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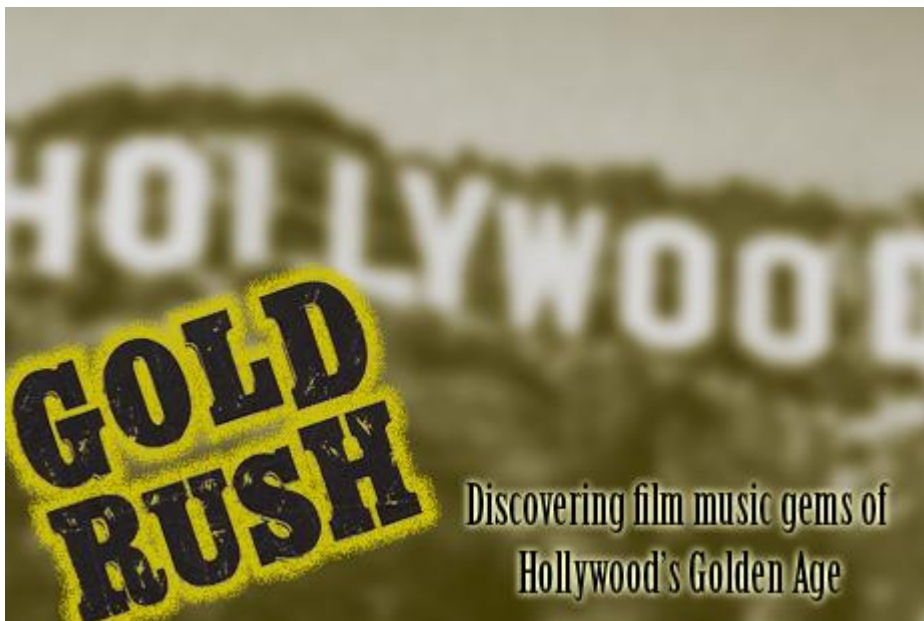
Springing Backward

A look at the best of the year so far.

STAR TREK

Gold Rush: The Hollywood Concerto **Behind Erich Wolfgang Korngold's crossover concerto.**

By James Lochner



Film music and the concert hall have always forged a strained relationship. “Classical” (for lack of a better term) composers seldom write for film—Prokofiev, Shostakovich, Copland, Corigliano, Glass and Muhly are a few exceptions. And unless it is programmed as part of a pops concert, film music rarely crosses over into the concert world.

That’s why, browsing through the bins in the Classical section of Tower Records at Lincoln Center one day in 1994, I was shocked to hear what I thought was film music soaring from the overhead speakers. The recording was a new Deutsche Gramophon CD of Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s *Violin Concerto*, performed by Gil Shaham, with André Previn conducting the London Symphony Orchestra. I was unfamiliar with Korngold’s concert music, but what I heard gave me goose bumps and I sat down on the floor in a back corner of the store to listen to the rest of it. Little did I know at the time, but without help from the good folks at Warner Bros., the concerto most certainly would not have existed in its current form.

When it came time to renew Korngold’s contract in 1938, Warner Bros. bowed to all of the composer’s demands, creating a situation for Korngold unique among other composers in Hollywood. Korngold was limited to a maximum of not more than two films in any 12-month period. (Compare that to the 11 films— including *Gone With the Wind*—Max Steiner scored in 1939.) Korngold was also allowed to select his projects

and his name was given its own title card in the main credits, as well as included on the film's poster. But most important, the music he composed would remain his property to use as he saw fit.



Because of the problems in Europe, Korngold moved himself and his family permanently to Hollywood in January 1938. Though he first began to sketch the concerto in the 1930s, Korngold vowed to stop composing concert music until Hitler was defeated and focused his energies on film music as a means of support. In early 1945, as the war in Europe was winding down, Korngold gave up his film work and returned to the concerto, incorporating themes from four of his film scores.

Another Dawn (1937) stars Errol Flynn, Ian Hunter and Kay Francis in a Saharan love triangle shot on the sets left over from Flynn's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The title of the film sprang from an inside joke at Warner Bros. Whenever the studio depicted a marquee or poster of a fictional film in one of their productions, the film's title was always *Another Dawn*. Stuck for a title on this Flynn film, the studio opted for *Another Dawn*, and had to find another phony film title whenever the necessity arose. The film has since faded into the sands of time except for Korngold's music, especially from its exposure within the concerto. (A 1996 Marco Polo CD of the score is now out of print.)

The film's love theme forms the first subject of the violin solo in the first movement. According to Korngold biographer Brendan G. Carroll, Korngold may have sketched this for an early version of the concerto, as he mentioned in a Viennese newspaper interview in May, 1937. In addition, Korngold's father, renowned music critic Julius Korngold, always admired the theme and suggested it could be the basis for a violin concerto. "But which came first?" asks Carroll. "We shall never know."

The love theme from *Juarez* (1936) supplies the violin's second subject. The film, based on the novel *Maximilian and Carlotta* by Franz Werfel, late husband of Alma Mahler-Werfel (to whom the concerto is dedicated), stars Bette Davis and Paul Muni. The coda beautifully ties the two themes together. In his liner notes for the Shaham recording, Anthony Burton explains, "both ideas exploit the solo instrument's capacity

for expressive melody in all its registers, while the transition between them, the central development section and the coda offer brief opportunities for virtuosity.

“Angela’s Theme” from *Anthony Adverse* (1936) forms the main theme for the second movement. Based on Hervey Allen’s 1933 mammoth 1,200-page bestseller, *Anthony Adverse* stars Fredric March, Olivia de Havilland (as Angela) and Claude Rains. A huge hit in its day, the film won four Academy Awards, including the first Supporting Actress Oscar for Gale Sondergaard (who won, according to one IMDB reviewer, “simply by grinning satanically for two hours”) and one for Korngold’s score. Today *Anthony Adverse* is largely overlooked. The film has never been released on DVD and even Varèse Sarabande’s weak 1991 recording of the score is long out of print.



Because of Academy rules at the time, however, the award went to the head of the Music Department and not the composer. Korngold was unaware of this and, fortunately, did not attend the ceremony. Leopold Stokowski (who was in Hollywood to star with Deanna Durbin in *100 Men and a Girl*, the controversial winner of the next year’s Oscar for Best Score) presented the award to Warner Bros. Music Department head, Leo Forbstein.

Knowing full well that the award belonged to Korngold, Forbstein sent a conciliatory note to the composer and published a message of congratulations in *The Hollywood Reporter*. Though the two men got along, Korngold wrote an incensed letter back and refused to accept the statuette even after Forbstein offered it to him. “I am obliged to see a certain intention in the decision of the Academy to give the award to someone other than the composer of the score himself,” wrote Korngold, “and I am not in a position to accept an award given officially and publicly to you by way of a private gift.” The award remained in Forbstein’s office until his death in 1949 when it was finally returned to Korngold.



As part of his contract, Korngold had to complete a second film following *Anthony Adverse* before being allowed to return to Vienna. He was offered the lavish production of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, again starring Errol Flynn. The rousing opening French horn call from the film is played almost verbatim in the concerto, but not until the violin has a little fun with it along the way. Beginning with a lively 6/8 gigue, the theme is transformed into a 2/4 folk song in the violin's second subject and further adapted into a virtuosic 2/4 dance in the coda.

Jascha Heifetz premiered the concerto on February 15, 1947, at a sold out concert in St. Louis, with Vladimir Goldschmann conducting. "In spite of the demand for virtuosity in the finale," wrote Korngold in the concert program, "the work with its many melodic and lyrics episodes was contemplated rather for a Caruso than a Paganini. It is needless to say how delighted I am to have my concerto performed by Caruso and Paganini in one person: Jascha Heifetz." One local critic wrote, "Whether the concerto is great music, one, after only a first hearing, would hate to say...Only Time will assess its authentic values. This enthusiastic admirer believes Time will find true values there."

"My violin concerto was triumphantly received in St. Louis. A success like in the best times in Vienna," Korngold wrote in a letter to Josef Reitler, formerly a critic of *Neue Musikalische Presse*, then currently a professor at Hunter College.. "I now have five weeks until the New York critics tear it apart...Is there any chance you could get a small report of its success into the New York music press or even a daily paper...If the knowledge of this success reaches the music world...before the New York critics vent their snobbish, atonal anger on it, the violin concerto may be a decisive turning point for me, a comeback!"

Korngold's plea was in vain. Olin Downs in *The New York Times* disparagingly called it a "Hollywood Concerto." And Irving Kolodin in *The Sun* quipped, "More corn than gold," a wisecrack that stuck to the work, and Korngold's music in general, for 40 years.

"Unfortunately, American critics were merciless in their contempt for composers,

conductors, and performers who had ‘sold out’ to Hollywood. This caused Korngold much sorrow,” said renowned violinist Louis Kaufman, who played on numerous Korngold scores, including *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, *The Sea Hawk*, *The Sea Wolf*, *Kings Row* and *Between Two Worlds*. “This lyric concerto will long outlast many arid twelve-tone concertos now praised by self-styled ‘Beckmessers.’ Time alone will sort out the music and art worthy of enduring admiration.”



True Value: Legendary violinist Jascha Heifetz.

Heifetz recorded the work for RCA Victor in January 1953 with Alfred Wallenstein and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. “Many consider it to be the finest recording ever made by Heifetz,” said Carroll, “and it was the first major Korngold work to be issued on long playing records.” In addition to Heifetz and Shaham, the concerto has since been recorded by such legendary violinists as Itzhak Perlman, Anne-Sophie Mutter and Hilary Hahn, and is regularly performed in concert.

Time apparently has found the concerto worthy of enduring admiration.

James Lochner is a freelance writer and the author of FilmScoreClickTrack.com.

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