

Opera *en abyme*: The prodigious ritual of Korngold's *Die tote Stadt*

WILLIAM CHENG*

Abstract: This essay frames Erich Wolfgang Korngold's *Die tote Stadt* (1920) as a *mise-en-abyme* narrative containing four nested realms of diegesis: (1) the opera's 'real' world, (2) a prolonged dream sequence, (3) a dance troupe's rehearsal of an opera within that dream, and (4) an expressly requested baritone song performed by a 'Pierrot' character in the midst of that dreamt rehearsal. I conceptualise the opera's dense meta-theatrics as a reflexive celebration (and also a didactic warning against the escapist pleasures) of sung spectacle. Excerpts from my interviews with Inga Levant – director of the 2001 Strasbourg production of *Die tote Stadt* – are used to supplement my broader examination of the ways in which Korngold's reputation as a 'problemless' and 'apolitical' child prodigy has impacted critical, dramaturgical and hermeneutical orientations towards this opera since its earliest post-war performances.

'After Richard Mayr – the most unforgettable of all Viennese singers – performed the Pierrot Lied', recalled Luzi Korngold nearly fifty years after attending a performance of her husband's *Die tote Stadt*, 'the audience broke into a hurricane of enthusiasm'.¹ Along with the 'Lautenlied', this lyrical baritone waltz remains today one of the most well-known numbers from Erich Wolfgang Korngold's three-act opera, which received a double premiere in Hamburg and Cologne on 4 December 1920 and went on to enjoy over a decade of success across dozens of European stages before succumbing to the full force of Nazi censorship in 1933.² In the second act of *Die tote Stadt*, a minor character named Fritz performs the 'Pierrot Lied' as an expressly requested song in the midst of a dance troupe's preparations for a rehearsal of Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable* – a rehearsal that, in turn, takes place during an extended dream sequence within *Die tote Stadt*'s overarching

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¹ 'Nachdem Richard Mayr – unvergesslichster aller Wiener Sänger – das Pierrot-Lied gesungen hatte, brach im Publikum ein Orkan der Begeisterung los' (Luzi Korngold, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold* [Vienna, 1967], 33). Translations in this paper are mine unless otherwise indicated.

² Within three years of its premiere, *Die tote Stadt* received over fifty performances in Hamburg alone, and, in the words of Andreas Giger, 'scored the only unquestionable success of any composer during the five-year reign [1919–1924] of Richard Strauss and Franz Schalk at the Vienna State Opera' ('A Matter of Principle: The Consequences for Korngold's Career', *The Journal of Musicology*, 16 [1998], 545). For further details on the history of the opera's reception, see Julius Korngold, *Die Korngolds in Wien: Der Musikkritiker und das Wunderkind* (Zurich, 1991), 254–68; Brendan G. Carroll, *The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (Portland, 1997), 146; and Jessica Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (London, 1996), 90.

diegesis.³ This dizzying descent into meta-theatrics establishes the ‘Pierrot Lied’ as a compounded example of what writers have variously termed ‘stage music’, ‘phenomenal song’, ‘narrative song’, ‘diegetic music’ and ‘heard music’ in opera.⁴ Embedded within three layers of spectacle, the ‘Pierrot Lied’ is effectively removed fourfold from ‘reality’ and lies at the structural midpoint of the opera’s narrative. Like the centre of a turning wheel or the zenith of parabolic flight, the song evokes a sensation of timelessness via Fritz’s role-play as a moonstruck Pierrot, the lilting dactylic metre of the text, sweeping arpeggios in the harp, an abundance of notated vocal portamenti, and the overall elastic rhythms of the music (marked over the course of eighty-nine bars with numerous fermatas and six instances of *poco rit – a tempo*). Operatic action is temporarily frozen as the other members of the dance troupe cease their jests and (according to stage directions) ‘phantastisch um Fritz gruppiert, zumeist vorgebeugten Hauptes, starr die Augen auf ihn gerichtet, unbeweglich wie in Traum’ (gather fantastically around Fritz, most of them with heads inclined, their eyes fixated on him, motionless as if in a dream). With on-stage and off-stage audiences united in awed appreciation of music that is ‘audible’ as such, the ‘Pierrot Lied’ resounds as a literal showstopper, a dramatic centrepiece that revels reflexively in the conceit of sung spectacle.

Die tote Stadt stages the psychological turmoil of a grief-stricken man who plunges into a veritable abyss of such spectacle. Korngold and his father, the polarising Viennese critic Julius Leopold Korngold, adapted *Die tote Stadt*’s libretto⁵ from the

³ I use the term ‘diegesis’ in this paper with reference to the ‘narratively implied spatiotemporal world of the actions and characters’ in a story-telling medium (Claudia Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* [Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1987], 21) and the terms ‘meta-diegesis’ and ‘meta-theatrics’ to describe that which is ‘narrated or imagined by a character . . . [such as] dreams, visions, [and] fantasies’ (*ibid.*, 22). These definitions – commonly deployed in film theory – are indebted to the narratological vocabulary of Gérard Genette, who popularised the labels ‘diegetic’ (also termed ‘intra-diegetic’), ‘meta-diegetic’ and ‘extra-diegetic’ (a narrative act ‘external’ to the primary narrative). See Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, 1972), 228–37; Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, 1988), 84–95; and Didier Coste and John Pier, ‘Narrative Levels’, in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf Schmid and Jörg Schönert (Berlin and New York, 2009), 295–308.

⁴ These designations appear respectively in Luca Zoppelli, “‘Stage Music’ in Early Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera”, trans. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, *this journal*, 2 (1990), 29–39; Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 5; Carolyn Abbate, ‘Erik’s Dream and Tannhäuser’s Journey’, in *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton, 1988), 166; Robbert van der Lek, *Diegetic Music in Opera and Film: A Similarity between Two Genres of Drama Analysed in Works by Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957)* (Amsterdam, 1991), 27–62; and Heather Hadlock, *Mad Love: Women and Music in Offenbach’s Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (Princeton, 2000), 36. On the problematic division between ‘phenomenal’ and ‘noumenal’ music in opera, see, for example, Richard Taruskin, ‘She Do the Ring in Different Voices’, *this journal*, 4 (1992), 187–97 (esp. 194–6), and Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999), 87–92.

⁵ The father–son team initially published the libretto under the pseudonym ‘Paul Schott’ conceivably as a pre-emptive attempt to defuse the suspicions of critics who had previously accused Julius of having composed Erich’s earlier works. The true identities of the librettists did not become public knowledge until the opera received its 1975 revival at the New York City Opera.

1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte* by the Symbolist Belgian poet Georges Rodenbach.⁶ The opera is set in ‘omnipresent . . . Bruges, the dead city, weakly dreaming of the past amidst the mystic peace of its churches and cloisters, its bells, its weather-worn Gothic facades, its stagnant waterways and abandoned canals’.⁷ Paul, the protagonist, mourns his dead wife, Marie, and has transformed his home into a monument of heartbreaking denial: a life-sized portrait of Marie hangs on the wall; a plait of Marie’s hair, stored in a glass coffer, rests on a table; and Marie’s room, which Paul has named ‘die Kirche des Gewesenen’ (the Temple of the Past), remains perfectly preserved with all kinds of mementoes lying within.⁸

The operatic action begins on the day a dancer named Marietta arrives in Bruges with her touring troupe of stage performers. She bears an uncanny likeness to the late Marie, and when Paul encounters her, he becomes spellbound by this surrogate object of desire. In the final scene of Act I, the ghost of Marie steps out of her portrait and tells Paul to free himself from the *doppelgänger*. At the beginning of Act II, Paul falls into a prolonged dream in which he finds himself abandoned by both his friend Frank and his housekeeper Brigitta. After surreptitiously watching Fritz’s performance and Marietta’s opera rehearsal, Paul slowly comes to recognise the perversity of his affections. His annoyance with Marietta finally turns into outright rage in Act III when he sees her dancing with Marie’s plait of hair. Shouting ‘Mein Heiligtum, entweih es nicht!’ (My sacred relic, defile it not!), Paul chases Marietta around his house and, upon catching her, strangles her to death with the plait of hair. The dream sequence comes to a close and Paul awakens to discover that no murder has really taken place. In the end, having learned from his dream the importance of letting go, Paul leaves his home: the Temple of the Past, his relics, and Bruges, the dead city.

Marie’s death, which occurs prior to the inception of the opera’s formal narrative, constitutes the overwhelming trauma that drives Paul to delusion. By the time Paul is spying on Marietta at her rehearsal, he is, in effect, chasing after an *actress* who is the *dreamt representation* of a *doppelgänger* of his *deceased wife*. *Die tote Stadt* can accordingly be seen to contain four nested diegetic realms (as illustrated in Fig. 1): (1) the opera’s so-called ‘real world’ (the ‘reality’ of which remains uncertain throughout the narrative); (2) Paul’s dream world (the ‘un-reality’ of which is likewise contestable); (3) the dance troupe’s rehearsal preparations for *Robert le diable* (and – following Fritz’s song – the staging of a brief scene from that opera); and

⁶ Rodenbach also adapted *Bruges-la-Morte* into a four-act play entitled *Le Mirage* (1900). Both the novel and the play were translated into German by the Viennese playwright Siegfried Trebitsch and published respectively as *Die Stille Stadt* (1902) and *Das Trugbild* (1913).

⁷ This description appears in R. H. Elkin’s 1921 English translation of Julius Korngold’s German synopsis of the opera. The characters Paul, Marietta and Brigitta in *Die tote Stadt* are respectively named Hugues, Jane and Barbe in *Bruges-la-Morte*. The deceased wife of Hugues is never identified by name and is usually referred to as ‘la morte’ or ‘sa femme’. Frank and Fritz have no apparent analogues in the novel.

⁸ The significance of the plait of hair is explained towards the beginning of *Bruges-la-Morte*: ‘[La mort] ruine tout, mais laisse intactes les chevelures . . . Les cheveux ne se décolorent même pas. C’est en eux seuls qu’on se survit’ (Death ruins everything but leaves the hair intact . . . Hair does not even lose its color. It is in this alone that one lives on!) (Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, ed. Jean-Pierre Bertrand and Daniel Grojnowski [Paris, 1998], 54).

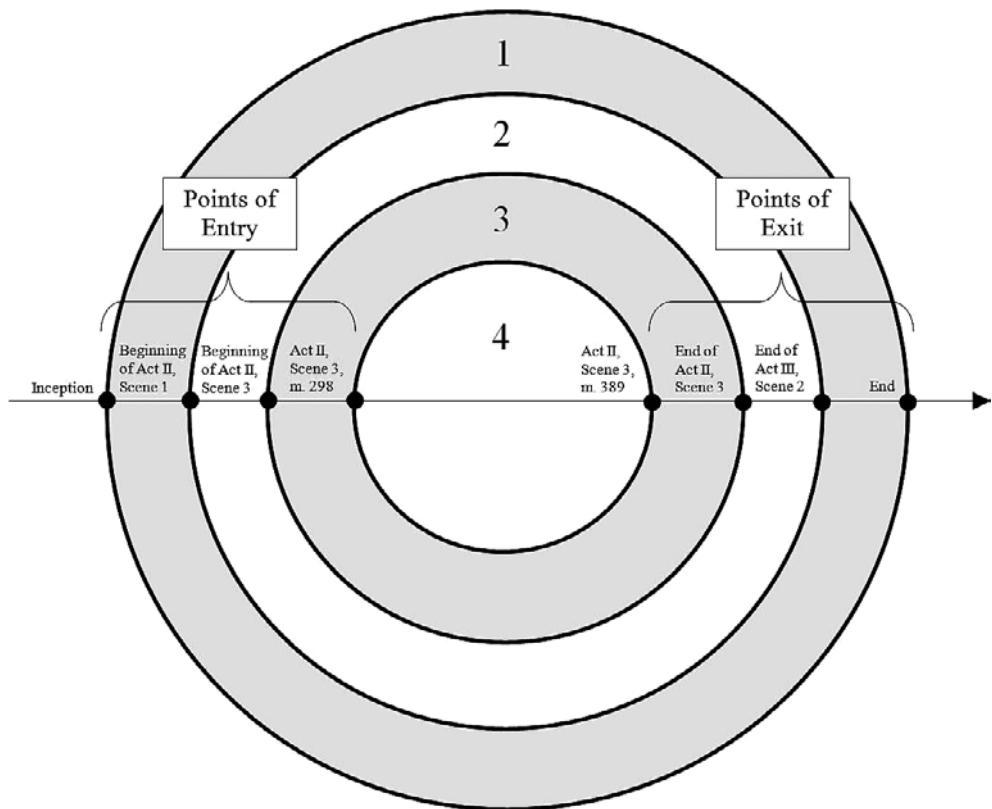


Fig. 1: The four nested diegetic realms of *Die tote Stadt*.

(4) Fritz's performance of the 'Pierrot Lied'. Each point of 'entry' signals the descent of Paul into fantasy, while each point of 'exit' tracks his progressive flight from spectacle.

The narrative levels of *Die tote Stadt* exemplify the phenomenon of *mise-en-abyme*, a term that was first deployed in aesthetic contexts by André Gide (1948) in his descriptions of reflexive embeddings in various forms of art.⁹ Following Gide, the concept quickly gained currency among literary theorists and eventually became the subject of a full-length monograph by Lucien Dällenbach (1977), who expanded the definition of *mise-en-abyme* to account for any work with an interior aspect that 'bears a similarity to the work that contains it'.¹⁰ As Dällenbach observes, the word 'abyme' – literally 'abyss' – 'invokes notions of *depth*, *infinity*, *vertigo* and *falling*'.¹¹ As

⁹ See André Gide, *Journal 1889–1939* (Paris, 1948), 41. The notion of *mise-en-abyme* originated in descriptions of heraldic aesthetics wherein an 'image of a shield contains, at its centre, a miniaturised replica of itself' (Lucien Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* [Paris, 1977], 17).

¹⁰ 'Entretenant une relation de similitude avec l'œuvre qui la contient' (Dällenbach, *Le Récit spéculaire*, 18).

¹¹ 'Convoque ... les notions de *profondeur*, *d'infini*, de *vertige* et de *chute*' (*ibid.*, 17n2, emphases in original).

such, *mise-en-abyme* ‘de-temporalizes and de-linearizes narrative: by bringing together the near and the far, the present and the past, it calls into question the system whereby one thing follows another, substituting for it a reality that is above or outside time’.¹² An illusion of infinite recursion necessarily confounds perceptual focus and betrays the porousness of the boundaries that are understood to exist between discrete diegetic strata.¹³ By extending that which philosopher Gregory Currie calls the ‘collapse of iterativity’ – namely, the idea that ‘imagining that someone imagines *P* [tends] to collapse into imagining *P*’ – one might reckon that watching a spectacle within a spectacle (such as the ‘*Pierrot Lied*’) can easily collapse into a ‘direct’ experience of spectacle, leaving exterior narrative frames nipping only sporadically at the fringes of one’s consciousness.¹⁴ The lush orchestration, through-sung text and endless melodies of an opera such as *Die tote Stadt* weave a continuous sonorous fabric that potentially assists such collapse. As often remarked by theorists of opera and film, an immersive wash of music can function as a sort of psychological lubricant, one that smoothes over gaps in dramatic logic, shifts in narrative voice and other such distractions in one’s overall apprehension of spectacle.¹⁵

The enthusiastic initial reception of *Die tote Stadt* in Austria and Germany can perhaps be attributed, at least in part, to the resonances between the opera’s *mise-en-abyme* depictions of trauma and the post-war conditions of the early 1920s. In presenting Paul’s escape from the opera’s diegetic realms as a ritual of mourning and healing, Korngold’s narrative arguably conveyed to its early audiences the ideological perils as well as the revitalising powers of musical spectacle in the wake of cultural fallout. Just as Paul must learn to abandon the false comforts of his fantasies, so audience members had to forego, at the end of each performance, their absorption in theatrics and return to face the dead cities and dead Maries that

¹² Lucien Dällenbach, ‘*Mise-en-abyme* and Mirror Effects in Claude Simon’, in *Claude Simon*, ed. Celia Britton (London and New York, 1993), 150.

¹³ See Klaus Meyer-Minneman and Sabine Schlickers, ‘La Mise en abyme en narratologie’, in *Narratologies contemporaines: Approches nouvelles pour la théorie et l’analyse du récit*, ed. John Pier and Francis Berthelot (Paris, 2010), 91–108, and Viveca Füredy, ‘A Structural Model of Phenomena with Embedding in Literature and Other Arts’, *Poetics Today*, 10 (1989), 745–69.

¹⁴ Gregory Currie, ‘Imagination and Simulation: Aesthetics Meets Cognitive Science’, in *Mental Simulation: Evaluations and Applications*, ed. Martin Davies and Tony Stone (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford, 1995), 161. Also see Shaun Nichols, ‘Imagination and the Puzzles of Iteration’, *Analysis*, 63 (2003), 182–7. In the last few years, film theorists have likewise increasingly begun to put pressure on facile distinctions between diegetic and non-diegetic music. See, for instance, Ben Winters, ‘The Non-Diegetic Fallacy: Film, Music, and Narrative Space’, *Music & Letters*, 91 (2010), 224–44; Jeff Smith, ‘Bridging the Gap: Reconsidering the Border between Diegetic and Nondiegetic Music’, *Music & the Moving Image*, 2 (Spring 2009), 1–25; and Robynn Stilwell, ‘The Fantastical Gap between Diegetic and Nondiegetic’, in *Beyond the Soundtrack: Representing Music in Cinema*, ed. Daniel Goldmark, Lawrence Kramer and Richard Leppert (Berkeley, 2007), 184–202.

¹⁵ On the ‘suturing’ effects of music in film, see David Neumeyer, Carol Flinn and James Buhler, ‘Introduction’, *Music and Cinema* (Hanover, NH, 2000), 13–17. Regarding the ‘anaesthetic’ power of musical phantasmagoria in the ‘magic circle’ of the *fin-de-siècle* opera house, see Adrian Daub, ‘Adorno’s Schreker: Charting the Self-Dissolution of the Distant Sound’, *this journal*, 18 (2006), 247–71.

loomed outside the cosy confines of the opera house.¹⁶ The opera hence showcased illusion's edifying qualities and capacity to serve as an antidote to social disillusionment. On the surface, then, *Die tote Stadt* was a point-blank refutation of *Opernkrise* and its polemics, a reflexive and kaleidoscopic celebration of 'pure' spectacle during a period in which the value of art was itself being rigorously called into question.¹⁷

Yet spectators and hermeneuts alike might harbour a lingering suspicion that any endeavour to read this opera and its *mise-en-abyme* narrative is ultimately an exercise in hermeneutical nihilism, a bid to rescue 'meaning' from a dramatic abyss that, by its very nature, resists straightforward interpretation. One could certainly view any practice of operatic hermeneutics in its own right as a journey into an abyss, a spelunking expedition with the objective of unearthing a cohesive, original interpretation of a work (and its stagings), or – as has become increasingly fashionable in recent years – submitting a handful of provocative observations that purposefully and 'responsibly' delight in polysemy, inconclusivity and the disavowal of textual legibility.¹⁸ The striking palette of musical, dramatic and narrative manifestations of *mise-en-abyme* in Korngold's opera furnishes a fortuitous opportunity to place a reading of this opera in dialogue (and at odds) with the very act of reading opera. As philosopher Ashley Woodward puts it, 'the frame-within-frame of the *mise-en-abyme* recalls the position of the postmodern nihilist who tries to frame the problem of nihilism, only to realise that he or she is enclosed in the same nihilistic frame, set on a larger scale'.¹⁹ *Mise-en-abyme*, of course, need not always be a cause for rhetorical paralysis (or – as Woodward's statement implies – existential crisis); rather, it can compel a certain level of reflexivity and an alertness towards the particular subtleties of hermeneutic manoeuvres. With this in mind, I seek to provide here an interpretation of *Die tote Stadt* through the framework of *mise-en-abyme* while contemplating, in turn, the social, political and intellectual incentives that have historically informed critical and dramaturgical characterisations of this opera.

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon have described *Die tote Stadt*'s narrative as an 'Orphic ritual of bereavement' that inspires *contemplatio mortis* and nurtures the audience's ability to cope with personal tragedies. See *Opera: The Art of Dying* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 116–22.

¹⁷ On debates surrounding the 'crisis in opera' during the Weimar Republic, see Susan C. Cook, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitoper of Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor, 1988), 9–26. A discussion of opera and nihilism in the context of fascist politics can be found in Jeremy Tambling, *Opera and the Culture of Fascism* (Oxford, 1996), 216ff.

¹⁸ A clear example of such responsible deconstructionist rhetoric appears in a study of Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* by Joseph Auner, who points to the 'inherent impossibility of this paradoxical work' and suggests that the 'power of the work is not that it gives us simple answers, but that it poses questions and problems admitting of no solution ... [speaking] to us powerfully through its failure' ('Schoenberg as Moses and Aron', *The Opera Quarterly*, 23 [2007], 382).

¹⁹ Ashley Woodward, *Nihilism in Postmodernity: Lyotard, Baudrillard, Vattimo* (Aurora, CO, 2009), 245. Woodward makes extensive use of the phrase 'abyssal nihilism' to describe the 'feeling of plunging into a bottomless pit ... often associated with a delegitimation of traditional structures (both social and theoretical) that previously provided frameworks for meaning and value' (*ibid.*, 11–12). Also see David K. Coe, *Angst and the Abyss: The Hermeneutics of Nothingness* (Chico, CA, 1985).

1

One matter that should first be addressed concerns the enormous – yet heretofore unremarked – extent to which the reception of *Die tote Stadt* has been coloured by the ‘apolitical’ image that critics, biographers and dramaturges have long since imprinted on its composer. Much like his middle-namesake Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart – whose figure has been clouded by that which Maynard Solomon calls the ‘myth of the eternal child’,²⁰ – Erich Wolfgang Korngold was widely regarded as a Wunderkind frozen in a cocoon of social pre-maturation.²¹ In a 1967 biography of her husband, Lizi Korngold noted that Erich spent his days as a teenager under the constant surveillance of his over-protective parents and ‘was more childish than his contemporaries, untouched by the problems of puberty’.²² Numerous writers also commented on Korngold’s perpetually dreamy demeanour. As noted by biographer Brendan Carroll, Korngold ‘never learned to drive because of his concern that he might easily mistake the accelerator pedal for the *sostenuto* pedal of the piano whenever his mind was distracted by musical inspiration’.²³ Although Korngold was twenty-three-years old by the time *Die tote Stadt* received its premiere, he was still perceived then as an over-grown child who had his head in the clouds and remained hopelessly estranged from the post-war *zeitgeist*.

Writers have commonly placed Korngold beneath the spacious – daresay purgatorial – umbrella of ‘late-Romanticism’, the ‘late-ness’ of which tacitly points to the label’s own connotations of stylistic obsolescence.²⁴ In an Italian biography of Korngold, Mario Tedeschi Turco describes *Die tote Stadt* as ‘deprived of the radical and revolutionary charge characteristic of Schoenberg or Berg, using instead, as a guiding principle, a completely late-romantic language’.²⁵ In similar fashion, William Ashbrook nebulously calls the opera ‘an example *sui generis* of post-World War I *mittel-europäisch* late-late romanticism’.²⁶ Other musicologists have wryly identified *Die tote Stadt* as ‘succulent’,²⁷ ‘a wet musico-dramatic dream’²⁸ and ‘more

²⁰ See Maynard Solomon, *Mozart: A Life* (New York, 1995), 3–18.

²¹ See Helmut Pöllmann, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold: Aspekte seines Schaffens* (Mainz and New York, 1998), 11–25, and Michaela Feuerstein-Prasser and Michael Haas, *Die Korngolds: Klischee, Kritik und Komposition* (Vienna, 2007), 33–64.

²² ‘War er kindlicher als seine Altersgenossen, unberührt von Problemen der Pubertät’ (Lizi Korngold, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 22).

²³ Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 177.

²⁴ Regarding the ‘pejorative ring’ of ‘late Romanticism’, see Carl Dahlhaus, ‘Schreker and Modernism: On the Dramaturgy of *Der ferne Klang*’, in *Schoenberg and the New Music: Essays*, trans. Derrick Puffett and Alfred Clayton (Cambridge, 1987), 193.

²⁵ ‘Deprivata della carica radical e rivoluzionaria proprio di Schönberg o Berg, ed impiegata, invece, secondo una direttrice anche linguistica ancora pienamente tardo romantica’ (Mario Tedeschi Turco, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold* [Verona, 1997], 103).

²⁶ William Ashbrook, ‘*Die tote Stadt*’, *Opera Quarterly*, 7 (1990), 188–9. Despite retaining various narrative elements of its Symbolist source material, *Die tote Stadt* is rarely described by writers as a ‘Symbolist opera’ – most likely, one might guess, because it was not French or Russian in language and national affiliation.

²⁷ David McKee, ‘*Die tote Stadt*: Erich Wolfgang Korngold’, *The Opera Quarterly*, 16 (2000), 151.

²⁸ Unidentified critic quoted in Brendan G. Carroll, ‘*Die tote Stadt* in California’, *Newsletter of the Erich Wolfgang Korngold Society*, 12 (January 1986), 3.

bombastic and ‘Wagnerian’ at times than it needs to be’.²⁹ Setting aside the well-worn question of just how ‘Wagnerian’ an opera of this period ‘needed’ to be, it is evident that these remarks have aimed to delineate Korngold’s (admittedly leitmotif-driven) opera as little more than a feast for the senses. To this day, the overriding assumption has been that *Die tote Stadt* succeeded by virtue of its *fin-de-siècle* ‘decadence’ and despite its lack of social timeliness.

The conservative image of Korngold became a well-publicised fact not least as a result of his father’s persistent attacks against various modernist composers. Julius Korngold’s aggressive rants eventually led Erich to be excluded from festivals hosted by ‘progressive’ musical organisations such as the International Society for Contemporary Music and Arnold Schoenberg’s Society for Private Musical Performances.³⁰ Thus throughout his young adulthood, Korngold experienced an increasing pressure of living in (and yet apart from) a cultural climate in which practitioners of Expressionism, serialism, *Zeitoper*, *Neue Sachlichkeit* and other aesthetic currents were actively devising ways of deploying music as a political vehicle. Korngold resisted these modernist tendencies and rarely sought to stray from what he called ‘the eminent possibilities offered by *old music*'.³¹ Unlike outspoken composers such as Schoenberg, Ferruccio Busoni, Hans Pfitzner, Ernst Krenek, Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith, all of whom participated extensively in debates about the state of opera (and art more generally) during the inter-war period, Korngold refrained from overtly philosophising about his own compositional aims. On 23 May 1926, in an interview with the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, he reported: ‘I do not subscribe to any one doctrine. My musical creed may be called the inspired idea. With what displeasure people regard this concept nowadays!’³²

It seems rather fitting, then, that shortly after *Die tote Stadt*’s premiere, the Berlin critic Adolf Weissmann praised the opera for its ‘Problemlosigkeit’ (problemlessness),³³ while Rudolf Stefan Hoffmann, Korngold’s first biographer, likewise admired that the work did not ‘[abuse the operatic stage] to philosophise, or propagate mysteries and immolations’.³⁴ Such statements underscored the opera’s alleged political neutrality (or naivety) and continue to find echoes in present-day criticisms of Korngold’s music. In a recent article, David Allenby speculates that ‘perhaps [Korngold’s] real problem was that *there was no problem*. With a total facility rare in music history, he had no need for a Beethovenian struggle with his material nor, like Wagner or Mahler, a compulsion to realise radically new creative

²⁹ William Schoell, *The Opera of the Twentieth Century* (London, 2006), 94.

³⁰ Notable exceptions include Korngold’s participation in the 1925 ISCM festival in Venice and the performance of Korngold’s Violin Sonata, Op. 6 at a concert of Schoenberg’s Society for Private Musical Performances in 1919. See Giger, ‘A Matter of Principle’, 561–62, and Walter Szmolyan, ‘Die Konzerte des Wiener Schönberg-Vereins’, *Österreichische Musikzeitschrift*, 36 (1981), 85.

³¹ Quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 194, emphasis in original.

³² Carroll, 194.

³³ Adolf Weissmann, *Die Musik in der Weltkrise* (Berlin, 1922), 245.

³⁴ Rudolf Stefan Hoffmann, ‘Die tote Stadt’, *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, 3 (1921), 63, translated in Giger, ‘A Matter of Principle’, 548.

forms'.³⁵ The 'problemless' image of Korngold has led writers to point out not only his '*joie de vivre* and optimism'³⁶ and 'fröhliche Gelassenheit' (cheerful serenity)³⁷ but also that his music was 'effective in a cheaply theatrical sort of way, and that it is not surprising that [he] eventually went to Hollywood to ply his trade for The Bastard Art' – that is, film music.³⁸ Hence, as a prodigy who, according to Robbert van der Lek, 'had [by the age of twenty-five] effectively already said everything he had to say through his music', Korngold was perceived as stunted in personal character yet bewilderingly mature in musical craft.³⁹ Some writers have attempted to explain Korngold's precocity by passing it off as simply the mechanistic imitation of compositional models. Indeed, as early as the 1920s, the reception of Korngold and his music has played out as a tug-of-war between those who pronounced the composer's style as derivative and those who insisted on its originality.⁴⁰ Biographer Brendan Carroll, who dubs Korngold 'the last prodigy', has gone so far as to say that he can 'recognise the voice of Korngold in a single chord, so extraordinarily personal is his style'.⁴¹ At stake for Korngold's defenders has been (and continues

³⁵ David Allenby, 'Don't Mention the War?', *The Musical Times*, 137 (1996), 30, emphasis added. Korngold's 'problemless' image invites comparison to the 'Mendelssohn Problem' – namely, the alleged lack of 'struggle' that writers have historically observed in the compositions of Felix Mendelssohn. See, for instance, Leon Botstein, 'The Aesthetics of Assimilation and Affirmation: Reconstructing the Career of Felix Mendelssohn', in *Mendelssohn and his World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton, 1991), 5–42. On the so-called 'apolitical' operas of Richard Strauss and Giacomo Puccini, see Anthony Arblaster, *Viva la Libertà! Politics in Opera* (London and New York, 1992), 245–61. Also see Pamela M. Potter, 'Strauss and the National Socialists: The Debate and Its Relevance', in *Richard Strauss: New Perspectives on the Composer and His Work*, ed. Bryan Gilliam (Durham, 1992), 93–113.

³⁶ Duchen, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 43.

³⁷ Rudolf Stefan Hoffmann, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold* (Vienna, 1922), 112.

³⁸ Eric Myers, 'Review of *Violanta* at Santa Fe Opera', *Newsletter of The Erich Wolfgang Korngold Society*, 7 (1985), 3. Ben Winters has suggested more optimistically that 'Korngold had recognised the importance of his musical heritage and allowed a musical voice from the past to speak through his music. It was this willingness to act as a conduit through which other voices, including his own past voices, could speak that perhaps allowed him to slot so neatly into the collaborative realities of the Hollywood studio system' (*Erich Wolfgang Korngold's The Adventures of Robin Hood: A Film Score Guide* [Lanham, MD, 2007], 17).

³⁹ Van der Lek, *Diegetic Music in Opera and Film*, 4. On Korngold's respective attitudes towards film and art music, see Robbert van der Lek, 'Concert Music as Reused Film Music: E. -W. Korngold's Self-Arrangements', trans. Mick Swithinbank, *Acta Musicologica*, 66 (1994), 78–112.

⁴⁰ In a review of the 1921 American premiere of *Die tote Stadt* at the New York Metropolitan Opera, Richard Aldrich declared: 'That [Korngold] shows himself in this work to be a strong original force in music will hardly be maintained. Some may find in his work hints of such influences as Strauss, Wagner . . . or even Puccini' ('Die tote Stadt, Fantastic Opera', *The New York Times* [20 November 1921]). The following year, Rudolf Stefan Hoffmann published a biography of Korngold that emphasised the significant extent to which the composer creatively reimagined the styles of his predecessors (see *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 105–15). Jessica Duchen's more recent biography of the composer likewise champions his originality by stressing that his musical language 'comes from Korngold himself, partly synthesised out of those influences [of Richard Strauss, Giacomo Puccini, Richard Wagner, Johannes Brahms, Johann Strauss and Alexander von Zemlinsky], partly reaching him alone from some rationally-inexplicable source of inspiration, and absorbed into his own idiosyncratic language' (*Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 91).

⁴¹ Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 371. Carroll retrospectively attempts to explain his biography's title in 'Warum *The Last Prodigy?* Zur Bewertung von Erich Wolfgang Korngold als möglicherweise

to be), it appears, a romantic vision of genius – a faith in the possibility that Korngold was a ‘true’ prodigy whose output was somehow able to rise above and go unsullied by the gritty politics of contemporary society.

But herein lies the rub: for no matter which position one takes in such disputes, Korngold emerges as a walking paradox.⁴² The mystique of this problem(less) child was summarily articulated by composer and musicologist Egon Wellesz in his review of Korngold’s first two operas, *Violanta* (1916) and *Der Ring des Polykrates* (1916):

In these works of a sixteen-year-old, the problem of personal experience seems to have become non-existent if one considers that an adolescent purely by intuition could have reproduced so uncannily the emotions and passions he cannot have yet experienced. In both of the operas, all phases of love are described, ranging from delicate flirtation to the most sensual eroticism.⁴³

How could it have been possible for Korngold – if he were emotionally ‘under-developed’ – to have produced what listeners perceived as ‘mature’ music? And by extension, how could an ‘asocial’ composer write music with any claim to social significance? Such questions raise some familiar red flags: they posit an ideological lockstep between the ‘nature’ and output of an artist; they stipulate life experience as a necessary (and perceptible) determinant of artistic expression; and they take for granted the existence of an uninterrupted pipeline of signification between compositional intentions and audience reception.⁴⁴ But even though students of the humanities nowadays tend to maintain a healthy scepticism towards the post-mortem author and the epistemological values of artistic intent, such caution is not always enough to quell the temptations of confessional criticism (especially when the artist under consideration is so thickly wreathed in contradiction and intrigue). The attempts of writers to ‘read’ Korngold in social or psychoanalytical terms have incidentally ended up making the composer out to be very much like the protagonist of *Die tote Stadt* – in sum, a poster-child of denial whose navel-gazing nostalgia rendered him almost pathological in character.

It is therefore not altogether surprising that Inga Levant, the director of the 2001 Strasbourg production of *Die tote Stadt* (originally filmed in front of a live audience

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größtes komponierendes Wunderkind aller Zeiten’, trans. Verena Paul, in Erich Wolfgang Korngold: *Wunderkind der Moderne oder letzter Romantiker? Bericht über das internationale Symposium Bern*, ed. Arne Stollberg (Munich, 2008), 303–14.

⁴² Theodor Adorno has remarked upon the disconnect between the ‘technical perfection and spiritual immaturity’ (‘technischer Vollkommenheit und geistiger Unreife’) of child prodigies, who appeared to break ‘the basic categories of the here-and-now valid musical order: those of personality and development’ (die Grundkategorien der heute und hier gültigen musikalischen Ordnung: die von Persönlichkeit und Entwicklung) (*Gesammelte Schriften* [Berlin, 2003], 42–3).

⁴³ Quoted in Carroll, *The Last Prodigy*, 133, emphasis added.

⁴⁴ Concerning the methods and pitfalls of ascertaining the impact of operas on their original audiences, see Katherine Bergeron, ‘Verdi’s Egyptian Spectacle: On the Colonial Subject of *Aida*’, *this journal*, 14 (2002), 149–59 (esp. 150–1); Roger Parker, “‘Insolite Forme’, or Basevi’s Garden Path”, in *Leonora’s Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997), 42–60 (esp. 44–5); and Thomas Grey, ‘Bodies of Evidence’, *this journal*, 8 (1996), 185–97 (esp. 186–7 and 195–6).

and subsequently released on DVD),⁴⁵ chose to stage the work as a Künstleroper-like commentary on the trajectory of Korngold's life and career.⁴⁶ When I asked Levant, in a 2008 interview, to explain the concept behind the production, she responded:

The starting point of my production was Korngold's private life, which actually repeated the opera. He, like Paul, was living in the past and refused to accept the changed situation of his own life. He wanted to continue living in the Vienna of the 1920s when he was admired [as a] creative Wunderkind. Refusing to accept Hitler's rise to power, but being forced out of Austria at the last possible moment, sitting in Hollywood with all the possibilities to create a new style of film music for the young developing art form, he actually denied the reality around him and enclosed himself in the glorious Viennese past, waiting for the Nazis to go and to return to his beloved Vienna.⁴⁷

It is apparent that Korngold's child-like image and *Die tote Stadt*'s reception have become tightly joined in the critical and dramaturgical imagination, but what remains less clear is whether Korngold and Paul really lived out parallel destinies, whether *Die tote Stadt* can be convincingly staged as a confessional work, and what the broader social and intellectual stakes of these queries might be.⁴⁸ Granted, the ease with which one can uncover (or fabricate) 'evidence' of a work's cultural, political and autobiographical valence constitutes a fundamental problem of allegory, which, in the words of Walter Benjamin, represents a form of discourse that seems to allow '[a]ny person, any object, any relationship [to] mean absolutely anything else'.⁴⁹ Such interpretive promiscuity naturally becomes a rather pronounced occupational hazard when one attempts to interpret a labyrinthine opera like *Die tote Stadt*. Let us now, then, turn to this opera and see just how deep its rabbit-hole goes.

2

In a 1921 interview with the *Wiener Blätter des Operntheaters*, Korngold described that which he found so stimulating about Rodenbach's source narrative for *Die tote Stadt*:

The peculiar atmosphere of Bruges; the melancholic undertone; the two lead characters with their compelling psychological conflicts; the struggle between the living woman's erotic power and the dead woman's lingering psychological power; the broader struggle between life and death, especially with regard to the beautiful idea of how the mourning of departed

⁴⁵ The DVD of this production is commercially available from Arthaus Musik & Kinowelt Home Entertainment (Munich, 2001).

⁴⁶ For more on Künstleroper, see Claire Taylor-Jay, *The Artist-Operas of Pfitzner, Krenek and Hindemith: Politics and Ideology of the Artist* (Burlington, 2004), and John Bokina, *Opera and Politics: From Monteverdi to Henze* (New Haven, 1997), 128–66.

⁴⁷ Inga Levant, interview with author (9 December 2007).

⁴⁸ Korngold and Rodenbach shared similar reputations insofar as the latter was also popularly regarded as a social and intellectual hermit. This has expectedly contributed to readings of *Bruges-la-Morte* that – like readings of *Die tote Stadt* – tease out possible connections between the life and work of the artist. See Philip Mosley, 'The Soul's Interior Spectacle: Rodenbach and *Bruges-la-Morte*', in *Georges Rodenbach: Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Mosley (Madison, 1996), 17–40.

⁴⁹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York, 2009), 174–5.

loved ones must, by necessity, be mitigated by a claim to life; and everywhere, a wealth of possibilities for musical design – all of this appealed to me.⁵⁰

The most conspicuous alteration that the Korngolds made when adapting Rodenbach's novel entailed, according to Julius, 'refashioning the action [in the middle of the opera] as a dream ... to soften the skit-like ending of a woman's strangulation and to achieve a conciliatory, elegiac conclusion'.⁵¹ Yet by retaining various unsettling aspects of Rodenbach's story – which concludes with the murder of the *doppelgänger* in presumed 'reality' – *Die tote Stadt* casts doubt on whether Paul actually wakes up after killing Marietta, and, indeed, whether he is ever dreaming in the first place.⁵² Many productions of the opera have toyed with audience expectations precisely by blurring the boundaries between the 'real' and 'virtual' realms of operatic diegesis, and, in line with Symbolist poetics, between the internal conditions and external symptoms of the protagonist.⁵³ Smoke, mirrors and other special effects have consistently been used to fulfil such goals since the opera's earliest performances. The Viennese critic Marcel Prawy recalled one particular optical-aural illusion that occurred during a 1921 staging of *Die tote Stadt* at the Vienna Staatsoper: 'There was an unforgettable moment in the first act when [Maria] Jeritza stepped out of a picture frame and modulated her voice, which up until then had had all of Marietta's youthful radiance, to the muffled, hollow timbre of a voice from another world'.⁵⁴ In 1975, Frank Corsaro's New York City Opera staging of *Die tote Stadt* attempted to capture the opera's hallucinatory ambience via a 'mixed media' approach that utilised screens displaying pre-recorded moving images.⁵⁵ More recently, Meisje Hummel's 2008 San Francisco Opera staging – a revival of Willy Decker's hit European production – introduced a silent body double for Paul and embedded a scaled-down reproduction of the stage within the stage proper (see Fig. 2).⁵⁶

⁵⁰ 'Die eigentümliche Brügge-Stimmung, der schwermütige Grundton, die beiden Hauptgestalten mit ihren fesselnden seelischen Konflikten, der Kampf der erotischen Macht der lebenden Frau gegen die nachwirkende seelische Macht der Toten, die tiefere Grundidee des Kampfes zwischen Leben und Tod überhaupt, insbesondere der schöne Gedanke notwendiger Eindämmung der Trauer um teure Tote durch die Rechte des Lebens, dabei überall eine Fülle musikalischer Gestaltungsmöglichkeiten – all das zog mich an' (quoted in Hoffmann, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 8). Julius Korngold and Luzi Korngold provide contradicting accounts of Erich's potential visit(s) to Bruges. Julius suggests that Erich spent time in Bruges as a young adult (see *Die Korngolds in Wien*, 252), whereas Luzi states that her husband travelled to the city for the first time only after his Hollywood career (see *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 99).

⁵¹ 'Die Umgestaltung zu einer Traumhandlung ... um den sketchartigen Schluß der Erdrosselung einer Frau zu mildern und einen versöhnenden elegischen Ausklang zu gewinnen' (Julius Korngold, *Die Korngolds in Wien*, 250).

⁵² For a study of the structural and narrative contrasts between *Die tote Stadt*, *Bruges-la-Morte* and *Le Mirage*, see Francis Claudon, 'Die tote Stadt: Quelques questions comparatistes à propos d'un opéra', *Revue de littérature comparée*, 61 (1987), 377–87.

⁵³ Götz Friedrich's famous 1983 Berlin staging, for example, concludes with Paul (James King) reflecting upon his potentially 'real' murder of Marietta (Karan Armstrong) – and seemingly contemplating suicide – while holding a gun near his own head.

⁵⁴ Marcel Prawy, *The Vienna Opera* (New York, 1970), 110–11.

⁵⁵ See Thomas Lask, 'Frank Corsaro Is Projecting a Novel Image for Opera', *New York Times* (1 May 1975).

⁵⁶ See Michael J. Vaughn, 'A Wildly Surrealist Experience', *The Opera Critic* (26 September 2008), <http://theoperacritic.com/tocreviews2.php?review=mv/sfotote0908.htm>.



Fig. 2: Paul (Torsten Kerl) and his own *doppelgänger* (Ben Bongers) in the 2008 San Francisco Opera staging of *Die tote Stadt*. Photo by Terrence McCarthy.

Such *mise-en-scène* pays tribute to the formal, thematic and imagistic reflections that pervade *Die tote Stadt* and its source material.⁵⁷ Throughout the opera, Paul sees Marie everywhere: in the water of the dead city's ubiquitous canals; in the relics that lie within the Temple of the Past; and, of course, in the nominally diminutive *Mari-etta*. Fernand Khnopff's ink-and-pencil frontispiece for *Bruges-la-Morte* highlights the affinities between the dead wife and the dead city by positioning the supine figure of the woman in parallel with one of the many iconic bridges of Bruges, and by framing her, Ophelia-like, with elegiac lilies that evoke Symbolist tropes of death and purity (see Fig. 3).⁵⁸ The dead woman's big hair (*à la* Mélisande) signifies female power and yet – because it is free-flowing, not yet braided into a murder weapon – retains an aura of natural innocence.

In *Bruges-la-Morte*, Rodenbach makes frequent use of chiastic rhetoric to indicate the protagonist's fixation with the dead woman. An exemplary line from the

⁵⁷ In a literary analysis of *Bruges-la-Morte*, Joyce Lowrie casts the novel's narrative as a diptych, pointing to lexical, phrasal and imagistic redundancies between earlier and later chapters (along with various dyadic tropes embodied by the dead woman and the *doppelgänger*). See 'Ophelia becomes Medusa: Reversals and Ambiguity in *Bruges-la-Morte*', in *Georges Rodenbach: Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Mosley (Madison, 1996), 41–62. Simon Morrison has noted similar elements of reflexivity and symmetry in Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko* in 'The Semiotics of Symmetry, or Rimsky-Korsakov's Operatic History Lesson', *this journal*, 13 (2001), 261–93.

⁵⁸ Lynne Pudles has suggested that the visual parallelisms in this frontispiece and other drawings by Khnopff demonstrate principles of Symbolist *correspondance*. See 'Fernand Khnopff, Georges Rodenbach, and Bruges, the Dead City', *The Art Bulletin*, 74 (1992), 637–54.



Fig. 3: Fernand Khnopff's frontispiece for Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte*.

novel – ‘Bruges était sa morte. Et sa morte était Bruges’ (Bruges was his dead wife. And his dead wife was Bruges) – is likewise pronounced by Paul towards the beginning of Korngold’s opera, albeit constructed differently: ‘Die tote Frau, die tote Stadt, flossen zu geheimnisvollem Gleichnis’ (The dead woman, the dead city, seemed to be fused into one mysterious being). Yet even here, a mirroring effect is achieved by the inverted melodic contours of ‘tote Frau’ and ‘tote Stadt’ (see Ex. 1). The former vocal phrase (bar 73) is doubled by the English horn and clarinet, while the latter (bar 74) is sung against a bass trumpet statement of what Arne Stollberg has designated, in a psychoanalytic study of the opera, as the ‘Kurzversion des Brügge-Motivs’ – here, a transposed retrograde inversion of the coinciding vocal melody.⁵⁹ A sense of lag is produced over the course of these two bars by the broadening of melodic profile – namely, by the drawn-out and mournful descending tetrachord (d” – c♯” – b♭’ – a’) formed by structural pitches resting on the first and third beats of the two vocal phrases (the regular dotted rhythms of which sound noticeably more deliberate than the free recit-like declamation of the surrounding text).⁶⁰ The timpani enhance this plodding effect by beating out a low E pedal-point in idiomatic funereal rhythms. The resulting illusion of temporal suspension (or at least deceleration) amounts to a musical manifestation of chiastic poetics, which, as Joyce Lowrie suggests, ‘abolishes diachronic time’ and gives rise

⁵⁹ Arne Stollberg, *Durch den Traum zum Leben: Erich Wolfgang Korngolds Oper ‘Die tote Stadt’* (Mainz, 2003), 103 and 306. Also see Hoffmann, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 97.

⁶⁰ Most recordings I have encountered tend to downplay (or – to my ears – disregard altogether) the intensification (whether in volume, tempo or articulation) prescribed by the expressive marking ‘etwas steigernd’ in bar 75, opting to preserve instead a steady pulse over the course of bars 74–5.

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is for 'Paul' and the bottom staff is for 'Bass trumpet'. The lyrics for Paul are: 'Brüg - ge blieb, um al -lein zu sein mit mei-ner To - ten. Die to - te Frau, die'. The bass trumpet part has lyrics: 'to - te Stadt flos - sen zu ge -heim-nis vol - lem Gleich - nis. Und tág - lich schritt ich glei - chen'. Musical markings include 'Etwas steigernd' (above Paul's staff), 'Wieder ruhiger werdend' (above Paul's staff), 'p' (dynamic for piano), 'mf' (dynamic for mezzo-forte), and 'pp' (dynamic for pianissimo). A box labeled 'Timpani' is at the bottom right.

Ex. 1: Inverted melodic contours and descending tetrachord in Act 1 scene 2 (bars 70–8) of *Die tote Stadt*.

to the impression that ‘reality might be nothing other than a petrified reflection in a looking glass, revealing that the future is merely a duplication of the past’.⁶¹ A chiasmus, in this sense, folds narcissistically into itself, flaunting the clever musicality of its rhetorical symmetry and tautologically defying the mandates of semantic progress.

As suggested at the outset of this essay, the ‘Pierrot Lied’ invokes a protracted feeling of timelessness via its dreamy musical aesthetic and centralised position in *Die tote Stadt*’s narrative (see Ex. 2). Especially given that neither the song nor the character of Fritz has an analogue in Rodenbach’s novel, the ‘Pierrot Lied’ can be understood as dramatic excess, a self-contained and luxurious celebration of lyric flight. Fritz – who appears only in this scene and otherwise possesses very few lines – might even come to resemble an ‘outside’ musician who has been hired to make a celebrity cameo and to deliver a performance *qua* performance. The song lies at the core of the opera’s diegesis and yet paradoxically outside of it: on the one hand, the audience hears this music refracted through the ears of Marietta, of Paul (who spies on the performance while hiding behind some trees) and of various other on-stage spectators (comprising almost the entire cast of the opera); on the other hand, the performance, so acutely spotlighted as a diegetic insertion (or intrusion), breaks down all such perceptual filters by collapsing into a manner of ‘pure’ song that transcends the opera’s narrative altogether.

⁶¹ Lowrie, ‘Ophelia becomes Medusa’, 55. On *mise-en-abyme*’s conceptual resonances with chiasmi and palindromes, see Max Nanny, ‘Iconicity in Literature’, *Word and Image*, 2 (1986), 206–7.

Ex. 2: Opening of Fritz's 'Pierrot Lied' in Act II scene 3 (bars 298–312).

What ultimately tethers the 'Pierrot Lied' to the operatic diegesis is its function as a cautionary tale for the protagonist. Insofar as the song recounts Fritz's own obsession with Marietta, it warns Paul against the dangers of his spectacular pipe-dreams:

Mein Sehnen, mein Wählen,
Es träumt sich zurück.
Im Tanze gewann ich,
Verlor ich mein Glück.

...
Zauber der Ferne
Warf in die Seele den Brand,
Zauber des Tanzes
Lockte, ward Komödiant.
Folgt ihr, den Wundersüßen
Lernt unter Tränen küssen.
Rausch und Not
Wahn und Glück:
Ach, das ist Gauklers Geschick.

I'm yearning, I'm sighing,
I'm dreaming in vain.
Of how I won heaven
And lost it again.

...
Tempted by travel,
I left my native town;
Lured by her dancing,
I joined her troupe as a clown.
Caught in Marietta's tresses,
Learnt to love mid tears and kisses,
Wealth and want,
Love and hate,
That is poor Pierrot's fate!⁶²

Fritz is unique among his troupe-mates in that he is doubly trapped within the business of make-believe. Bound by his infatuation with Marietta, he serves as an

⁶² This translation by R. H. Elkin appears in the 1921 G. Ricordi & Co. English libretto. Foregoing a literal translation, Elkin aimed instead to preserve the metres and rhyme schemes of the original German text.

Ex. 3: Marietta's response to the 'Pierrot Lied' in Act II scene 3 (bars 387–400).

entertainer for his fellow entertainers. A dreamt projection of Paul's voice of conscience, Fritz represents the puppet-like fool that Paul might also one day become should he continue to indulge in Marietta's affections.⁶³

The d' ♫ on which Fritz sings the final words of the 'Pierrot Lied' is instantly picked up by a flute's quaver iterations on the same pitch (enharmonically notated as c' ♯ in the piano reduction) (see Ex. 3). In light of the instrument's breathy timbre, these quiet, metronomic pulsations – additionally marked *staccato* in the orchestral score – sound rather like panting and, as such, conjure forth the image of an obedient Fritz begging for a reward. Marietta obliges by telling him, 'Bravo, guter Pierrot, darfst mich küssen' (Bravo, good Pierrot, you may kiss me) and allowing him to kiss her on the cheek. But the monotony and low tessitura of Marietta's 'fast tonlos' melody – also sung on d' ♫ – produce a mesmerising, sinister affect that is further intensified by the passage's sudden shift in harmonic language. The regular periodicity, soaring strings and sensuous consonances of parallel thirds

⁶³ In the final seconds of Act II in the 2008 San Francisco staging of *Die tote Stadt*, Marietta's troupe members swarm around Paul and speedily dress him up in the Pierrot costume that Fritz had worn earlier in the opera. Concerning critical attitudes towards the 'Pierrot' figure in post-war Vienna, see Harald Haslmayr, "...es träumt sich zurück...": *Die tote Stadt im Licht der österreichischen Nachkriegskrisen*, in Erich Wolfgang Korngold: *Wunderkind der Moderne oder letzter Romantiker? Bericht über das internationale Symposium Bern*, ed. Arne Stollberg (Munich, 2008), 173–86.

and sixths in the ‘Pierrot Lied’ all give way here to a series of bleak chromatic lines diverging symmetrically from the d’ b pedal-point in halting, syncopated rhythms that disrupt the previous fluidity of the triple-metre waltz.

Lying at the pit of the opera’s narrative abyss, the ‘Pierrot Lied’ serves as a psychological vacuum that sucks Paul into the deepest realm of theatrical conceit before propelling him forcefully away from it, unveiling to him meanwhile the narcotic essence of Marietta’s charms and boosting his resolve to take matters – quite literally – into his own hands. Indeed, following this turning point, the progressive dissolution of each diegetic sphere is accompanied by physical gestures of protest, gestures that Paul performs in his desperate attempt to dig himself out of his multi-layered fantasies and, in the end, to escape from Bruges (or even, it might appear, from the opera as a whole) – alas, something that Fritz, the sacrificial informant, was never able to do.

3

During Marietta’s rehearsal of *Robert le diable* towards the end of Act II scene 3, a troupe member named Victorin whistles the ‘Resurrection Motif’ from the Act III ‘Invocation’ of Meyerbeer’s opera and signals Marietta to ‘rise slowly from her seat and impersonate in pantomime a dead woman come to life’ (see Ex. 4). Several back-up nuns in night-attire appear in the illuminated windows of a convent. Amidst the diegetic pealing of ‘aufgeregtes Glockengetümmel’ (tumultuous bells), the orchestra descends into a tempest of cymbal crashes, timpani strikes, and harmonically as well as timbrally dissonant mixtures of brass bleats and piccolo glissandi, whipping up a bacchanal of noise that escalates in tempo and intensity until Paul’s sudden entrance brings the rehearsal to a full stop:

PAUL	PAUL
(stürzt hinter den Bäumen hervor)	(rushes out from behind the trees)
Halt ein! Du eine auferstandne Tote? Nie!	Stop! You, arisen from the dead? Never!
MARIETTA	MARIETTA
Du bist – Kommst grade recht! Du bist der richtige Robert!	You’re here just in time! You’re the perfect Robert!
PAUL	PAUL
(reißt ihr das Laken vom Leibe)	(tears the shroud from her body)
Halt ein!	Stop!
(die Beghinen und Erscheinungen find verschwunden, das Kloster dunkel)	(the nuns and apparitions have disappeared and the convent is now dark)
MARIETTA	MARIETTA
Nar[r]!	Fool!

Witnessing the infernal resurrection of Marietta (or maybe, in Paul’s eyes, Marie) is too much for our protagonist. Marietta’s proclamation – ‘Du bist der richtige Robert’ – attempts to implicate him in the opera rehearsal and to drag him one level deeper into the abyss, but Paul, by tearing apart Marietta’s costume, instead peels *away* a layer of fantasy, swiftly ending the pantomime and causing an exasperated Marietta to send away all of her fellow actors (see

Sehr rasch (♩)
(VICTORIN pfeift das Auferweckungsmotiv aus „Robert der Teufel“)

Ex. 4: Victorin whistling the ‘Resurrection Motif’ from Meyerbeer’s *Robert le diable* in Act II scene 3 (bars 562–8) of *Die tote Stadt*. The tune here is doubled by trilling flutes, oboes, clarinets and piccolo, and fleshed out by descending chromatic runs in the strings.

Ex. 5).⁶⁴ Paul’s gesture is at once erotically charged and symbolically murderous, not only undressing Marietta but also undoing her meta-operatic persona – a forewarning of graver undoings yet to come.

The dissolution of this diegetic layer, after all, provides only fleeting deliverance. Paul still remains a prisoner in his own dream, a prisoner in lockdown with Marietta, who – now ever so irritated by his resistance – proceeds to redouble her seductive efforts. A series of quarrels ensue between the two characters until Paul, at the end of Act III scene 2, enters into a state of frenzy upon seeing Marietta dancing with Marie’s plait of hair. Singing ‘ich tanz, ich tanz’, Marietta refuses to put down the plait and tortures Paul in a cruel game of cat-and-mouse. When Paul at last manages to catch her, he throws her down on the floor and events unfold as follows:

⁶⁴ Regarding the Catholic symbolism and ‘neomedieval conceits’ in this scene, see Michael P. Steinberg, ‘The Politics and Aesthetics of Operatic Modernism’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 36 (2006), 641–3.

PAUL (stürzt hinter den Bäumen hervor)

Frei, sehr betont, zurückhaltend

Wieder vorwärts! (accel.)

MARIETTA (die sich nicht stören lässt)

Du

Mar.

Paul

To - te?!

Nie! _____

(8).-----

p

Ex. 5: Paul's interruption of Marietta's rehearsal in Act II scene 3 (bars 579–90).

MARIETTA

(sich in der Abwehr auf den Ellbogen stützend, trotzig schreiend)

Nein! Nein! Du tust mir weh –

Du bist verrückt –

PAUL

(erdrosselt sie im Ringen mit der Haarflechte)

MARIETTA

(aufschreien)

Ah!

(fällt entseelt zurück)

MARIETTA

(resists him, propping herself on one elbow, shouts defiantly)

No! No! You're hurting me –

You're mad –

PAUL

(wrestles with her and chokes her with the plait of hair)

MARIETTA

(screaming)

Ah!

(falls back dead)

In the music, Marietta's scream is intoned as 'Ah!' and notated as a glissando descending from g". This utterance follows conjunctly from her two most recent glissandi on e" and f" # eighty-six bars prior – glissandi that were sung to the word 'tanz' (of 'ich tanz, ich tanz'), such that the eventual death-scream on g" suggests that Marietta, *Tänzerin extraordinaire*, has finally taken things too far (see Ex. 6).

Throughout the opera, Marietta's signature vocal gesture, the glissando that approximates hysterical cries of all sorts, serves as a sonic reflection of her relentlessly glissading body. As she dances across the stage in the moments leading up to her murder, her incessant singing of 'ich tanz, ich tanz' becomes the utmost exercise in musico-dramatic redundancy – for why would a professional

Wieder rasch

Mar. bists Kommst gra - de recht! Du bist der richt - ge Ro - bert

(beginnt ihn dämonisch-verführerisch zu umtanzen)

Vorwärts!

Mar. (tr.) *pp* *mf* *espress.*

Immer rascher

Mar. (faßt mit eisernem Griff Marietta bei der Hand, sie zum Stillstehen zwingend. Reißt ihr das Laken vom Leibe) (geschrien) Narr! (GASTON springt mit einem grotesken Tänzersprung von der einen Seite hinzu)

Paul Halt ein! (Die Beghinen und Erscheinungen sind verschwunden, das Kloster dunkel)

Vic. VICTORIN Zu -

Ex. 5: *Continued.*

singer-dancer need (or wish) to *sing* that she is *dancing* as she sings and dances? Marietta is, at first glance, a Salome-ish *femme fatale*, a seductress whose extravagant performances are described to render the protagonist completely ‘*außer sich*’ (beside himself). But she might also invite comparison to a less domineering operatic heroine – say, Jacques Offenbach’s Antonia – a woman who, at the risk of dying, simply ‘loved singing too much’.⁶⁵ Marietta’s chameleonic role-play of multiple personae – *doppelgänger*, siren, nun – has seemingly left her with no core identity of her own. She participates in a roundabout game of imitation for which there is no original, a game that is all too fitting given that she is *not* Marie, the opera’s ‘original’ (and appropriately elusive) woman. Although she has mastered singing and dancing with flying colours, she has solely done so within the language of meta-theatrics. As a character with no demonstrable ‘centre’, Marietta is, in short, *mise-en-abyme* personified – a woman who is undone by her own spectacle and because she loved acting too much.

When Marietta falls dead to the ground, Paul stares at her in horror and exclaims: ‘Jetzt gleicht sie ihr ganz – Marie!’ (Now she is just like her – Marie!). A lengthier

⁶⁵ See Hadlock, *Mad Loves*, 70–7.

Fließend, mit Schwung, ekstatisch gesteigert (♩)

The musical score consists of two parts. The top part shows Marietta singing 'ich tanz' on glissandi in Act III scene 2 (bars 691–6). The vocal line is supported by a piano accompaniment featuring r.H. (right hand) and l.H. (left hand). The bottom part shows Marietta's death-scream on glissando later in the same scene (bars 764–7). The vocal line is supported by a piano accompaniment. A bracket connects the two sections, and a line points from the end of the first section to the start of the second. The lyrics for the death-scream include: Nein! Nein! Du tust mir weh, Du bist ver-rückt, (erdrosselt sie im Ringen mit der Haarflechte), Ah! (aufschreiend), (fällt entseelt zurück), (kurze Pause).

Ex. 6: [Above] Marietta singing ‘ich tanz’ on glissandi in Act III scene 2 (bars 691–6) and [Below] Marietta’s death-scream on glissando later in the same scene (bars 764–7). The stabbing dissonant chords in bars 764–66 echo those which accompanied Paul’s interruption of the troupe’s rehearsal in Act II scene 3 (see bars 580–2 in Ex. 5).

corresponding passage from Rodenbach’s novel can shed light on the significance of this statement:

Les deux femmes s’étaient identifiées en une seule. Si ressemblantes dans la vie, plus ressemblantes dans la mort qui les avait faites de la même pâleur, il ne les distingua plus l’une de l’autre – unique visage de son amour!

[The two women had been fused into one. So alike in life, even more alike in a death that had given them the same pallor, he could no longer distinguish the one from the other – the singular face of his love!]⁶⁶

Like the archetypal Eurydice, Marie suffers two deaths: first, the decay of her body, and, second, the passing of Paul’s obsession with her passing, symbolically enacted via Marietta’s murder.⁶⁷ Yet Paul’s statement – ‘Jetzt gleicht sie ihr ganz’ – is also

⁶⁶ Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, 270.

⁶⁷ A passage from *Bruges-la-Morte* can further illuminate the significance of this ‘double-death’: ‘La figure des morts, que la mémoire nous conserve un temps, s’y altère peu à peu, y dépérit, comme d’un pastel sans verre dont la poussière s’évapore. Et, dans nous, nos morts meurent une seconde fois!’ (The faces of the dead, preserved in our memory for some time, change and deteriorate little by little, like the chalk of a pastel drawing that fades away because it is not kept under glass. Thus, within us, our dead die a second time!) (Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, 74).

a little misleading given that Marietta and Marie were (as Paul gradually comes to realise) actually *nothing* alike ‘in life’ except for their physical appearances. One might enquire as to whether there was even, in ‘reality’, *any* physical resemblance at all between the two women. That audience members witness so much of this operatic drama through Paul’s own grieving vision(s) should make it impossible to discern true appearances from products of dramatic invention. Reality and fiction (and the fictions within fiction) are so thoroughly scrambled in this opera that Marietta’s bodily congruence with Marie can easily be reckoned as complete fabrication, as the psychic projection of a wandering mind’s eye.

In the exact moment that Paul screams ‘Marie!’ – as he prepares to *exit* this nightmare – the orchestra plays that which Rudolf Stefan Hoffmann has labelled as the ‘Vision Motif’, which the ghost of Marie had memorably sung to the name ‘Paul!’ in Act I scene 6, immediately prior to Paul’s *entry* into the dream realm (see Ex. 7).⁶⁸ By quoting Marie’s melody, the instruments invoke her spiritual presence and call attention to her corporeal absence, counteracting Marietta’s fleshy pyrotechnics and the excesses of spectacle more broadly. In these few precious seconds, the two rightful lovers simultaneously call out to each other across death’s divide, with Marie gaining the uncanny capacity to ‘speak’ just as dream-Marietta finally falls dead and silent, her throat forced shut by strangulation.⁶⁹ This moment also marks the last time Paul utters his dead wife’s name in the opera. It almost appears as if he has come to understand that Marie and her name can no longer continue to be represented *in* music (the language of opera), that no amount of song or dance can resurrect her, and that she does not belong in his world of the musical living any more than he belongs in his dreams of the dead.

Thus what one actually hears during the scene of Marietta’s murder is indeed a lot of non-singing, with utterances consistently being spoken, spoken-sung, glissed, screamed and instrumentally ventriloquised. In the 2001 Strasbourg production, Torsten Kerl and Angela Denoke (as Paul and Marietta) play at a frightening illusion of realistic violence by carrying out the entire murder scene in spoken tones (even the lines – as shown in bars 764–5 of Ex. 6 – that Korngold melodiced with angular tritone leaps). It is not simply that the actors are *not singing* per se – that is, a matter of expressive mode – but also that the non-sung vocalisations are accompanied by a cloud of audio-visual detritus rather foreign to opera’s glossy veneer: one can see the projectile spit of Kerl as he sputters, ‘Gib . . . oder *sirb!*’; Denoke’s acute declamations of ‘Nein! Nein!’ elicit from her surroundings audible echoes that her sustained singing, until this point, had effectively covered up –

⁶⁸ See Hoffmann, *Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 96.

⁶⁹ The utterance ‘Marie!’ appears, uniquely among all the music of *Die tote Stadt*, without any corresponding musical notation in the vocal staff. In other parts of the opera, Korngold employs three kinds of notation to represent spoken and spoken-sung utterances: an unheightened stem without note-head (used to indicate the rhythm of the singer’s declamation); an ‘X’ note-head with heightened stem (almost always accompanied by the performance instructions ‘gesprochen’ and/or ‘tonlos’); and, lastly, a diamond note-head with heightened stem (reserved mostly for passages containing expressive, disjunct intervals). See Act III scene 3 (bars 113–32) and Act I scene 5 (bars 132–5) for examples of all three types of notation.

Wieder rasch
(Dunkelheit wie zum Schluß des 1. Bildes)

[...] [Paul!]

Sehr getragen, feierlich geheimnisvoll, unirdisch

MARIE

Ex. 7: [Above] Paul's scream ('Marie!') in Act III scene 2 (bars 768–71) and [Below] Marie's wailing cry ('Paul!') in Act I scene 6 (bars 5–9).

echoes that further draw attention, all of a sudden, to the foreboding vastness of the space enveloping the darkened stage; and all the while, the two struggling characters are kept in an awkwardly close-up shot, resulting in a shaky, documentary-like style of cinematography and its evocations of faux-realism (see Fig. 4).

So jarring are these cumulative dramatic effects that a viewer could be led to perceive – against all common sense – that the murder taking place is somehow ‘real’ (or at least more ‘realistic’ than it ought to be). What is so potentially chilling about Denoke’s on-stage murder is the notion that it can be difficult, if not impossible, to buy out of theatrical artifice. There are no ‘safe words’ in this



Fig. 4: The murder scene in the 2001 Strasbourg production of *Die tote Stadt*. Here, Paul kills Marietta by slitting her throat instead of strangling her with Marie's plait of hair, thus perhaps compounding the illusion that the actors are going (dangerously) 'off-script'.

role-play, so to speak, such that Denoke's desperate shriek of 'Du tust mir weh!' can (and, if convincing, is very much supposed to) sound indistinguishable from a real plea for help. The opera stage at this moment holds Denoke's voice hostage insofar as her scream is capable of signifying only as a stylised and dramaturgically sanctioned cry. Having sung, spoken, spoken-sung, shouted, laughed and screamed her way through the opera, Denoke, at the point of her character's death, finds herself in the role of a prima donna who cried wolf, a singer who has *exhausted* every mode of 'alternative' enunciation, an actress who has acted too much – just like Marietta – and now consequently possesses no way of telegraphing any real danger that might be occurring on that stage.⁷⁰ Viewers (especially those watching this production on the commercially distributed DVD), of course, would scarcely hesitate to bet their lives (or rather, Denoke's life) on the fact that there is no real danger. Yet the scene can nevertheless stick a sliver of doubt beneath one's skin, a fugitive doubt that is easily remedied by an appeal to reason, but can burrow, all the same, past rational faculties by virtue of the palpable drama of non-singing operatic bodies in savage conflict. Positioned at the climax of a narrative that insistently challenges the boundaries between what is real and what is fantasy, this scene ultimately leads us to the realisation that, sometimes on an opera stage, no one can hear you scream.

4

With Marietta's sacrificial dream-death – a karmic echo, perhaps, of Fritz's own sacrificial captivity as poor Pierrot – Paul escapes at last from his lengthy nightmare and its abyssal terrors. Yet this might be considered as only the opera's penultimate release, for the narrative's outermost diegetic layer – the one separating stage from

⁷⁰ This account might bring to mind the story of how Manuel García once allegedly threatened to kill Maria Malibran on stage if her performance of Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello* did not satisfy him. See April Fitzlyon, *Maria Malibran: Diva of the Romantic Age* (London, 1987), 38–41, and Catherine Clément, *Opera, or, The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, 1988), 11.

audience – is still left standing. In the concluding moments of *Die tote Stadt*, Paul awakens to hear his housekeeper Brigitta announce the return of Marietta, who appears in search of an umbrella that she had left behind. Marietta enters ‘in Erscheinung und Haltung genau wie sie zu Endes des 1. Bildes fortging, leicht und liebenswürdig’ (with exactly the same appearance and manner as she went out at the end of Act I, jaunty and amiable), creating the illusion that no ‘real’ time has passed since the dream sequence first began and thereby bringing the opera’s diptych narrative full circle. But Paul, equipped with his newfound wisdom, does not even acknowledge her presence, prompting Marietta to leave his house once and for all. Having overcome his final temptation, Paul describes to his friend Frank his acceptance of Marie’s death, singing the following text to the tune of the ‘Lautenlied’, the song that Marietta and Paul performed as a duet in Act I (see Ex. 8).⁷¹

O Freund, ich werde sie nicht mehr wiedersehn.
 Ein Traum hat mir den Traum zerstört,
 Ein Traum der bittern Wirklichkeiten
 Den Traum der Phantasie.
 Die Toten schicken solche Träume,
 Wenn wir zu viel *mit* und *in* ihnen leben.
 Wie weit *soll* unsre Trauer gehn,
 Wie weit *darf* sie es,
 Ohn’ uns zu entwurzeln?
 Schmerzlicher Zwiespalt des Gefühls!

O friend, I shall not see her anymore.
 A dream has killed my dream,
 A dream of bitter realities has dashed
 The dream of fantasy.
 The dead send such dreams
 If we live too much *with* them and *in* them.
 How far *should* we give way to grief,
 How far *dare* we,
 Without destroying ourselves?
 Cruel conflict of the heart!

Upon Frank’s suggestion, Paul decides to leave his home. After Brigitta and Frank exit the stage, he delivers a final soliloquy to the first verse of the ‘Lautenlied’ melody, but instead of singing, ‘Glaub, es gibt ein Auferstehn’ (I believe there will be resurrection), as he did in Act I, Paul now concludes, ‘Hier gibt es kein Auferstehn’ (There is no resurrection here). And just as Paul, after awakening from his dream, sees Marietta in a completely different (and no longer desirable) light, so perhaps audience members are tasked with hearing this Act III ‘Lautenlied’ not as a device of the *doppelgänger*’s seduction (as was possibly the case with the Act I performance) but rather as a redeemed and purified iteration – sung with solitary voice – that affirms Paul’s readiness to move on with his life.⁷²

What follows is a meditative pantomime in which Paul, it seems, *physically* takes apart the opera’s outermost diegetic layer with deliberate, ritualistic gestures:

Paul erhebt sich, schließt mit langsamer Feierlichkeit die zum Zimmer der Toten führende Tür ab, nimmt die sie schmückenden Blumen ab, verhüllt das Bild und nimmt auch hier

⁷¹ The orchestral melody in bars 104–5 of Ex. 8 bears a striking resemblance to the ‘Renunciation (of Love)’ leitmotif from Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (a work with which Korngold was certainly familiar). This melody also occurs during Marietta and Paul’s earlier performance of the ‘Lautenlied’, but its potential significance seems to change between Act I and Act III. Whereas in the duet, the reference might signal Paul’s deplorable renunciation of Marie for Marietta, its appearance in the final scene ostensibly connotes his renunciation of – that is, release from – his unhealthy fixation with his deceased wife.

⁷² The beguiling power of the ‘Lautenlied’ in Act I is described by Marietta herself, who, upon the conclusion of the duet, says to Paul: ‘Das dumme Lied, es hat Sie ganz verzaubert’ (This silly song, it has quite bewitched you).

poco rit. (♩)

Paul Wie weit soll uns - re Trau - er gehn, wie weit darf sie es, ohn' uns zu ent -

(♩.)

p sub. p

calando

Paul wur - - zeln?

p express.

sub. pp

poco rit. (♩)

Paul Schmerz - li - cher Zwie - spalt des Ge - fühl!

p espri. poco rit. (♩)

p pp

Ex. 8: Paul reflecting on the lessons of his dream in Act III scene 3 (bars 100–12).

Blumen an sich, sie an die Brust drückend. Dann lässt er die Gardine des Fensters herab, ergreift die Tischlampe und schreitet gesenkten Hauptes auf die Ausgangstüre im Hintergrunde zu. Wenn er sie erreicht hat, öffnet und Abschied nehmend zurückblickt, fällt langsam der Vorhang.

[Paul rises, slowly and solemnly locks the door of the dead woman's room, takes down the flowers that bedeck it, draws the curtain across the portrait, and takes from this the flowers as well, holding them close to his breast. Then he draws the curtains of the window, takes the lamp, and goes, with lowered head, out the door and into the background. When he has reached and opened the door and taken one parting look backward, the curtain slowly falls.]

Since the opera stage at this point is mostly made up of the scant props and architecture with which Paul is interacting – including the various meaningful pieces of Marie-memorabilia – he arguably does not just draw the curtains, lock the door to the ‘Temple of the Past’, and take away the flowers, but additionally *dismantles* the stage as a whole, literally bringing down the (opera) house with his own bare hands – the same pair of hands with which he had earlier torn Marietta’s costume (ending the rehearsal of *Robert le diable*) and throttled the *doppelgänger* (ending the dream). By de(-)constructing the stage, Paul passes the opera’s moral torch to audience members who must now similarly forfeit their own indulgence in theatrical fantasy.

Yet the multiple mirrors, nested illusions and *coups de théâtre* (‘...and it was all a dream’) of this operatic experience can leave viewers with the uneasy impression that there is no real ‘here’ out here – or, put differently, that the world ‘outside’ this opera is just another layer of its dramatic onion, every bit as illusive, ephemeral and stage-like as any putatively contained spectacle. Such is likewise the dilemma of the hermeneut, who must confront *Die tote Stadt* and its *mise-en-abyme* narrative in the same way Paul gazes at Marietta – sceptically, a little uncomfortably, and with an intense longing for something substantial to come to fruition. Both meaning and presence are systematically elided in the opera’s chain of disappearing acts: Fritz, who serves his crucial function in the limelight and thereafter vanishes so unceremoniously; Marietta, who cries out with hostage voice at the moment of her dream-death; and Paul, who makes his silent exit as a trauma survivor *qua* stage-hand with a didactic gesture towards the audience. But for eager exegetes who wish to plumb the opera’s depths, interpretations will appear as ubiquitously as Paul’s visions of Marie. Taking heed of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s assertion about the capacity of music to ‘[mean] nothing and yet [mean] everything’,⁷³ Carolyn Abbate has suggested that a ‘coherent stance’ towards music’s (and, by extension, opera’s) ineffability ‘would involve not taking advantage of it, hesitating before articulating a terminus, or restricting music to any determinate meaning within any declarative sentence’.⁷⁴ David Levin’s recent monograph on operatic stagings concludes with a similar caveat that, in both hermeneutical and dramaturgical endeavours, ‘the fact that ... *any* work can be made to signify almost anything does not mean that anything goes’.⁷⁵ Following Abbate’s critique of ‘gnostic’ analysis, Levin maintains that in ‘performing and theorizing these [operatic] works, we bear an ethical as well as an aesthetic responsibility to attend to the terms of antithesis’.⁷⁶ Any responsibility one might bear in the act of interpreting opera, of course, is primarily a responsibility not to the opera itself – the text-object that is animated via collective processes of composition, production, consumption and critical dialogue, but rather

⁷³ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, 2003), 11.

⁷⁴ Carolyn Abbate, ‘Music – Drastic or Gnostic?’, *Critical Inquiry*, 30 (2004), 517.

⁷⁵ David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago and London, 2007), 207, emphasis in original. A nuanced study of intersections between historical, political, aesthetic and philological factors in approaches to ‘informed’ operatic dramaturgy can be found in Gundula Kreuzer, ‘Voices from Beyond: Verdi’s *Don Carlos* and the Modern Stage’, *this journal*, 18 (2006), 151–79.

⁷⁶ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 206–7.

to actual people – the composers, performers, spectators and interlocutors upon whom the life (and perceived liveliness) of an opera depends.⁷⁷

Korngold's naive, myth-shrouded image has historically served as what one might call a hermeneutical fail-safe for patrons and critics of *Die tote Stadt*. For it is unlikely that the opera – with its abundant symbols and timely themes of loss and trauma – was regarded as inherently problemless or aphilosophical by its contemporary audiences. What seems more probable is that Korngold's childish reputation has by and large relieved individuals of the 'responsibility' (ethical or otherwise) of commenting on the opera in drastically problematic and philosophical ways. When Austrian and German critics during the early post-war period voiced their unease about the convoluted plots and ambiguous symbolism of operas such as Franz Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* (1918), Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1919) and Franz Schmidt's *Fredigundis* (1922), they were not just expressing anxieties about the potential political threats of cryptic narratives but also aiming to chastise the esoteric pretensions of these composers.⁷⁸ No such rebuke would have been necessary for kid Korngold. The perceived implausibility of intended political messages in *Die tote Stadt* appeared to have led writers to embrace the opera's relatable lessons of mourning and coping at face value – that is, to permit the opera's otherwise densely symbolic meta-theatrics to collapse into problemless, audience-friendly spectacle.

Let us consider, then, by way of conclusion, the final minutes of Inga Levant's Strasbourg production, which foregoes the opera's *l'ieto fine* and Paul's edifying pantomime. Instead, Frank – made up like a devil but dressed in a bishop's gown – hands a knife to Paul, who uses it to slit his own wrists as he sings the 'Lautenlied'. As the song's orchestral coda plays, Paul staggers towards the back of the stage and slumps dead against a wooden door, above which a neon sign displays the existentialist words 'No Exit'.⁷⁹ The production further introduces the character of a young boy who comes onto the stage during both the Act I and Act III performances of the 'Lautenlied'. In the final scene, this mute boy – who has no

⁷⁷ Abbate acknowledges that her portrayal of music as something that needs to be critically 'freed' invokes a discourse that seems to 'anthropomorphise musical works, making them into living things toward which we must develop an ethical position' ('Music – Drastic or Gnostic?', 517). She then disclaims: 'They are not, of course, but the way we cope with them may reflect choices about how to cope with real human others or how not to' (*ibid.*). For more on the ethics of musical hermeneutics, see Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton, 2001), vii–xvi. Richard Taruskin has likewise criticised the 'fallacy of reification' with regard to the 'pseudo-ethics' of historically informed performance practices, which are 'born of a misplaced sense of obligation' – that is, to 'the ancient dead . . . an inanimate object or an abstract idea' rather than to living human beings (*Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* [New York, 1995], 24).

⁷⁸ See Andreas Giger, 'Tradition in Post World-War-I Vienna: The Role of the Vienna State Opera from 1919–1924', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 28 (1997), 189–211 (esp. 197–8); Giger, 'A Matter of Principle', 547–9; and Marc A. Weiner, *Undertones of Insurrection: Music, Politics & the Social Sphere in the Modern German Narrative* (Lincoln, NB, 1993), 191 and 237ff.

⁷⁹ At the beginning of Act II in this production, Paul ends up killing Frank (an action not prescribed by the libretto) instead of simply arguing with him. Levant explains that Paul does so because 'Frank is the person who tries to open Paul's eyes to see the reality which Paul doesn't want to see' (interview with author [9 December 2007]).



Fig. 5: [Left] Grégory Rousset as adolescent Korngold in Act I and [Right] Rousset appearing to accompany Torsten Kerl's performance of the 'Lautenlied' in Act III scene 3 of the 2001 Strasbourg production of *Die tote Stadt*.

analogue in the original libretto – sits down in front of a piano and acts as if he is accompanying Paul as the latter sings his farewell (see Fig. 5).

The boy, according to Levant, is meant to represent Korngold, trapped fittingly in his youth and on a stage exhibiting his most celebrated work. Levant explains that, at the end of this performance, 'Paul – or Korngold – realises there is no resurrection, and he chooses to escape the reality that he cannot understand while singing his most famous tune, remembering himself as an inspired child playing his old piano'.⁸⁰ By framing 'hier gibt es kein Auferstehn' as a defeatist rather than a life-affirming proclamation, this production shackles Paul to the stage, to spectacle, and to a dream of an unrecoverable past. Frank's earlier proposal to Paul – 'Willst du mit mir? Fort aus der Stadt des Todes?' – is likewise recast as a menacing invitation to 'escape' Bruges via self-destruction rather than relocation. When I asked Levant why she altered the ending of the opera, she responded that she did not think she 'changed the plot, but only interpreted it'.⁸¹ Her goal was to use the opera to communicate what she believed to be a faithful (or at least provocative) representation of Korngold – a wide-eyed prodigy who bloomed too early and became fraught, in his later years, with a deep yearning for his days of Viennese glory. The resulting production thus resembles a tidy dramatic package that infuses staged narrative with a tone of auspicious confession, obliquely pathologising the composer's nostalgia (as intimated by Paul's suicide) and treating the opera writ large as a testament to Korngold's escapist tendencies.⁸²

⁸⁰ Levant, interview with author (9 December 2007).

⁸¹ Levant.

⁸² Biographer Jessica Duchen makes a similar interpretive move in describing the 'heartfelt nostalgia' of the 'Pierrot Lied' as 'only too close to Korngold's own developing sentiments'

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The attempts of dramaturges, critics and biographers to preserve the apolitical image of *Die tote Stadt* and its composer might be understood as intellectual wish-fulfilment. The term ‘genius’ tends to be avoided nowadays due to its connotations of hero worship, the work concept and hegemonic canons, but this label has consistently been central to characterisations of Korngold and his early output. It is commonly observed that this Wunderkind somehow managed to absorb with remarkable ease the aesthetic elements of his compositional models while filtering out much of the inconvenient politics implicated therein. Such wishful discourse yields a portrait of a composer who spoke fluent Wagnerese and yet appeared magically unburdened by the baggage associated with this musical language and with *fin-de-siècle* ‘decadence’ more generally. Despite all the controversies ignited by his father, young Erich was regarded as having been chiefly dedicated to creating music for music’s sake. His child-like demeanour made him an exemplary vessel through which ideals of prelapsarian, daresay redemptive, aesthetic autonomy could be vicariously fulfilled.⁸³ A view of compositional genius as a condition that transcends reason, culture and criticism must have been a tempting one even (or especially) for jaded writers who might otherwise have disapproved of Korngold’s ‘conservative’ tendencies. Just as the enigmatic aspects of *mise-en-abyme* can bestow hermeneutical wings upon its interpreters, so the mystifying nature of Korngold’s talents seems to have granted writers, both past and present, a rare instance of critical respite.

It could be concluded that *Die tote Stadt*’s political valence lies precisely in its assumed apoliticality, or – to invoke again the transcendent vocabulary of genius – its supra-politicality.⁸⁴ Relying on such ambivalent rhetoric, to be sure, is a bit like having one’s deconstructed cake and eating it too – part of the postmodern hermeneut’s complete breakfast, naturally, but little more than empty calories if consumed without the accompaniment of critical contexts. Conversations about music and politics sometimes get mired in questions of whether a work ‘is’ or ‘is not’ political at the expense of reflexively interrogating the kinds of social, dramaturgical and academic motivations underlying the politicisation (or de-politicisation) of that work. For it is not, ultimately, that *Die tote Stadt* intrinsically defies problematisation or politicisation – quite the contrary: given its spectacular abyss, the opera supplies ample fodder for dramatic interpretation and lively philosophical debate. In the end, perhaps the initial meteoric popularity of the opera owed partly to the notion that

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and speculating as to how Korngold could be ‘prey to nostalgia at the age of barely twenty’ (*Erich Wolfgang Korngold*, 76). Duchen goes on to suggest that Korngold was ‘mourning, with his contemporaries, the passing of an era ... [or longing] for the comparative ease of his childhood’ (*ibid.*).

⁸³ Along similar lines, Maynard Solomon has pointed to aspects of Mozart’s Wunderkind image that implied ‘a channel between childhood and creativity that early Romantic aestheticians found irresistible ... Other purveyors of the Mozart-as-child myth viewed him not only as a child but as a simpleton or, to put it more kindly, a divine vessel’ (*Mozart: A Life*, 14).

⁸⁴ For reflexive notes on the politics of reading opera politically, see Amanda Eubanks Winkler, “‘O ravishing delight’: The Politics of Pleasure in *The Judgment of Paris*”, *this journal*, 15 (2003), 15–31 (esp. 15–6), and Robert D. Hume, ‘The Politics of Opera in Late Seventeenth-Century London’, *this journal*, 10 (1998), 15–43 (esp. 28–35).

it invited its audiences to identify with Paul's healing experience (across multiple levels of entertaining musical drama) without pressuring them to articulate the means or consequences of such identification. During an era in which one's patronage of specific musical genres was often construed as a facile reflection of political and ideological allegiance, Korngold's apolitical image and obscure intentions conceivably allowed audiences to lay aside such concerns and to luxuriate freely in operatic spectacle. For all 'intents' and purposes, then, Korngold's escape has also been our own – and it is in *this* reflection that the dead city has since lived.