

ERICH WOLFGANG KORNGOLD

Literature Search: Descriptions of Korngold's Music

Two pieces of documentary evidence figure prominently in the references to Korngold in music literature. The first is a letter written to Korngold's father by Richard Strauss in 1910; the second is a poll conducted by a Viennese newspaper in 1930. Since both documents have been used somewhat carelessly by biographers it is important to establish what they say, and to investigate the way they have been used.

Strauss Writes to Julius: Making Korngold Pt 2. Interpretations and Translations 1910-2000.

In December 1909 Korngold's father Julius sent scores of his son's works (Piano sonata No 1, Don Quixote, Six Characteristic Pieces and Der Schneemann) to some forty musical experts¹ living outside Vienna. On 3rd January² Richard Strauss replied with comments. An extract of his letter was quoted alongside Professor Kretzschmar's³ in Universal Edition's advertisement for the score of *Schneemann*.

Richard Strauss schreibt: 'Diese Sicherheit im Stil, die Beherrschung der Form, diese Eigenart des **Ausdruckes**. **dieser** Harmonik, es ist wirklich erstaunenswert'.⁴

The original letter in German was lost in 1938 and rediscovered in 1983, and a translation of the full text by Willi Schuh was published in 1997 by Erich's biographer Brendan Carroll. This translation reads as follows, with the sentences classified (a) – (h) for reference purposes.

(a) Today I received your son's compositions and have read them with the greatest astonishment. (b) This case hardly calls for mere congratulations: the first feeling one has when one realizes that this was written by an 11 year old boy is that of awe and concern that so precocious a genius would be able to follow its normal development, which one would wish him so sincerely. (c) This assurance of style, this mastery of form, this characteristic expressiveness in the sonata, this bold harmony, are truly astonishing. (d) How happy you must feel! (e) But now take this young genius away from his desk and his music; send him to the countryside for tobogganing, skiing, . . . lest his young brain becomes prematurely tired and worn out

¹ "asuwärtige Musiker und Sachverständige". Julius Korngold. *Die Korngolds in Wien*. Zürich: M&T Verlag, 1991. 129.

² Misdated to 3 January 1909, and translated by Strauss scholar Prof Dr Schuh, from the original highly idiosyncratic script for Brendan Carroll.

³ Professor Kretzschmar (...) 'Selbst unter den ausserordentlichen Fällen musikalischer Frühreife bleibt der Ihres Sohnes noch phänomenal'.

⁴ Originally published in *Allgemeinen Musik-Zeitung* 27.5.1910. **The advertisement is reprinted by Julius Korngold, 1944? 1991.135.**

before it reaches its full productivity. (f) I am looking forward to making the personal acquaintance with this arch-musician. (g) My best wishes accompany him on his future paths. (h) With best regards and thanks again for the most interesting dispatch.⁵

Confronted with a child prodigy⁶, Strauss expresses both excitement and caution. The excitement is based on his appreciation of Erich's craftsmanship in style, form, expression and harmony (c), while his caution is based on a wish that Erich avoids becoming either burned out or a boy who missed out on the normal experiences of childhood (e).

Pertinent here is Julius's quote recollected in 1945 of Arthur Nikisch's words which bear an uncanny resemblance to Strauss's sentiments and phrasing.

“But this is *phenomenal!* I am really *excited* about these pieces. I mean the compositions as such, without the consideration that they are written by a boy of thirteen. What *flowering imagination*, what *invention*, what *daring harmonic innovation!!* One is really at loss (sic) what to admire the most! Good Lord, what rich gifts will the world be given by this genius, if he develops in a normal way. May the Almighty only grant health to this chosen being – then there will be nothing to be afraid of”⁷

In his 1922 biography of Erich, Hoffmann published an extract from the letter, presumably provided to him by Julius. This was the first appearance of the letter in the literature. It provides the German version of most of sentence (b) and all of sentence (c). Noting Schuh's translation and the 1945 version (see below) it seems that Hoffmann omitted the phrase “wenn man hört, daß dies ein elfjähriger Junge geschrieben hat” in sentence (b) after the word “überkommt”.

(...) das erste Gefühl, das einem überkommt, ist Schrecken und Furcht, daß ein solch frühreifes Genie auch die normale Entwicklung nehmen möge, die ihm so innig zu wünschen wäre. Diese Sicherheit im Stil, diese Beherrschung der Form, diese Eigenart des Ausdrucks in der Sonate, diese Harmonik, - es ist wirklich erstaunenswert.⁸

The first published appearance of Strauss' words outside Europe appears to be in Ewen's 1934 American publication. Here the comments are misattributed to Erich's opera *Die tote Stadt* of 1920 (!). The extract is sentence (c) and the source was either Hoffmann's biography or the advertisement from Universal Edition. Neither source explains the attribution to *Die tote Stadt*.

⁵ Brendan Carroll, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold. The Last Prodigy*. 1997,43.

⁶ **Fig 1. studio photograph of Erich in 1909, playing in studio “snow”. First published in R.S. Hoffmann. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Wien: C.S. Verlag, 1922. facing p16.**

⁷ Quoted in Julius Korngold. *Child Prodigy*. 1945.30.

⁸ **R.S. Hoffmann. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Wien: C.S. Verlag, 1922. 11.**

This assurance of style, this mastery of form, this individuality of expression, these harmonies are astounding,⁹

By mistaking the work and the date, Ewen attributes Strauss's opinions of Korngold's early accomplishments to those of his maturity. In 1934 Ewen believes that Strauss was a "great composer whose life-work ended two decades ago"¹⁰, and that his decline could be pinpointed to the works of the 1920s.

Since *Alpensinfonie* (...) descent from the heights has been rapid. With operas such as *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* (1919) and *Egyptian Helen* (1928), with orchestral works such as *Schlagobers* (1924) (...) poison had set in Strauss's former inspiration. His ideas lacked freshness; his music was now being manufactured (...) without blood or the pulse of life, (...) all technique and no soul.

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In his 1944 memoirs written seven years after the loss of the letter,¹² **and unpublished until 1991**, Julius Korngold, then in his mid-eighties, recalled its contents.

(b1) Richard Strauss schrieb: "Zu gratulieren ist da kaum. das erste Gefühl, das einen überkommt, wenn man hört, daß dies ein elfjähriger Junge geschrieben hat, ist Schrecken und Furcht, daß ein so frühreifes Genie auch die normale Entwicklung nehmen möge, die ihm so innig zu wünschen wäre. (c1) Diese Sicherheit im Stil, die

⁹ David Ewen. Editor and Compiler. "Erich Wolfgang Korngold. 1897- " in *Composers of Today*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1934. 146.1.

¹⁰ Ie closer to the time Strauss made his comments about Korngold.

¹¹ David Ewen. Editor and Compiler. Strauss, Richard" in *Composers of Today*. New York: H.W. Wilson, 1934. 260-4. 263.

¹² The letter was lost during the Korngold's escape from Hitler's Austria in 1938 and reappeared at a public auction in 1983.

Beherrschung der Form, diese Eigenart des Ausdrucks in der Sonate, diese Harmonik, es ist wirklich erstaunenswert.”¹³

Except for the reference to the sonata(c), which is not included in Universal Edition’s 1910 advertisement, Julius’s memory appears faultless. Perhaps a second copy of the letter was available. He might have made a copy for Erich to bring to America in 1934. Notes for his memoirs might have been part of the hand luggage he took to America in 1938 or part of the documents and manuscripts successfully rescued from Nazi confiscation by his eldest son Hans Robert¹⁴. In Julius’s memoirs published in 1945 in proficient English **with no translator credited**, the passage appears as follows: (the Schuh translation is added for the purposes of comparison).

(b1A) This case hardly calls for congratulations. (b1B) The first feeling overcoming us on hearing that this has been written by a boy of eleven is fear and anxiety, lest this *precocious genius* might not develop as normally as we must wish so devoutly. (c) This firmness of style, this sovereignty of form, this individual expression in the sonata, this harmonic structure – it is really astounding.¹⁵

(Schuh)(b) This case hardly calls for mere congratulations: the first feeling one has when one realizes that this was written by an 11 year old boy is that of awe and concern that so precocious a genius would be able to follow its normal development, which one would wish him so sincerely. (c) This assurance of style, this mastery of form, this characteristic expressiveness in the sonata, this bold harmony, are truly astonishing.

¹³ **Julius Korngold. *Die Korngolds in Wien: Der Musikkritiker und das Wunderkind. (Memoirs): 1944. 129. Printed in German in 1944. Published in 1991.***

¹⁴ It is possible that the letter was part of a collection of memorabilia reportedly “lost” in Los Vegas by Julius’s eldest son. Seen by Julius as something of a black sheep, Hans, named after Robert Schumann, failed to comply with family standards and therefore is substantively absent from their records. His story is possibly worth pursuing.

¹⁵ Julius Korngold. *Child Prodigy. Erich Wolfgang’s Years of Childhood. (Preliminary Printing from the Work of Memoirs: “Postludes in Major and Minor”.* New York: Willard, 1945. 129.

While the differences are, by and large, minor, the 1945 version may reflect a slightly more eulogic tone. In sentence (c) Strauss's original letter merely refers to "die Harmonik" – the harmony; the 1945 work translates this as "harmonic structure" and Schuh translates it as "bold harmony", both of which seek to interpret what Strauss found astonishing. Either is possible.

Just to confuse matters for us, Arthur Nikisch's "words" of 1910 as Julius recalls them firstly in 1944 and secondly in 1945, bear an uncanny resemblance to Strauss's sentiments, the elements he chooses to praise, his hopes and fears, and finally his phrasing. I have classified the sentences to show their correlation to Shuh's translation.

i) 1944 recollection:

(b2) "Das ist ja aber ganz phänomenal. (b2B) Ich bin ordentlich aufgeregt über die Stücke und zwar über die Komposition an sich, nicht nur mit der etwa einschränkenden Erwägung, daß dieselben von einem elfjährigen Knaben herkommen! (c) Welche blühende Erfindung, welche Phantasie, welche Kühnheit in der Harmonik!! (b2B) Wirklich, man weiß nicht, was man mehr bewundern soll! Mein Gott, mit was allem wird dieses Genie die Welt beschenken, wenn es sich normal entwickelt. Gebe der Allmächtige diesem begnadeten Menschenkinde nur Gesundheit – für alles andere braucht einem nicht bange zu sein"¹⁶

i) 1945 translation:

(b2) "But this is *phenomenal!* I am really *excited* about these pieces. (b2B) I mean the compositions as such, without the consideration that they are written by a boy of thirteen. (c2) What *flowering imagination*, what *invention*, what *daring harmonic innovation!* (b2B) One is really at loss (sic) what to admire the most! Good Lord, what rich gifts will the world be given by this genius, if he develops in a normal way. May the Almighty only grant health to this chosen being – then there will be nothing to be afraid of"¹⁷

While Nikisch would have found the compositions Romantically "exciting" albeit with unspecified reservations, even if they had been written by a mature composer, Strauss finds them astonishing perhaps because they show maturity emanating from a child. The translation of (c) rearranges Nikisch's list: - here "imagination" comes before "invention" and Erich's harmonies are perhaps youthful and "daring" instead of masculine and "bold". Julius chooses not to translate Nikisch's acknowledgement of the ambiguity of Erich's maturity and youth. The questions here are, does Nikisch wittingly echo Strauss's apprehension or does Julius paraphrase Strauss's words and attribute them to Nikisch? Certainly, their

¹⁶ Julius Korngold. *Child Prodigy*. Erich Wolfgang's Years of Childhood. (Preliminary Printing from the Work of Memoirs: "Postludes in Major and Minor". New York: Willard, 1945. 129.

¹⁷ Quoted in Julius Korngold. *Child Prodigy*. 1945.30.

different character is apparent, Nikisch being openly effusive, while Strauss is restrained, but by placing the two experts' quotes side by side, Julius can utilise their astonishingly parallel expressions to cement his son's status.

Luzi Korngold is less than supportive of Julius' efforts to promote Erich and what she understands as his unrelenting bourgeois ambitions for himself and therefore his family's cultural acumen. She provides the other substantively reliable, untranslated versions of both experts

Richard Strauss schrieb: (b1B) "Das erste Gefühl, das einen überkommt, wenn man hört, daß dies von einem elfjährigen Jungen geschrieben wurde, ist Schrecken und Furcht, daß ein solch frühreifes Genie auch die normale Entwicklung nehmen möge, die ihn so innig wünschen wäre. (c) Diese Sicherheit im Stil, diese Beherrschung der Form, diese Eigenheit des Ausdrucks in der Sonate, diese Harmonik – es ist wirklich erstaunenswert".¹⁸.

Luzi's version, excepting her corrections of Julius's grammar, bears close resemblance to Julius' 1944 version. She includes the "Sonate" which suggests she had access the Julius's memoirs possibly with permission from her mother-in-law. However her use of "Eigenheit" alludes to Erich's personal idiosyncrasies where Julius's and Strauss' "Eigenart" alludes to his peculiarities as a departure from what might be considered normal or acceptable within a traditional frame. Arthur Nikisch's words as published by Luzi bear a strong resemblance to Julius' translation of 1945.

Arthur Nikisch rief aus: "Aber das ist ja phänomenal! Ich bin wirklich aufgeregt über die Stücke! Ich meine die Kompositionen als solche, ohne Berücksichtigung, daß sie von einem elfjährigen Jungen geschrieben wurden. Was für eine blühende Phantasie, welche Erfindung, welche kühne harmonische Neuerung! Man weiß wirklich nicht, was man am meisten bewundern soll! Lieber Gott, was für reiche Gaben hat die Welt von diesem Genie zu erwarten, wenn es sich normal entwickelt. Möge Gott diesem auserwählten Wesen nur Gesundheit gewähren – dann ist nichts zu fürchten..."¹⁹

It would seem that Luzi uses Strauss' words from Julius' 1944 draft and Nikisch's from Julius' 1945 translation. There seems no obvious reason for this disparity,

¹⁸ Luzi Korngold. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Ein Lebensbild. Österreichischen Komponisten des 20. Jahrhunderts.* Vienna. Elizabeth Lafite. 1967. 12-13.

¹⁹ Luzi Korngold. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Ein Lebensbild. Österreichischen Komponisten des 20. Jahrhunderts.* Vienna. Elizabeth Lafite. 1967. 13.

except that she had access to the putative copy of Strauss's words, but not to Julius' 1944 draft. **Erich's mother died in**

Rudy Behlmer's article,²⁰ which coincides with Luzi's biography, includes what appears to be a translation of the Universal Edition advertisement.

This firmness of style, this sovereignty of form, this individual expression, this harmonic structure – it is really astounding.

Brendan Carroll, writing the article on Erich in the 1980²¹ Grove Dictionary, **appears to have used Julius's 1944 memoir and the 1945 translation** to produce a composite paraphrase of sentences (b) and (c). He correctly dates the letter to 1910.

One's first reaction that these compositions are by an adolescent boy are those of awe and fear: this firmness of style, this sovereignty of form, this individual expression, this harmonic structure – it is really amazing.

Having gained access to Julius's "unpublished memoirs" with George Korngold's permission, Carroll introduces his November 1980 review of *Violanta*²² with another paraphrase.

Such mastery fills one with awe and fear. May he develop his powers to the full in a normal way.

In 1984, the year after the original letter was rediscovered, Carroll uses the paraphrase from his 1980 review as written by Strauss "earlier".²³ In 1985, in his own biography of Erich, Carroll produced another paraphrase of (b) and (c).

Such mastery fills me with awe and fear. May he develop his powers to the full in a normal way.²⁴

Without direct reference to Erich's age, Strauss hopes that his apparently abnormal, unspecified and perhaps Faustian "powers" survive an unspoken danger.

²⁰ Rudy Behlmer "Erich Wolfgang Korngold – Established Some of the Film Music Basics Film Composers Now Ignore" in *Films in Review*, No 182. 1967. 86-100. 88.

²¹ B.G. Carroll. ²¹"Korngold, Erich Wolfgang" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Edited Stanley Sadie, London: MacMillan, 1980. vol 10. 210.

²² Brendan Carroll. "Korngold's 'Violanta' in *The Musical Times*. Vol 121. November 1980. 695-9. 696.

²³ Brendan G. Carroll. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold, 1897-1957: His Life and Works*. Paisley Scotland: Wilfion Books, 1985. 4.

²⁴ Brendan G. Carroll. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold, 1897-1957: His Life and Works*. Paisley Scotland: Wilfion Books, 1985. 4.

Thus by the mid 1990s, when Erich's definitive value was under close scrutiny, the existence of a letter if not its exact content is more apparently common knowledge. The most recent reports of its content have in fact become less representative of its original sentiments.

While subsequent quotes stray further away from the actual text they regain a down-to-earth representation. In 1995 David Raksin,²⁵ who was a film composer in Hollywood at the same time as Erich, acknowledges that he was unable to quote Strauss verbatim, offered the following as a remembered version of Strauss's comments.

I have recently heard a Piano Trio of exceptional brilliance and maturity. But more impressive than the talent displayed by the composer is the fact that he is a twelve year old boy²⁵.

On what were Raskin's memories based? Several possibilities offer themselves. Given his close memory of part of sentence (b) he might have seen the putative copy of Strauss's letter in Erich's possession or read Julius's autobiography, as published in 1991, and therefore knew that the extract referred to specific works. However the reinvention of sentence (a) suggests the letter had become common knowledge in the Hollywood musical community.

In 1996, Jessica Duchon includes a close paraphrase of sentence (b) and almost an exact copy of (c) and though her source is not given, the implication is that **she had consulted the 1991 GERMAN PUBLICATION OF JULIUS'S memoirs.**

The first reaction on learning that this has been written by a boy of eleven is something of a shock mingled with apprehension, that such a precocious genius may not experience the normal development one sincerely hopes for him. The stylistic assurance, mastery of form, individuality of expression in the sonata, these harmonies – they all are really astonishing.²⁶

²⁵ http://www.americancomposers.org/raksin_korngold.htm
David Raksin Remembers his Colleagues Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Copyright 1995 by David Raksin. Published on the ACO website with the kind permission of the author

²⁶ Jessica Duchon. *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. London: Phaidon, 1996. 30.

In 1997 Bernd Rachold, **who wrote an epilogue to Julius's Memoirs published in German in 1991**, offered this paraphrase in his liner notes to the recording *Much Ado about Nothing*. Strategic phrases appear as quotes.

No less an authority than Richard Strauss had spoken favourably of the "child prodigy's" earliest chamber compositions and was more than happy to attest to his "precocious genius" and "stylistic assurance" to say nothing of his "formal mastery" and "individual expression".²⁷

Tony Thomas offers a reordered paraphrase in 1997.

This firmness of style, this sovereignty of form, this individual expression, this harmonic structure – one shudders with awe to realise these compositions were written by a boy²⁸

Both indicate that the 1945 or 1980 translations had been consulted.

As noted above, Carroll's 1997 biography of Erich uses the Willi Schuh translation of the entire Strauss letter. In his article on Erich in the 2000 Grove Dictionary, Carroll paraphrases sentence (b) and quotes sentence (c), adding an exclamation mark. The text is casually described as Strauss's "remark".

One's first reaction that these compositions are by a child are those of awe and concern that so precocious a genius should follow its normal development ... This assurance of style, this mastery of form, this characteristic expressiveness, this bold harmony, are truly astonishing!"²⁹

Duchen writing for *Gramophone* in 2002, offers her own partial paraphrase of (b):

The first reaction on learning that this has been written by a boy of 11 is something of a shock mingled with apprehension, that such a precocious genius may not experience the normal development one sincerely hopes for him.³⁰

²⁷ Korngold: *Symphony in F Sharp*, Suite from *Much Ado about Nothing*. London Symphony Orchestra. André Previn. Deutsche Grammophon GmbH, Polygram. 4DDDD, 1997.

²⁸ Tony Thomas. *Music For the Movies*: "Erich Wolfgang Korngold." Los Angeles: Silman-James, 1997. 2nd ed 160.

²⁹ Brendan Carroll. "Korngold, Erich Wolfgang" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. London: MacMillan, 2000. Vol 7. 823-4.

³⁰ Duchen, Jessica. Erich Wolfgang Korngold(1897-1957): From Vienna to Hollywood" in *Gramophone*. March 2002. 40-1. 40.

From this survey, several comments can be made. Firstly, Strauss's reputation, linked to the canon of great composers, is such that his comments on Erich are considered to provide authentic evidence of the boy's youthful genius. Secondly, as we shall see, many writers wish to draw particular attention to this because of their suspicion that Erich's early promise was not fulfilled. Thirdly, a genealogy of the writers' attribution can be deduced. Fourthly, the possibility has been raised that a second perhaps inexact copy of the letter existed.

The most significant element in the translations of the Strauss letter lies in the way authors have interpreted Strauss's comment on Korngold's harmony. The original merely refers to 'diese Harmonik'. The simplest translation might be "this harmony", indicating both the way Erich puts notes together and the resulting combinations of sounds we hear. Ewen's translation of 1934 interprets the phrase as "these harmonies," emphasising the sounds rather than the processes that led to them. **The 1945 translation** uses the term "harmonic structure" which emphasises the process more than the results. It is significant that this phrase should be the one most commonly found between 1945 and 1997, **even though the German version had been available albeit by special request since 1944**, for matters of structure predominate descriptions of twentieth-century music during this period. In the 1997 translation Schuh uses the phrase 'this bold harmony' which comes closer to the wide sense of the original, although it imputes to Strauss astonishment about Erich's boldness, possibly in relation to his age. This is not unlikely, although it might have been hard to astonish Strauss in late 1909 with one's harmonic boldness, for that year had seen the premiere performances of *Elektra*.