

This Day in History... May 29, 1897

Birth of Erich Wolfgang Korngold

Composer Erich Wolfgang Korngold was born on May 29, 1897, in Brünn, Moravia, Austria-Hungary. A child prodigy, his technical skills and understanding of music combined to make him one of the most talented, yet underrated, musical figures of the 20th century.

The son of a music critic, Korngold was frequently referred to as “a new Mozart.” By the time he was five, he could play four-hand piano arrangements with his father. He could also play any melody he heard with complete, elaborate chords. He started writing his own original music by the time he was seven.

At the age of 10, Korngold performed an excerpt from his original piece *Gold* for Gustav Mahler, then the most influential composer in Vienna. Mahler hailed Korngold as a “musical genius.” He also said there was no point in sending him to a musical conservatory since he was already far ahead of anything he’d learn there.

When he was 13, Korngold’s ballet *Der Schneemann (The Snowman)* became a hit, and the show was performed on the stages of 40 different opera houses in the years to come. Korngold continued composing popular works throughout his teen years, including his first orchestral score, the *Schauspiel-Ouverture* and his first two operas, *Der Ring des Polykrates* and *Violanta*.



One of Korngold’s early successes was his ballet *The Snowman*.

Korngold’s greatest success came in 1920 when his opera *Die Tote Stadt (The Dead City)* was performed in Germany. He then began re-creating the scores of Johann Strauss II with his own style. This gained the attention of director Max Reinhardt, with whom he began collaborating. Among these was *Waltzes From Vienna*, which was later the basis for a 1934

Alfred Hitchcock film. In addition to his composing and conducting work, Korngold also taught opera and composition at the Vienna State Academy and received the title professor honoris causa by the president of Austria.

In 1934, Korngold supervised the scoring of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* for Warner Bros., which was his first work in Hollywood. Korngold’s elaborately orchestrated score proved to be a major influence on the film industry after that. After scoring *Give Us This Night*, Korngold was invited to score *Captain Blood*. Initially, he didn’t think he wanted to score a pirate movie, but after seeing the young new star Errol Flynn in action, he changed his mind. The film was an instant hit, launching Flynn’s career, inspiring a resurgence in costumed, romantic adventures, and earning Korngold an Oscar nomination for the score.

Korngold soon signed a contract with Warner Bros., and won Academy Awards for *Anthony Adverse* (1936), and *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938). In all, Korngold wrote the scores for 16 Hollywood films and is often considered one of the founders of film music. After World War II, *Die Tote Stadt* became the first German opera produced by the Metropolitan Opera in New York City. Korngold retired from film composing in 1947 and spent his final years composing concert pieces and his sixth opera. Korngold died on November 29, 1957.



Korngold stamp from the 1999 Hollywood Composers issue



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