, fulfilling assignments and obligations at both locations for the next five years, until 1938, when German forces invaded Austria to cheering crowds. Everything that he'd owned in Vienna was confiscated, and his wife and family members still there were left destitute and stranded. By whatever means, Korngold was able to get them out and to safety back in the U.S. before it was too late, and there the composer, now a naturalized citizen, remained in California for the rest of his life.

That brings us to the String Quartet No. 3. If the No. 2 was the last work he wrote in Vienna in 1933 just before his first trip to Hollywood, the No. 3, composed in 1945 was his last chamber work, period. Korngold may have been the brightest star among the movie industry's composers of film scores, and he was paid accordingly by Warner Brothers studio, but he fell into a deep depression, feeling that he had failed to fulfill his life's promise, which was opera and serious orchestral concert works. He even admitted, "Just as I do for the operatic stage, I try to invent for the motion picture dramatically melodious music with symphonic development and variation of the themes." With that statement one wonders if he even paid much attention to the plots and scenes of the movies he was

scoring for. He imagined himself writing operas, and the music he wrote for the motion pictures was probably better than the movies it was intended for.

The war in Europe, then nearing its end, weighed heavily on Korngold as well. Surely, he had lost friends, acquaintances, and associates in the long nightmare. It's said that "as he watched the lights of night shift aircraft workers' cars streaming over the Cahuenga Pass from Los Angeles to the Lockheed aircraft factory in North Hollywood, he exclaimed to his wife, 'This will be Hitler's end!'"

Korngold made the long journey not just from Vienna to Hollywood, but an equally long voyage in his musical development. For maximum appreciation of this collection of his works, I'd strongly suggest that you listen to them, not as they're programmed on these two discs, but rather in chronological order. The three string quartets are up first, but if you listen to them before the String Sextet and the Piano Quintet, you will not hear how Korngold went from keeper of the late Romantic flame to a style much closer to Schoenbergian atonality than you might imagine.

So, begin with the String Sextet, starting on track five of disc two. Every so often, the flame flickers briefly to reveal in the shadow it casts a distorted, surreal image of Brahms, but it quickly fades as the wind blows the flame in another direction. Timothy Judd, who authored a description of the piece for The Listeners' Club, framed it perfectly, writing, "this is music which basks in the twilight of Romanticism. As with the works of late Strauss and early Schoenberg, it pushes the harmonic language to its chromatic limits, yet always falls back into the sensuous grandeur of tonality. At moments, melodic threads emerge that will remind you of the most beautiful and transcendent passages of Mahler. It feels youthful and vigorous, yet there is also a sense of autumnal nostalgia."

Tonality is stretched to the breaking point in the way that objects are said to be stretched as they approach the event horizon of a black hole, though volunteers are still needed to confirm that theory. We speak often of the decadence and death rattle that spelled the end of the Romantic period. It did not "go gentle into that good night," and Korngold's Sextet is a case study in the period's gloaming. You have, on the one hand, moments of exquisite, breathtaking melodic beauty—listen to the passage beginning at 5:57 in the first movement—followed by fracturing of the line and a descent into chromatic chaos.

In the second movement (*Adagio*), which, to me, evokes the dying whimpers of a wounded animal, Korngold takes us to a place he would go only in his later works to give us a foretaste of Ivesian bi-tonality. Admittedly, it can be challenging at points to hear this Sextet as music that radiates the Romantic ethos, but everything dies in its own way.

The Pacifica Quartet's members—Simon Ganatra and Austin Hartman, violins; Mark Holloway, viola, and Brandon Vamos, cello—joined by extra violist Milena Pájaro van den Stadt and extra cellist Eric Kim demonstrate a most insightful ability to make Korngold's head-spinning changes in mood and textural content clear, coherent, and cogent for even a first-time listener—a remarkable accomplishment and a stirring performance.

Compared to the Sextet, the Piano Quintet of just four years later seems more in keeping with Korngold's reputation as a composer in the end-stage throes of Romantic passion, at least for the first minute or so of the piece. But ground control to Flight op. 15, "Fasten your seat belts; you're in for a bumpy ride ahead." It isn't long before the *legato*, tonal lyricism turns rhythmically disjointed, tonality is diluted by increasing chromaticism, and the piquancy of dissonant notes finish the roux.

The rapid-fire changes of texture and mood suggest that it wasn't just operas Korngold was writing in his head as he composed his film scores; his chamber music manifests the same impression of rapidly shifting scenes in a movie in which the accompanying soundtrack portrays the moment-to-moment emotional states of the characters and the actions taking place on the screen. Listen, for example, to the passage beginning at 2:20 in the quintet's first movement. Suddenly, after being buffeted by headwinds, tailwinds, and turbulence, seemingly out of nowhere, we find ourselves drawn into music of an incomparably tender and moving love scene. But enjoy the moment while you can because it soon morphs into something stealthy-sounding, like thieves in the dead of night tiptoeing towards the target of their planned robbery. As they close in, the pace of the music, like their heartbeats, picks up, and you can feel the adrenalin rush in your throat.

I have to admit that hearing this performance of the Quintet by the Pacifica Quartet and pianist Orion Weiss caused me to experience Korngold's music in a different way than I ever have before. I say this not in a demeaning or deprecating way, but I understand this now to be movie music long before Korngold traveled to Hollywood, composed his first film score, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 1935, and ever dreamed of writing music for the silver screen. He was, as they say, "to the manner born;" it was in him, his personal genie, from the very start. His film scores aren't imagined operas he never got to write; quite the opposite, his operas, real and imagined, and so, too, his chamber music and symphonic works, are the film scores that were in his future.

I realize this is a controversial idea, but if you listen to these works, especially as they're so compellingly performed here, I think the argument can be made that this is why Korngold's music has always had such a strong emotional appeal. Taken as purely abstract works, they're really not all that great. The constant shifting of textures and moods, the dense chromaticism and dissonance that render the music in many passages virtually atonal, the

lack of what we normally think of as thematic development in chamber and symphonic music, all of that is problematic when listened to as music without an extra-musical program.

But imagine a movie playing in your head as you listen to these works, and suddenly they make sense and Korngold's magic is revealed. These are the best film scores ever written, and that is not a putdown, nor is it to say that the music is in anyway inferior to the non-programmatic works by other composers.

Earlier in this review, I wrote that Korngold went from keeper of the late Romantic flame to a style much closer to Schoenbergian atonality than you might imagine. The String Sextet and the Piano Quintet teeter on the edge, but now turn to the three string quartets. The passages of Romantic passion are fewer and farther between and more fleeting. The movie score elements are still dominant, but the movies this music is written for is avant-garde cinema.

The First String Quartet manages to maintain a hold on tonality, but it's a tenuous one. Its second movement, *Adagio quasi Fantasia* is actually quite beautiful in its spellbinding, tragic way. The influence here is not Schoenberg but instead quite similar to Richard Strauss's yet-to-be written *Metamorphosen*. If you like that piece—and I know that many don't—you will definitely respond positively to the second movement of Korngold's String Quartet No. 1.

The beginning of the String Quartet No. 2 is promising, offering a bit of lighthearted gaiety that proves Korngold did have a sense of humor. The first movement may, in fact, be the easiest and most appealing movement to listen to in these three quartets. Korngold teases with diatonic scales and V-I cadences that come unexpectedly amid partings in the chromatic clouds. Tickling of the funny bone continues in the movement that follows. It's designated Intermezzo, but its tempo, busybody chattering, and odd stoppages resembling pratfalls, is more in the manner of a scherzo.

With the third movement, *Larghetto*, one has the feeling that Korngold is regressing to his Romantic roots. This is music of a beauty one associates with Mahler, or in other words, with the side effect of the anti-depressant that makes you think of killing yourself. The finale, titled "Waltz" is a Viennese dance hall, with rosy-cheeked fräuleins and their suitors gliding across the dance-room floor to the strains of Johann Strauss II's waltzes. Overall, I'd have to say that Korngold's Second String Quartet is the gem amongst the schist, but that's just my opinion.

While Korngold never adopted Schoenberg's Twelve-tone method, he went as far as he could to compose music that sounds pretty much like it. There comes a point where a

piece of music is so freely chromatic that it needn't be systematized or serialized into a tone row that uses every note of the chromatic scale before it begins to sound like the very thing it isn't. If you listen to any one of these works in its entirety, you will not mistake it for Schoenberg. There is still much in the way of febrile passion and Romantic beauty in this music that won't be found in Schoenberg's obsessive-compulsive repetition of tone rows, but during the course of any one of these Korngold works, you will encounter passages that don't just push the envelope of tonality, they seal it and send it off in the mail. Perhaps a closer comparison to Korngold than Schoenberg is Zemlinsky, who taught Schoenberg and was then later disinclined to embrace his one-time student's methodology. Zemlinsky's music, like Korngold's, despite its dense chromaticism, managed to hold on to the remnants of tonality and to an overheated Romantic style.

The performances here by the Pacifica Quartet and artist extras where called for are truly powerful in their communicative strength and gloriously luxuriant in tone. If you've detected at various points throughout this review that I was never much of a fan of Korngold's music, that would have been true before I received this two-disc Korngold Collection set. But the Pacifica Quartet, Weiss, van den Stadt, and Kim have caused me to hear these works in a way I've not heard or thought about them before. My theory may be controversial and dead wrong, but I'm now convinced that the key to Korngold's non-film-score music (which includes his operas, his chamber works, and his symphonic/orchestral works for the concert stage) is through his film-score music. And these performances can take credit for getting me to really appreciate Korngold for the first time. Urgently recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 49:4 (Mar/Apr 2026) of *Fanfare* Magazine.