

Programme notes by Chris Darwin: use freely for non-commercial purposes

Erich Korngold (1897-1957) String Quartet No.3 in D, Op.34 (1945)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo. Allegro molto

Sostenuto. Like a folk tune

Finale. Allegro

Korngold's youth was a hard act to follow. Aged 9, the young Austrian prodigy played his cantata *Gold* to Mahler, who pronounced him a genius; aged 11 he composed a ballet whose performance caused a sensation two years later, when his Piano Trio and a Piano Sonata so impressed Artur Schnabel that he championed the works all over Europe. Richard Strauss remarked: "This assurance of style, this mastery of form, this characteristic expressiveness, this bold harmony, are truly astonishing!" Puccini, Sibelius, Bruno Walter and many others were similarly impressed. In his early 20s he composed his operatic masterpiece *Die Tote Stadt* and briefly outstripped Strauss as the most performed composer from German-speaking countries. Incidentally, he also had the distinction, aged 25, of having a brand of high-end cigarettes named 'Heliane' after his latest opera *Das Wunder der Heliane*. This opera contains some of his most intense music. However, Strauss' "concern that so precocious a genius should follow its normal development" proved prescient.

Around this time he began arranging and conducting classic operettas by Johann Strauss, Leo Fall and Offenbach - work that took up an increasing proportion of his time. In late 1934 Max Reinhardt invited him to Hollywood to work on a film version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Korngold was asked to arrange Mendelssohn's overture and incidental music to accompany the movie, though he also incorporated other Mendelssohn works and a small amount of his own original material into the score. Its success and the advent of the second war led to Korngold committing more to film scores for Warner Bros. and less to his own independent compositions. He became depressed and vowed not to write concert works until Hitler was defeated. The end of the war together with the death of his domineering father brought a questioning of his career path ('*First I was a prodigy, then a successful opera composer in Europe . . . then a movie composer . . . I feel I have to make a decision now, if I don't want to be a Hollywood composer for the rest of my life*') and a subsequent resurgence of creativity. In December 1945, he surprised his wife with a Christmas present - the final sketch of the new String Quartet No. 3, his first post-World War II classical work. His wife later wrote, "Erich had come back to himself."

The quartet is dedicated to Bruno Walter - another émigré living in Beverly Hills. The interval of the seventh which appears twice in the first bar (*illustrated*) is a unifying element throughout the quartet. The first movement is the most challenging for the listener, as if Korngold is at pains to assert that he is writing serious music again. Indeed, although the movement is nominally in D major, the violins in the first two bars somewhat wistfully play all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. In contrast to this generally descending opening theme, the second subject is a gently rising one (*illustrated*). The exploration of these questioning themes is interrupted by a *subito agitato* section that is like Shostakovich in its brutality. But these beasts are banished and

Allegro moderato

Poco piu Mosso

the main, descending, theme returns strengthened and finally returns at a slow speed before the movement comes to rest with relief, home in D major.

The short, cheekily skittish *Scherzo* calls for virtuosic nimbleness especially from the first violin. Note that the viola's repeating accompanying figure (*illustrated*) is a sequence of three rising sevenths.



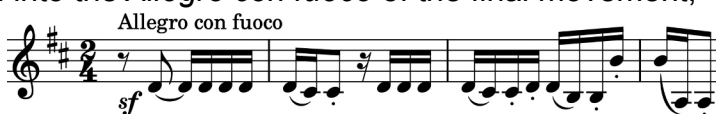
The *Trio* slides up a semitone into E major and then seduces us with a gorgeous tune (*illustrated*) based on one from Korngold's (allegedly favourite) score to the film *Between Two Worlds* (1944); but we are not allowed to wallow for long before another sequence of those sevenths takes us back to the skittish *Scherzo*.



The substantial *Sostenuto* third movement is based on a muted theme (*illustrated*) taken from the love scene of Korngold's 1943 score to the film *The Sea Wolf*. The theme itself mainly uses intervals of fourths which together with the simple accompanying line give it, an endearing open transparency. The movement consists of variations on this theme, some of which, without mutes and introduced by tremolo and rising sevenths, enter a much harsher world.



A few bars of *Allegretto* introduction lead into the *Allegro con fuoco* of the final movement, whose rhythmically tense, unison theme (*illustrated*) could have been written by Korngold's neighbour in Hollywood Igor Stravinsky. This energetic fun gives way initially to the viola playing a theme Korngold later used in the 1946 film *Devotion*, about the Brontë sisters. The fun returns and subsequently gives way to reminiscences of earlier themes from this quartet and a version of the opening, before galloping off to a triumphant conclusion.



Korngold's willingness and ability to share his ideas between his film music and music for the concert hall are reflected in this comment from an interview in 1946: "It is not true that cinema places a restraint on musical expression. Music is music whether it is for the stage, rostrum or cinema. Form may change, the manner of writing may vary, but the composer needs to make no concessions whatever to what he conceives to be his own musical ideology."