

5-2016

# Korngold's Leading Ladies: A Comparative Study of Female Characters in the Operas of Erich Wolfgang Korngold from 1915 to 1927

Brandon Larry Dow  
*University of Arkansas, Fayetteville*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd>



Part of the [Other Music Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Dow, Brandon Larry, "Korngold's Leading Ladies: A Comparative Study of Female Characters in the Operas of Erich Wolfgang Korngold from 1915 to 1927" (2016). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1612.  
<http://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/1612>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UARK. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UARK. For more information, please contact [scholar@uark.edu](mailto:scholar@uark.edu), [ccmiddle@uark.edu](mailto:ccmiddle@uark.edu).

Korngold's Leading Ladies: A Comparative Study of Female Characters in the Operas of Erich  
Wolfgang Korngold from 1915 to 1927

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Music in Music

by

Brandon Dow  
Southern Arkansas University  
Bachelor of Arts in Music, 2014

May 2016  
University of Arkansas

This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

---

Dr. Martin Nedbal  
Thesis Director

---

Dr. Laurence Hare  
Committee Member

---

Dr. Alan Gosman  
Committee Member

## Abstract

Portrayals of women in art have always been a sensitive subject due to the unequal distribution of power between the sexes within the Western patriarchal society and, more recently, due to newly acquired criticism of artistic misogyny. The operas of Erich Wolfgang Korngold showcase varying interpretations of female characters that waver between misogynist objectification and disparagement and ardent endorsement of feminine prominence. This thesis discusses three of Korngold's operas (*Violanta*, *Die tote Stadt*, and *Das Wunder der Heliane*) and examines them through the lens of the tumultuous and ever-changing political and social landscape of women's issues in Vienna in the early twentieth century. The first chapter discusses *Violanta* in connection to the nebulous concept of *femme fatale*. Whereas the *femme fatale* characteristics are mainly prominent in the libretto, Korngold's music mostly subverts them. I show that Alfonso, the opera's main villain and a classic Don Juan character, is far more prominent in the music of the opera than the eponymous heroine. As a result, *Violanta* projects a special type of the traditional, patriarchal, and misogynist plot so often found in the operatic world of nineteenth-century opera—one in which the *femme* is subverted before she even has a chance to become *fatale*. The second chapter discusses *Die tote Stadt* and further shows how Korngold exploits the archetype of *femme fatale*. The opera's main character, Marietta, displays many of the same traits as *Violanta*. Musically, Marietta exudes far more prominence than *Violanta* as can be evidenced in her entrance music, her main aria, and in a serenade to her. While Marietta is ultimately murdered, she still exemplifies strong and independent qualities that *Violanta* does not. The third chapter discusses *Das Wunder der Heliane* and Korngold's abandonment of the *femme fatale* archetype. *Heliane* has a much stronger ethical character than the previous heroines, and her beauty and virtue are constantly amplified within the music.

Heliane may also reflect the commonly held beliefs of many women of the feminist movement as well as the budding Nazi party: that women should abstain from sexual promiscuity and be emblazoned with a strong moral compass.

©2016 by Brandon Dow  
All Rights Reserved

## **Acknowledgements**

Special thanks are extended to each member of my thesis committee, particularly the director Dr. Nedbal, for all of the support, scholarly advice, and guidance they have given me throughout my two years at the University of Arkansas. The commitment they show to their students is remarkable. It would have been impossible to make it through this program of study without their help.

Additional recognition should be given to Charles Morgan at Mena High School and Dr. Dan Dykema at Southern Arkansas University. Thanks to Mr. Morgan for fostering my musical abilities in their infancy and to Dr. Dykema for encouraging my love of opera and exposing me to the music of Erich Wolfgang Korngold. Finally, my upmost gratitude and deepest adoration is given to my family, especially my mother, Linda Dow. Their unfathomable love and support bewilders me every day. Without them, none of this would have ever been possible.

## **Dedication**

First, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Linda Dow, who managed to raise two healthy children as a single parent. Second, I would like to dedicate this thesis to all of the strong women I have known throughout my life. You are all beautiful and have my sincerest admiration and deepest respect. Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to anyone who might lose hope in the power of dreaming. I submit this thesis as proof that dreams can and do indeed come true.

## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	1
II.	Whose Opera is it Anyway? The Subversion of <i>Femme Fatale</i> in Korngold's <i>Violanta</i> .....	4
	Defining the Indefinable.....	6
	Setting up <i>Violanta</i> .....	7
	<i>Violanta</i> as a Failure.....	11
	Whose Opera is it Anyway?.....	13
	Connections to <i>Carmen</i> .....	18
	Conclusions.....	21
III.	<i>Die tote Stadt</i> : On the Path to a Better Treatment of Women.....	24
	The Same but Different.....	26
	First Impressions Are Very Important.....	29
	The Object(s) of Many Desires.....	32
	Conclusions.....	40
IV.	The Final Frontier: <i>Das Wunder der Heliane</i> , the Absence of <i>Femme Fatale</i> and the Manifestation of Integrity in <i>Heliane</i> .....	45
	Deciphering the Libretto.....	47
	Distinguishing <i>Heliane</i> .....	51
	<i>Heliane</i> 's Musical Importance.....	54
	Premiering Korngold's Masterpiece.....	61
	Conclusions.....	63
	Bibliography.....	67



## I. Introduction

Portrayals of women in art have always been a sensitive subject, often times due to the misogynistic treatment and objectification of them. Many women in opera are portrayed as a *femme fatale*, an archetypal character that appears in many famous operas of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, such as Bizet's *Carmen* or Strauss' *Salome*. The operas of Erich Wolfgang Korngold showcase several varying interpretations of female characters as well as a clear trajectory towards ultimate musical prominence. Although they were banned during World War II and subsequently faded into obscurity, Korngold's operas were very popular at the time they premiered. Because of their popularity at the time, this thesis discusses three of Korngold's operas (*Violanta*, *Die tote Stadt*, and *Das Wunder der Heliane*) and examines them through the lens of the tumultuous and ever-developing political and social landscape of women's issues in Vienna in the early twentieth century.

The first chapter discusses *Violanta*, written in 1914 and premiered in Munich in 1916. It is the story of a beautiful Venetian woman who vows to avenge the suicide of her sister by plotting the murder of the sister's seducer, Alfonso. This chapter discusses *Violanta* in connection to the nebulous concept of the *femme fatale*. Whereas the *femme fatale* characteristics are mainly prominent in the libretto, Korngold's music mostly subverts them. I show that Alfonso, the opera's main villain and a classic Don Juan character, is far more prominent in the music of the opera than the eponymous heroine. As a result, *Violanta* projects the traditional, patriarchal, misogynist qualities so often found in the operatic world world of nineteenth-century opera. While most fin-de-siècle operas dealing with *femmes fatales* contain misogynist elements,

Korngold's score is particularly intense in highlighting the ultimate dominance of men over women.

The second chapter discusses *Die tote Stadt* and further shows how Korngold exploits the archetype of *femme fatale*. It is the story of a traveling actress named Marietta who takes advantage of a man named Paul who has lost his wife and believes Marietta to be his deceased wife reincarnated. Marietta displays many of the same traits as Violanta. Musically, Marietta exudes far more prominence than Violanta as can be evidenced in her entrance music, her main aria, and in a serenade to her. While Marietta is ultimately murdered, she still exemplifies strong and independent qualities that Violanta does not. I show that Marietta may symbolize a new independent woman for the women of Austria who just gained the right to vote and hold legal office around the time this opera was written and premiered.

The third chapter discusses *Das Wunder der Heliane* and Korngold's abandonment of the *femme fatale* archetype. This opera is a story of love's triumph over evil. The Stranger, imprisoned for spreading love throughout the kingdom, is further charged for lusting after the Ruler's wife Heliane. The Ruler ultimately kills Heliane, but because she and the Stranger remain pure, they travel together to afterlife. Heliane has a stronger ethical character than the previous heroines, and her beauty and virtue are constantly amplified within the music. Heliane may also reflect the commonly held beliefs of many women of the feminist movement as well as the budding Nazi party: that women should abstain from sexual promiscuity and be emblazoned with a strong moral compass.

While Korngold is largely forgotten by the general population today, he was one of Vienna's brightest stars in his time. Brendan Carroll, Korngold's official biographer, lovingly calls Korngold the last of the musical prodigies like Mozart. Rather than producing kitsch,

Korngold reflects societal trends as well as personal experience within the context of these three operas, thus solidifying their significance and validating further in-depth study of them. This thesis will hopefully serve as a starting point for future scholars who wish to study Korngold's unique and fascinating operatic works. Carroll hoped that with his biography, Korngold would at last take his place as the true heir to composers like Mahler, Strauss, and Puccini. It is my hope that this thesis, in some small way, might also contribute to the ever expanding recognition of Korngold's music as art rather than novelty.

## II. Whose Opera is it Anyway? The Subversion of *Femme Fatale* in Korngold's *Violanta*

In 1913, a young Erich Korngold set out to compose his first opera, quite a feat for a young man of just 16 years old. By then, he had some success with symphonic composition, but excelled particularly with dramatic works, most notably the ballet pantomime *Der Schneeman* in 1909. By the end of 1913, he finished his first opera *Der Ring des Polykrates*, a charming and comical one-act piece set in the late eighteenth century. The true test for Korngold's dramatic prowess would come just a year later in 1914, when he wrote the dramatic and emotionally charged *Violanta*, another one-act opera. His father, Julius Korngold, had doubts as to whether this young man had the maturity to compose an opera using Hans Müller's passionate, if not a bit contrived, libretto.<sup>1</sup> Those fears were dashed after the successful double premiere of *Polykrates* and *Violanta* in Munich in 1916.<sup>2</sup> The local reviewers soon praised young Korngold as a master of operatic composition.

Both operas remained in the repertoire of many German opera houses until Korngold's works were banned for political reasons during World War II. And yet, in spite of the praise the two operas received, and the popularity that they both enjoyed for many years, there is a surprisingly small amount of research about them. Only one article was easily available in English about *Violanta*. It was featured in *The Musical Times* and was merely a synopsis and review of the opera, along with some score analysis and biographical information. The article

---

<sup>1</sup> Brendan G. Carroll, *The Last Prodigy* (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997), 32: Erich Korngold's father, Julius, constantly encouraged his son to compose as much as he could, so that he could improve quickly. One particularly amusing anecdote comes from Karl Böhm, stating: "Korngold's father, Dr. Julius Korngold, constantly encouraged his son to compose—so much so that on one occasion, when we all went to bathe in the lake, he shouted after him: 'Erich! Don't bathe—compose!'"

<sup>2</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 112

coincided with the 1980 recording of *Violanta* and was surely written in hopes that it would spark further adventures in research.<sup>3</sup>

In his biography of Korngold, Brendan G. Carroll provides a good summary of *Violanta*'s plot:

Violanta, a grand-dame of fifteenth-century Venice, has vowed to avenge the suicide of her sister, the abandoned lover of the handsome Alfonso, Prince of Naples. During the carnival, she finds Alfonso and lures him to her house, where, at a pre-arranged signal (Violanta will sing the blasphemous carnival song) her husband Simone will kill him, and thus avenge her sister's death. After initial hostility, however, she falls in love with the prince herself. After a rapturous duet ("Reine Liebe," Everlasting Love) she sings the carnival song. When her husband appears from behind an arras, dagger drawn, she throws herself between the two men and dies, thereby expiating her adultery.<sup>4</sup>

This summary makes it clear that the character *Violanta*, to some extent, fits the profile of the *femme fatale* stereotype, an operatic plot archetype that includes such heroines as Bizet's *Carmen* and Strauss' *Salome* and *Elektra*.

The following pages discuss *Violanta* in connection to the variable concept of the *femme fatale*. I argue that to a large extent the character *Violanta* fits the basic characteristics of most *femmes fatales*, but the opera as a whole also undermines that concept. The *femme fatale* characteristics are especially prominent in the libretto. Korngold's music, by contrast, mostly subverts those characteristics. I show, furthermore, that Alfonso, a classic Don Juan-type character, is far more prominent in the music of the opera than the eponymous heroine, and as a result *Violanta* acquires a traditional, patriarchal, misogynist quality that is so often found in the operatic world of nineteenth-century opera. To illustrate the misogynist aspects in

---

<sup>3</sup> Brendan G. Carroll, "Korngold's 'Violanta'," *The Musical Times* 121, no.1653 (Nov. 1980): 695-698

<sup>4</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 103

Korngold's music, I also draw connections between *Violanta* and *Carmen* and show that *Violanta* is in fact more patriarchal than *Carmen*. While most fin-de-siècle operas dealing with *femmes fatales* contain misogynist ideas, Korngold's score is particularly intense in highlighting the ultimate dominance of men over women.

### **Defining the Indefinable**

Because it is an archetypal character that appears in many different operas, *femme fatale* is a difficult concept to define. We can, however, pin-point at least four common characteristics that *femmes fatales* usually share. A *femme fatale* possesses some kind of unusual and captivating beauty (especially white skin and spellbinding eyes), and she uses this beauty to influence or entrap men.<sup>5</sup> The presence of the *femme fatale* usually creates some kind of controversy; enough to make one or more characters within the story oppose their tempting influence.<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, although the *femme fatale* does not have to slay male characters, she does “bring about a psychological change or a fateful, momentous transformation in [them] or in the quality of [their] life.”<sup>7</sup> While the term *femme fatale* has only been around for the last few hundred years, the image of an alluring yet threatening woman has appeared in the arts and literature for much longer. Some would even consider Eve from the Bible to be one of the first *femmes fatales* when she lures Adam into eating the forbidden fruit, thus resulting in their eviction from the Garden of Eden.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Terri Stricker, “A Comparative Study of *FEMME-FATALE* Imagery and its Significance in Selected *FIN-DE-SIECLE* Art and Literature,” (PhD diss., University of Arkansas, 2000), 12

<sup>6</sup> Stricker, “Comparative Study,” 13

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Stricker, “Comparative Study,” 11-12; Elizabeth K. Menon, *Evil By Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 4

The *femme fatale* concept becomes particularly prominent in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, not just in opera, but also in many other art forms. During this period, artists gradually began to portray the *femme fatale* not only as a vile seductress, but also as a beautiful, powerful, independent, and intelligent woman. Characters such as Emma Bovary, Maggie Tulliver, Effi Briest, Salome, and Turandot are examples of such new portrayals.<sup>9</sup> The artist Gustav Klimt painted many powerful feminine figures in *Nuda Veritas*, *Judith and Holofernes I*, and *Portrait of a Woman*, with the hope of giving women role-models at a time when they had practically no rights at all.<sup>10</sup> This increase in depiction and interpretation reflects the struggle for understanding gender issues and the pursuit of women's rights that culminated in the early twentieth-century with suffragists and continues to this day.<sup>11</sup> Film characters such as Sharon Stone's Catherine Trammel in the 1992 film *Basic Instinct* and Rose Byrne's Rayna Boyanov in the 2015 film *Spy* show that the concept is not only still around, but nevertheless important and continually being explored.

### **Setting up Violanta**

There is no doubt that the main character, Violanta, is set up to resemble a *femme fatale* from the very beginning. The first significant hint, as arbitrary as it may seem, is the fact that her namesake is the sole title of the work. Generally speaking, most of the often analyzed *femmes fatales* in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century repertoire have their namesake as the title of the work they are featured in. *Carmen*, *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Lulu*, and *Turandot* are all not only famous *femmes fatales* but also famous titles.

---

<sup>9</sup> Stricker, "Comparative Studies," 5

<sup>10</sup> Stricker, "Comparative Studies," 7

<sup>11</sup> Stricker, "Comparative Studies," 5

Violanta's *femme fatale* characteristics are quite pronounced throughout Müller's libretto. Two characteristics are established in the opening scene. The first trait is that Violanta is very beautiful with white skin and captivating eyes. These traits are particularly accentuated by the character Matteo, a seemingly unimportant adolescent boy, who is presented to the audience during the first scene and then is not heard from or mentioned for the rest of the opera. This begs the question; why would Korngold include him at all? His infatuation with Violanta and his dialogue with the soldiers reinforces her great beauty, even before we see her on stage, thus establishing Matteo's and this scene's importance. While teasing Matteo, one of the soldiers standing guard exclaims, "He dreams of her white body, on which pale moonbeams play...", taking note to accentuate the pallor of her skin. Matteo's infatuation is further accentuated when he states, "Perhaps she has joined the carnival at San Marco, to outshine all the lights with the brilliance of her eyes."<sup>12</sup>

A second trait that *femme fatales* usually share is that they create some kind of controversy among the other characters. It is usually to the point where at least one, if not more characters oppose the *femme fatale*'s tempting influence. Again, this can be found in the opening scene of *Violanta*, in the exchange between Matteo and Barbara, Violanta's chambermaid. Each time Matteo accentuates Violanta's beauty, Barbara retorts in opposition to his fascination. When Matteo says, "Perhaps... perhaps she's nestling in someone's arms, like a white dove in a cage, learning how to smile again," he further accentuates Violanta's beauty.<sup>13</sup> Barbara opposes Matteo's beguilement quite strongly by saying, "You fool! Don't you know that she is as chaste

---

<sup>12</sup> "Violanta Libretto," in accompanying booklet, *Violanta* performed by Eva Marton, Siegfried Jerusalem, and the Munich Radio Orchestra conducted by Marek Janowski, CBS Masterworks MK 79229, 1980, CD, 40-41

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*



as the snow, and that her silence and mysterious melancholy fill us with fear?”<sup>14</sup> It is interesting to note Barbara comparing Violanta to snow, simultaneously describing her as cold while further accentuating her “whiteness.” Barbara and Matteo complement each other well in this scene. Matteo highlights Violanta’s beauty, while Barbara emphasizes the fear that is induced by Violanta’s “mysterious and melancholy” behavior.

A third *femme fatale* characteristic is the psychological change or transformation of a character, usually due to the *femme fatale*’s actions. Scene two shows the aftermath of Violanta’s behavior towards Simone. Simone enters the scene and exclaims, “This is the house of Captain Trovai: It is closed to mirth and pleasure!”<sup>15</sup> He is not just annoyed by the happy goings-on, but truly seems to despise the sights and sounds of individuals relishing in the festivities of Venice. Simone is clearly frustrated that he cannot find his wife when he exclaims, “No! No! Always no! What is in her mind, that she should thus hide herself?”<sup>16</sup> It is not a far stretch to assume that, if Violanta can incite fear in Barbara with her “silence and mysterious melancholy,” she can also incite depression and petulance in her spouse with her persistent absence and taciturnity.

Scene three further reinforces Simone’s petulance and explains the source of Violanta’s despondence. The scene opens with the introduction of Giovanni, a jubilant and foppish painter who seems to revel in every aspect of the Venetian festival. When Giovanni tries to get Simone to join him at the Feast of the Redentore, Simone refuses, stating that Giovanni’s joy repulses him.<sup>17</sup> Giovanni tries to entice him more by asking him if he would like to see Alfonso, whom he describes as “the ladies’ idol from the Appenines?”<sup>18</sup> Once Simone realizes this is the same

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 44-45

<sup>16</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 46-47

<sup>17</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 47

<sup>18</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 47

Alfonso that wronged Violanta, he gives an impassioned speech explaining what Alfonso did that made Violanta so miserable. Simone says:

She hates him! Hates him more than Death! Did you not know? The miserable scoundrel seduced her sister, Nerina, who was a novice in Deserto: And, prey to her shame, the poor child threw herself into the sea. Since her death, Violanta has remained silent. Terror clutches her throat and in her bitter hatred she rejects everything that calls itself man... Because of this stranger, whom her hatred pursues, she is more distant to me than when I first courted her...<sup>19</sup>

Violanta is clearly despaired by the death of her sister, and has become jaded, not just to Alfonso, but to all men in general. This explains why Violanta has been so taciturn, causing Simone to supplant his formerly happy behavior with general antagonism towards festivity and mirth.

A fourth element commonly associated with *femme fatale* is manipulation of men and Violanta is a proficient manipulator as one can see in the way she involves her husband, Simone, and the seducer of her sister, Alfonso, in her plan to get revenge. These are simultaneously accomplished in scene four, which is the first scene where Violanta makes an appearance. She proudly explains exactly what she did to make Alfonso follow her:

I pushed aside the maidens who swarmed around him like bees around their hive, and glided towards him, swaying and sighing. Tremulous and languishing, I lured the seducer after me. I sang the song all Venice sings today”<sup>20</sup>

Violanta uses Simone’s imagination against him by intentionally being mysterious when she says, “In the dark he bent over me, his eyes burning, his lips quivering, and then, then...”<sup>21</sup> After Simone breathlessly asks her to finish, Violanta does so with the vague statement: “Then I knew that my sister, Nerina, would smile in her grave today.”<sup>22</sup> This alludes to the moment she

---

<sup>19</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 49

<sup>20</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 55

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 55

realized how she would avenge her sister. Violanta wants Alfonso dead but does not want to commit the murder herself. She not only justifies Alfonso's murder but also entices Simone to commit it when she says, "If you love me, he must live no longer!... As long as those eyes kindle a flame that outglows all shame, as long as those lips moisten to engender every sin, I cannot live, I cannot smile, I cannot kiss you!"<sup>23</sup> The final weapon in Violanta's manipulative arsenal is used when she pleads, "Yes, you shall kill him! Kill him, so that I may be your wife once more!"<sup>24</sup> Simone agrees. Yet again, Violanta has caused a change in Simone's behavior, transforming him from cynical grouse to bloodthirsty avenger, further enforcing the fourth characteristic of *femme fatale*.

### **Violanta as a Failure**

The early scenes of the opera clearly present Violanta as a siren of sorts, capable of manipulating people with her songs, her beauty, and her actions. But the opera's end completely shatters this image. Although Violanta succeeds in persuading Alfonso to come up to her room, she falls in love with him, which leads to her ultimate demise. The death of the female anti-heroine is a common feature among numerous *femme fatale* stories: Salome is sentenced to be killed by King Herod and Carmen is killed by Don José. Whereas characters such as Salome and Carmen are killed by men they had manipulated, Violanta sacrifices herself for someone she previously intended to destroy. Violanta's transition from a manipulative seductress to cooing dove is quite out of character for a *femme fatale*. This transformation, however, is prefigured from the very beginning of the opera both in the libretto and in Korngold's music.

---

<sup>23</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 59

<sup>24</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 61

Scene six shows, according to Carroll, both Violanta's and Alfonso's psychological transformation.<sup>25</sup> I believe that a more accurate interpretation is that Alfonso proves to be a better manipulator than Violanta, and there is ample evidence in the libretto to prove it. It begins with Alfonso's entrance into Violanta's room, which is the first time he is seen on stage. Violanta immediately questions his compliments about her beauty by stating that he no doubt has "harbored many a one," referring to beautiful maidens of course. However, Alfonso responds, "All women rebuke me."<sup>26</sup> This seems unlikely considering that, in scene five, he admitted that a thousand women would throw kisses over his grave if he died. When coupled with the fact that Violanta admitted to parting the maidens who swarmed around him like bees, it makes him seem insincere. He then tries to persuade her to sing the carnival song she sang previously for him, but she refuses, insisting that he take off his mantle and sword. When he tries to sing the song himself, Violanta abruptly silences him. Alfonso asks why she stopped him, and after a ludicrously quick interrogation, Violanta divulges every detail of the murder plot, saying that she is Simone's wife and, upon her signal, Simone will appear and murder him.

Alfonso proceeds to make Violanta feel guilty by explaining why he has pursued so many women in his life. According to Alfonso:

I often wished to die. When life seemed but an empty dream to me; Yes, death is an old playmate of mine. But to be scorned by one whom I love is poison instead of a good sleeping potion. My lips have kissed your sister's lips... It's true. And many another have I thus deceived. But whatever my deeds and failings, they were decreed for me by fate. I never knew my mother: she gave her life that I might live, no home, no sister's greeting, no true heart were ever mine. I was reared in a monarch's court. He called himself my father, but never was. Commissioned by the fire of youth, I was driven by an insatiable longing. A trembling heart fell under my spell, but to plunge me into further adventures. I never knew happiness, nor have I ever found rest, and thus, parched and thirsting for love, I have never felt what love inspires... You cannot condone my deeds:

---

<sup>25</sup> Carroll *Prodigy*, 104

<sup>26</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 73

Neither would I accept your pity; But that you should know me as I am, and not think me contemptible, that alone makes this hour worth living... Now sing your song! I won't hinder you. No...<sup>27</sup>

Alfonso begins the text by admitting that, despite all of the women he has pursued, his life feels incomplete. His words suggest that he might have even contemplated suicide. He admits to his seduction and abandonment of women, including Violanta's sister, but then proceeds to shift the blame from himself to the environment which reared him. His mother died during child-birth, his father was inattentive, and he was an only child. Thus, his eternal conquest of women is really a constant need to replace the love he never experienced as a child. Alfonso makes Violanta feel sorry for him, then taps into her long repressed urges to "live in the moment."

The manipulation works, for there is probably no more manipulative feeling than that of guilt. Violanta decides that she is in love with Alfonso, and that she should follow her heart and pursue her feelings for him. She sings the accursed song and, after Simone is summoned, he begs him not to kill Alfonso, for she loves him. Simone is enraged, accuses Alfonso of being a thief, and thrusts his dagger at him. It is an action in vain, for just as he thinks he is about to hit Alfonso, Violanta leaps in-between them and takes the brunt of the blow. Violanta then perishes, ending the opera, as so many do, in tragic death.

### **Whose Opera is it Anyway?**

Although the libretto, to some extent, defines Violanta as a *femme fatale*, the music undermines these characteristics. Moreover, it actually emphasizes the story's male villain: Alfonso. The character of Alfonso becomes important because he is Violanta's counterpart. Alfonso is a classic "Don Juan" character. The "Don Juan" archetype is basically the gender

---

<sup>27</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 77-79

opposite of *femme fatale*. Upon closer examination of the libretto, it is clear that Alfonso and Violanta share many of the same characteristics, strengthening Alfonso's status as a "Don Juan" character. Alfonso has physical beauty that many women find not just alluring, but seemingly irresistible. This is actually mentioned several times. In scene three, when Giovanni first makes his entrance and is speaking with Simone about the carnival, he describes Alfonso as "the ladies' idol" and remarks about how he arrived on a barge drawn by "four priestesses of love."<sup>28</sup> He also says that "women surround him like turtle-doves, laughing hearts where'er he goes!"<sup>29</sup> Again, it is important to mention when Violanta explains how she cunningly seduced him, she tells of how she had to part the "maidens who swarmed around him, like bees around their hive."<sup>30</sup>

Not only does Alfonso attract a lot of women, but he also brings women to their destruction. He seduces Violanta's sister, Nerina, and she feels so guilty after the fact that she commits suicide. He also seduces Violanta, much like how Violanta initially seduced him to lure him to her room. Moreover, he incites so much passion in Violanta that she willingly lays down her life for him, although they had just met. This is a true testament to Alfonso's manipulation skills.

As was stated earlier, many who fall victim to a *femme fatale* are fascinated with their skin and eyes. This is true of "Don Juan" characters as well. It is apparent from several instances that Violanta is fascinated with Alfonso's skin and eyes. In scene four, Violanta details her seduction of Alfonso and in doing so, she makes many comments about his eyes. Her descriptions suggests that she is utterly captivated by them when she says, "His eyes lit up with

---

<sup>28</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 47

<sup>29</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 49

<sup>30</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 55

that indefinable smile that turns the blood in our veins to fever heat.”<sup>31</sup> Later, when she is hinting at her tryst with Alfonso, she says that he bent over her with “his eyes burning.”<sup>32</sup> Finally, when she is describing to Simone that she cannot love him like she was meant to unless he kills Alfonso, she begins her speech by saying, “As long as those eyes kindle a flame that outgrows all shame.”<sup>33</sup> There is also one brief mention of Alfonso’s fairness. When Simone finally decides to go through with the murder, he says he will wait for Alfonso in Violanta’s room. Violanta rebuts and suggests he hide elsewhere so that she can “gaze into the pallor of his face” before he is killed.

One reason Korngold’s opera is not a straightforward *femme fatale* story is the fact that Violanta, while obviously important in the plot, has virtually no music to herself. In fact, the only motives that are clear are the carnival song, the love duet “Reine Liebe,” and Alfonso’s motif.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Alfonso is far more prominent in the score than any other character or motif. The theme associated with him, which is the principal theme found in his main aria, shows up often when Alfonso does not. This presents clues to the significance of Alfonso and his seductive skills in the world of *Violanta*.

The Alfonso motif often appears in direct correlation with manipulation. It is first heard in the overture, surrounded by altered ninth chords that bookend the motif with chilling tension. These chords are spaced to the extreme across instrumental ranges and timbres. In fact, it spans four and a half octaves across the orchestra. The chords start in the lowest strings and tubular bells sustaining a pedal E, creating an ominous and mysterious atmosphere. In the next measure,

---

<sup>31</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 53

<sup>32</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 55

<sup>33</sup> “Violanta Libretto,” 59

<sup>34</sup> Carroll, “Violanta,” 697

the horns come in with a B-flat augmented chord, which adds not only another level of mystery, but also introduces an element of instability. The instability is further increased in the third measure with the addition of the high strings sustaining a C-sharp in split octaves. The entrances of the beginning chord are repeated until it dissolves into more diatonic yet still unstable transitional material. These melodic figures continue until measure twenty-three. This is where the texture thins out and the French horn plays Alfonso's theme in the key of C. Like Alfonso, the melody is attractive and mysteriously alluring. The melody becomes more agitated until it disbands back into the transitional melodic material, only this time presented in G. The overture finally ends with the same altered ninth chord that was heard at the beginning. By bookending this motif, these chords pollute the beautiful melody with a sense of insincerity.

The altered ninth chord that begins and ends the overture has been labeled by Carroll as the "Violanta chord."<sup>35</sup> It is unclear whether the label is to evoke the fact that this is the opening chord of *Violanta* (much like the famed "Tristan" chord begins *Tristan und Isolde*) or the character Violanta herself. It is safe to say, however, that rather than representing Violanta, the chords act as a negation of the beauty of Alfonso's motif. As a result, the chord should be referred to as the "Alfonso" chord or the chord associated with Alfonso's manipulation.

The second time the Alfonso theme is heard, it is grotesquely distorted to showcase the despicable deed Alfonso has committed. In scene three, when Simone explains to Giovanni why Violanta hates Alfonso so much, the melody comes in just after Simone asks, "Do you not know?" It is still presented in the French horn, but rather than being in the friendly and inviting key of C, the melody is presented in G minor and is suspended over a C-sharp diminished chord. The melodic arch, rather than resolving up to the third, B-flat, remains on the A, further

---

<sup>35</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 104



increasing the unease of this passage. The subversion of this resolution directly coincides with Simone's account of how Alfonso seduced Violanta's sister, and ends with how Violanta rejects anything that calls itself man.<sup>36</sup>

When the theme is presented a third time, Violanta details her seduction of Alfonso and describes him as surrounded by a thousand lights. This suggests that Violanta may already have feelings for Alfonso although she has seen him only briefly. This time the theme is presented in C major in the flute. This is probably one of the most beautiful and intimate sections of the score. The flute gives it an ethereal effect not previously heard, and the quiet trumpet fanfare on the sustained G helps to add a regal quality, which helps depict Alfonso's noble status. It is important, however, that the theme at this point illustrates Violanta's perception of Alfonso and, as a result, is devoid of the subversive elements that accompany in its two earlier instantiations.

Alfonso's motif is most prominent in his aria "Sterben wollt ich oft." What is most interesting is that as the motif is showcased, Alfonso blames the responsibility for his devious character on his parents and his rearing. The text that correlates with the beginning of this motif is the line, "But whatever my deeds and failings they were decreed for me by fate..." and continues through the explanation of his unfortunate upbringing.<sup>37</sup> When the aria is finished, Alfonso begins to question why Violanta is not speaking. He says, "Mona Violanta? You feel pity for me? No pity? And yet you do not sing?"<sup>38</sup> These questions are set above the same altered ninth chord that chillingly opened the overture. The chord both adds tension and makes the text sung above it seem incredibly disingenuous. It is as if the music suggested that Alfonso tensely

---

<sup>36</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 49

<sup>37</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 79

<sup>38</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 79

awaits Violanta's reaction after he has finished his manipulative tale. He anxiously "tests the waters" with the questions, making sure that Violanta believes the tale he has spun.

Alfonso's theme, which is associated with a transference of culpability from himself to his rearing environment, appears both when Simone details Nerina's seduction and while Violanta herself is being seduced by Alfonso. The music accompanying Violanta's seduction is beautiful because it is heard from the point of view of Violanta. Because she finds Alfonso attractive, we hear the music as attractive as well. The music accompanying the description of Nerina's seduction is dark and grotesque because it represents the reality of Alfonso's manipulation and its incongruous side-effects. When the altered ninth chords from the overture appear again during Alfonso's interrogation of Violanta, we realize his true intentions are much more malicious and shady. First, he makes her feel sorry for him, then he taps into her long repressed urges to "live in the moment" and further convinces her to do so now. All of this is set up for us from the very beginning. Perhaps the overture not only foretells events soon to conspire on stage but also represents the pattern that Alfonso has used on so many other women.

### **Connections to *Carmen***

In the operatic world, one of the most influential and classic representations of *femme fatale* appears in *Carmen*. When one thinks of the term *femme fatale*, one almost immediately conjures up images of the sexy, exotic woman that captivates both Don Jose and Escamillo. More important for the present discussion is that *Carmen* and *Violanta* have several correlations that further illustrate the status of Violanta as a fin-de-siècle *femme fatale*. While both stories are ultimately about the destruction of an intimidating woman by the hands of a man, they seem to be set up in opposite fashion.

It is not only Bizet's opera that relates to Korngold's on many different levels, but Merimeé's original tale of the same title also shares significant features with *Violanta*. What is revealed in Merimeé's story, as Susan McClary has shown, is a battle between the sexes, in which men must band together to avoid becoming the casualty of feminine wiles.<sup>39</sup> The first detail that cements the recurring demonization of women is the epigraph that precludes the story. It is not printed in French, but rather in Greek, and gives no hint as to its translation, ensuring that only educated men could understand this short section rather than women readers who would not have received the same education.<sup>40</sup> When translated, the epigraph reads, "Every woman is bitter as bile, but each has two good moments, one in bed and the other in the grave."<sup>41</sup> From the very beginning, women are presented as the enemy.<sup>42</sup> Conversely, in *Violanta*, Alfonso is set up to be the enemy and ultimate undoing of Violanta, possibly even suggesting that men are responsible for the undoing of women. This is set up from the opening bars of the overture, when Alfonso's motif is bookended by the chilling altered ninth chords explained earlier.

The story of Merimeé's *Carmen* is saturated with ideas of masculinity and fraternity, perhaps even more so than Bizet's opera. The Merimeé tale is narrated by a French archaeologist who travels to Spain to find the battlefield of Munda, and along the way meets both Don Jose and Carmen. The first scene where Don Jose and the Frenchman meet is full of what could be considered by Freudians as phallic imagery, what with extended blunderbusses, cigars, and so on.<sup>43</sup> They share cigars, and any evident difference between the two men vanishes. They become

---

<sup>39</sup> Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1992), 1-4

<sup>40</sup> McClary, *Carmen*, 4

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> McClary, *Carmen*, 5

like brothers in this scene of male bonding, thus the relationship between men is firmly established in the story.<sup>44</sup> *Violanta* is also saturated with ideas of masculinity, particularly in the score. Alfonso's motif is associated with the most "masculine" character in the entire story, for he is described as "the ladies' idol." This, coupled with the repeated statement of Alfonso's motif, shows that masculinity runs rampant throughout the music.

When the Frenchman encounters Carmen for the first time, she blatantly uses her body to try to seduce the Frenchman.<sup>45</sup> They share a communal smoke and when finished the Frenchman invites Carmen to accompany him for ice cream.<sup>46</sup> Before she agrees, she asks the Frenchman if he knows the time. The Frenchman produces a fine pocket watch, impressing the young girl. Carmen's seduction continues from the outdoors to increasingly more private spaces until both she and the Frenchman are in Carmen's room.<sup>47</sup> Just at the moment when the Frenchman believes he will conquer Carmen's body, Don Jose bursts into the scene and manages to escort the Frenchman to safety.<sup>48</sup> Don Jose knows that the Frenchman was to become Carmen's next victim as he himself had already become.<sup>49</sup> After such excitement, the Frenchman returns to his quarters only to discover that Carmen has robbed him of his beloved pocket watch. Thus, the woman is set-up to be, not only an outsider, but also mischievous and conniving. The result of this scene is not that of fraternity, but rather of treachery and estrangement, further pitting men against women.<sup>50</sup> Clearly, Carmen is set-up as "the other." A different approach is used in

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> McClary, *Carmen*, 7

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> McClary, *Carmen*, 8

*Violanta*, but first an exploration of how Bizet presents Carmen as “the other” will help strengthen the argument further.

One way Bizet presents Carmen as “the other” is by using Carmen to disrupt the traditional formula of *opéra-comique*. The beginning of each act follows the standard format. The scene is usually set by a crowd sequence, which is then succeeded with a few balanced, autonomous musical numbers.<sup>51</sup> Carmen subverts the standard format with her entrance in the first act, and continues to undermine the established order by executing one of her own. Bizet also represents “otherness” in Carmen by imbuing her music with exotic influence. The music, while seemingly using Spanish folk songs such as the Seguedilla or Habañera, actually just employs the traditional aspects that create so many “oriental” effects. These aspects include “pentatonicism, Dorian sixth and Mixolydian seventh, raised second and augmented fourths, nonfunctional chromatic coloration, ...bass drones, ...colorful timbral effects (such as percussion effects), Phrygian seconds, ...and insistent dance rhythms.”<sup>52</sup> Korngold, rather than setting *Violanta* up as “the other,” never gives her an conventional motif. This undermines *Violanta*’s importance, dethroning her as the sexy main character and turning her into a milquetoast warm-body that takes up space. This allows masculinity to reign supreme throughout the music, polluting and manipulating as it traverses the score.

## **Conclusions**

It is clear from the libretto that *Violanta*, like Carmen, is initially set up to be a *femme fatale*. In spite of this, she fails to achieve the one goal she is after from the very beginning,

---

<sup>51</sup> McClary, *Carmen*, 50

<sup>52</sup> McClary, *Carmen*, 53

which is to destroy Alfonso. Upon closer inspection of the score, the character Alfonso is actually far more important and secretly more malicious than what was previously thought upon a cursory glance. Moreover, not only does Alfonso meet all of the criteria of a “Don Juan” character, he also succeeds in conquering all of his female conquests. *Violanta*, rather than being a story about a vengeful woman, is instead a tale about a man’s masterful manipulation skills and his unending conquest for women.

The misogynist aspects that are presented in *Carmen* in 1875 are further enhanced in *Violanta* by 1914, which would prove to be an important year for Austrian women. It is obviously important because it marks the beginning of World War I. While women already filled a small amount of the work force, they began to flood it once their husbands went off to war. While this gave women a sense of pride and worth, it also brought to light many of the issues that women faced, even though many suffrage movements were suspended, so as to not distract from war efforts. After the war, using their new found job experience and importance, women’s suffrage would continue. By 1919, they would gain the right to vote and hold political office. It was, however, a long hard road with many challenges. The increased representations and interpretations of female figures from this era directly correlate with the battles for understanding gender issues and the campaign for women’s rights.

Some artists, such as Gustav Klimt, portrayed women in many different ways, including powerful and beautiful depictions. These more positive interpretations possibly gave women of the time something to aspire to while they fought for their rights. Korngold, however, utilizes a more realistic approach. His audience is shown that even strong, powerful women fall victim to the plights and misdeeds of misogynists, who see women as objects of desire, rather than human beings. This is surely the product of a patriarchal society that began with Eve, and still continues

in various forms to this day. The next chapters will consider how Korngold's understanding of women changed in later operas. It is even possible that these changes coincided with him meeting Luise "Luzi" von Sonnenthal, the woman that he would eventually marry. While there are still uncertainties surrounding Korngold scholarship, one thing is evident: we are shown the ugly side of society through *Violanta*.

### III. *Die tote Stadt*: On the Path to a Better Treatment of Women

After the great success of *Polykrates* and *Violanta* in 1916, Korngold gained much notoriety, especially in the field of opera composition. He essentially became a household name overnight, particularly in Austria. He became widely known for his lush orchestrations, lavish melodies, and excellent employment of dramatic material. However, with all of his success he could not escape the Great War. The defense minister of the time became enamored with the idea of turning Korngold into a real war hero, so his initial medical exemption was called into question. Fortunately for Korngold, the doctor appointed to perform his medical examination was also the doctor and throat specialist for the Vienna Court Opera.<sup>53</sup> The good doctor recognized Korngold during his appointed screening and thus gave him B-classification, which meant Korngold was excused from active military duty. Korngold would serve his time in Vienna, being in charge of the library, acquisition of music from the library, and conducting the regimental band.<sup>54</sup>

While serving his country, conducting, and composing various marches, Korngold managed to keep up his operatic compositions. Having proven that he could compose serious dramatic works with great success, he turned his attention to a full length opera. From 1916 to 1920, Korngold composed *Die tote Stadt*. This became Korngold's first opera to achieve international acclaim. It was also one of the few musical works of the time to see a fierce competition among opera companies for the rights to premiere the sure-to-be phenomenal work.

---

<sup>53</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 114

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*



In the end, the work was premiered simultaneously in Hamburg and in Cologne. Within two years, the opera had become a smash hit that traveled the globe.

*Die tote Stadt* is a much darker, more psychological tale than *Violanta*. The premise of the opera is quite similar to Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 psychological thriller *Vertigo*. The opera is set in Bruges, Belgium, whose dark and archaic atmosphere seems to fit perfectly with its dark, pathological elements. At the beginning of the opera we meet Paul, a man who is so utterly devastated by the death of his lovely wife, Marie, that he virtually turns his home into a live-in memorial to her, including a glass case which houses a lock of her lovely golden hair. While out on the town one day, he meets an actress named Marietta who is so close to being Marie's doppelganger that Paul often calls her Marie instead of Marietta. Marietta is a strong-willed woman who wants nothing but attention from men and seems to stop at nothing to get what she wants. Throughout the opera, she uses her "feminine wiles," along with her knowledge of Paul's dead wife and his strong devotion to her, to seduce Paul. At the end of the opera, after much antagonizing from Marietta, Paul realizes that Marietta is nothing like his beloved Marie and flies into a jealous rage. He strangles Marietta with the lock of Marie's hair and exclaims "Now, she is exactly like her – Marie!"<sup>55</sup> After his homicidal indignation, Paul awakes from what appears to be a dream, thus expiating his dark deed. He vows to move on with his life and to stop dwelling on the past in order to look forward to the possibility of a bright future.

Since this was Korngold's first full-length drama, there was obviously more room for character development as well as musical exploration. In the musical score, Korngold expands his harmonic language and is more experimental. Connected to the expansion and

---

<sup>55</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," in accompanying booklet, *Die tote Stadt* performed by Carol Neblett, Siegfried Rene Kollo, and the Munich Radio Orchestra conducted by Erich Leinsdorf, RCA Victor Opera Series 7767-2-RG, 1975, CD, 73

experimentation is Korngold's ability to present more well-rounded psychological studies of the opera's characters than in his earlier works. This chapter focuses on how *Die tote Stadt* treats the main female character, Marietta. I show that Korngold's musical approach makes the lead female characters seem more present and relevant. Furthermore, I connect Korngold's treatment of women in this opera to the cultural and societal aspects of post-war Vienna and to the composer's personal life.

### **The Same but Different**

One common theme that appears in nearly all of Korngold's operas is the significance of a strong female main character. In *Violanta*, it was obviously the opera's namesake. Yet, as Chapter 1 has shown, in spite of possessing some qualities of a *femme fatale* and being the eponymous heroine, the music associated with *Violanta* in fact glorifies the main villain, Alfonso. Marietta's status within the drama of *Die tote Stadt* (and her relationship with the main male character Paul) could not be more opposite from *Violanta*. Marietta is not only more successful but also more prominent, both in the libretto and the music of the opera. She is the sole focus of the plot of *Die tote Stadt*, especially because in Paul she does not have a strong male counterpart. In fact, Paul has none of the swaggering and imposing characteristics of either Simone or Alfonso from *Violanta*. Paul is a classic example of an *homme fragile*, a male character that displays overly sensitive, emotional, and pacifistic characteristics, and therefore represents the perfect victim for a strong *femme fatale*.

Some clarification is needed in connection to the idea that Marietta is presented as more powerful in *Die tote Stadt* than *Violanta* in the earlier opera. When compared side by side, both are portrayed as a menacing force but both end up being murdered by a prominent male

character. However, a closer look at the libretto and the score of both *Die tote Stadt* and *Violanta* shows that Marietta is what one initially expects Violanta to be: an independent, successful, powerful female character. While it is widely accepted that Marietta fits the characteristics of *femme fatale*, Korngold scholars and critics rarely discuss as to how exactly she does so. I will use Stricker's taxonomy as I used in the previous chapter for Violanta, because I feel it is one of the most succinct classifications available.

The presence of Marietta, as well as Paul's false equalization of her to Marie, causes a conflict between Paul and his friend Frank. In Act I, just after Paul confesses of his discovery of Marietta, Frank warns, "you are playing a dangerous game... You see ghosts and phantoms – I see reality, I see women as they are."<sup>56</sup> He ultimately tells Paul "Resign yourself! You've been alone too long, you've lost yourself in mourning."<sup>57</sup> In act II, it is revealed that Frank ultimately betrays Paul by also pursuing Marietta, telling Paul, "Yes, I. I am your rival, she's deceiving you, and with me!"<sup>58</sup> This obviously furthers the controversial tensions that have built between Frank and Paul since the beginning of the opera.

The presence of Marietta also instigates conflicts with the other minor character, Brigitta, Paul's maid. In Act II, Paul is seen observing a procession of nuns with Brigitta bringing up the rear. Obviously startled by her presence with the sisters of the convent, Paul stops her and asks her why she decided to leave him and take the holy orders. Brigitta's response is quite simple: "I fled from sin, faithful to the dead."<sup>59</sup> Clearly, Brigitta felt that Paul's pursuit of Marietta, as well as Marietta's willingness to go along with the charade, was disturbing and thus sought a place of

---

<sup>56</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 27

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 44

<sup>59</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 41

peace where virtue would be honored. This further shows how the introduction of Marietta into Paul's life has slowly caused his life to crumble around him, and yet he does not seem to realize it until the final act.

It is obvious that Marietta triggers a psychological change in Paul, especially at the end when she drives him into a murderous frenzy. However, there is one important emotional disturbance that Marietta causes even before Paul's Act III rampage. It comes at the end of Act II when Marietta convinces Paul that he has actual feelings for her and should abandon his attachment to his deceased wife. Paul catches Marietta in a compromising situation as she receives much attention from the male members of her acting troupe. Paul reprimands her for her behavior, calling her a "shameless, common prostitute."<sup>60</sup> She denies this until Paul confronts her with his knowledge about her affair with Frank, to which she replies "I do what I like."<sup>61</sup> Paul claims that he only loves Marietta because she looks like Marie and that he has betrayed his dead wife. Marietta then convinces him that he never betrayed his wife, he deceived himself. After Marietta stats "All that I have is yours to take and love!" Paul exclaims "I am your slave," thus cementing his psychological transformation from lovesick to lustful.<sup>62</sup> Marietta decides to take it one step further by suggesting that instead of consummating at her house they should go to Paul's house. Her reason behind this is quite clear: "Tonight I shall kiss you where she once lived; the specter must be banned forever! In *her* own room I want you to be mine!"<sup>63</sup>

It is important to note that Paul is not the only man who is psychologically manipulated by Marietta throughout the course of the opera. Two of the actors in Marietta's troupe by the

---

<sup>60</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 55

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 59

<sup>63</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 60

names of Viktorin and Fritz are also seduced and damaged by Marietta. We do not see what the two men were like before they met Marietta, we only see the aftereffects of her charms. In scene three of Act II, Viktorin is addressing the rest of the members of the troupe when he fondly refers to Marietta as “our Queen” and continues: “She outrivals Phyllis; Doth outshine Columbine and Amaryllis! Queen of the Piazzetta! Enchanting Marietta!”<sup>64</sup> She even convinces the performer Fritz to serenade her with the glorious aria “Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen.” After the serenade is over, she allows him to kiss her. She then begins to let all of the other male actors kiss her on different parts of her body until they are all crowded around her, enjoying the brief contact they all get with her body. Like many other *femmes fatales*, Marietta dominates is promiscuous and dominates men with her sexuality.

### **First Impressions Are Very Important**

It is common knowledge that a first impression can be a defining moment in terms of how we initially perceive someone. The same is true for characters within a dramatic work. This could not be more true when comparing Marietta to Violanta. These two female characters could not possibly have more dissimilar entrances to the works that they both occupy. The entrance music that Korngold writes for both of these characters ultimately defines their position within the music as well as in the drama: Marietta’s glorifies her while Violanta’s undermines her.

Marietta is, as previously described, such a beautiful woman that she catches the attention of everyone who comes into contact with her. Her entrance in the score is arguably one of the most intense and magnificent passages within the opera. The build-up begins at the end of scene

---

<sup>64</sup> Erich Wolfgang Korngold, *Die tote Stadt* Vocal Score (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2013), 223

four of Act I, just as Paul shoos Brigitta away to show Marietta into the house. Paul begins a brief soliloquy in which he says, “Marie! Yet once again let me absorb your features and your charm into my being. I see you... I can feel you... Now, God! Now, give her back to me!”<sup>65</sup> Two measures before Paul’s soliloquy begins, the violins play a trill that alternates between F-sharp and G in a very high register while the dynamics increase to a fortissimo, creating an impressive amount of tension. As Paul sings the line “Marie! Yet once again...” the dissonant interval in the violins increases in intensity. Incidentally, Paul adds to the tension by singing the entire first line on a sustained F-sharp. When he segues into “I see you...” there is a prominent cadence to an E-flat major chord, preceded by a large harp glissando. When he proceeds to “I can feel you...” there is another strong cadence, this time on a C-sharp-major chord. When he sings “Now, God!” there is a cadence on an A-major-chord. When he completes the line with “back!” we are given one last impactful cadence on a B-flat major-chord. The following four measures are comprised of alternations between quarter-note triplet passages and sweeping orchestral flourishes. The last quarter-note triplet measure is followed by a brief caesura, then quick eight-note triplets leading to a fermata that sustains silence for just a few moments before erupting into Marietta’s official entrance. These brief pauses are enough to suck the air out of an opera house in anticipation for Marietta’s entrance. When Marietta makes her entrance on stage, the orchestra flourishes into a beautiful melody in B-major over the top of Paul’s exclamation of “Wonderful!”<sup>66</sup> The build-up to the entrance of Marietta is solely written to complement Paul’s and the audience’s expectation of her, so much so that when she finally enters we find her just as marvelous as Paul does.

---

<sup>65</sup> Korngold, *Die tote Stadt* Vocal Score, 215

<sup>66</sup> Korngold, *Die tote Stadt* Vocal Score, 28

Violanta's entrance could not be handled more contrariwise. While Marietta's build-up and entrance are meant to enhance her presence, Violanta's entrance does nothing to accentuate her arrival. Her husband Simone and his friend Giovanni are just about to go to the festival in Venice to see if they can find Alfonso, and the entirety of the build-up is therefore focused on the opera's male villain, as is much of the operatic material discussed in Chapter 1. Violanta's entrance seems to interrupt the action and the anticipation of the two men perusing Alfonso, the result of which is an underwhelming and surprising entrance. The build-up begins as Giovanni says, "Come with me and you will have no doubt as to his presence! Come with me! Women around him like turtle-doves, laughing hearts where'er he goes!"<sup>67</sup> Simone responds with, "Good! Come. He's the man into whose countenance I long have craved to look!"<sup>68</sup> The build-up is at its most intense just before Giovanni exclaims "Wine! Flowers! Lights!" when the orchestra cadences to an E-sharp dominant seventh section. This is followed by a horn call that features a triplet figure ascending from B to C-sharp to D-sharp, which mimics the sound of a hunting call. When Giovanni exclaims "Wine!" this same E-sharp dominant seventh is sustained through triplets, creating great tension. This is then repeated when he exclaims "Flowers!" as well. It is only when he exclaims "Lights!" that the triplets begin to slowly ascend rather than repeating the same chord, creating more tension and more of a "hunting" atmosphere. The text glorifies different aspects of the festival they are about to traverse while the music suggests their hunt for Alfonso, the object of much of Violanta's loathing. The tension reaches its climax just as Giovanni sings "in Chorus..." which results in sustained G-sharp in the high strings against an F-

---

<sup>67</sup> "Violanta Libretto," in accompanying booklet, *Violanta* performed by Eva Marton, Siegfried Jerusalem, and the Munich Radio Orchestra conducted by Marek Janowski, CBS Masterworks MK 79229, 1980, CD, 49

<sup>68</sup> "Violanta Libretto," 49

sharp in the low strings, followed by an orchestral flourish to the resolution on a dotted eighth-sixteenth pattern which is comprised of a G-sharp dominant seventh chord. These same musical figures are repeated again in the next measure. The following measure contains Violanta's official entrance, which is the exact moment that all of the tension that has been building up gets released in a very unsatisfying way. Instead of resolving to the G-sharp dominant seventh chord, it resolves downward to an F-sharp minor chord on a half note. The tension is brought to a screeching halt through this sudden downward resolution accompanied by *molto ritardando* and a sudden decrescendo. Then descending quarter-note and eighth-note triplets melt into an E-major resolution marked *piano*, which coincides with Violanta's first musical entrance when she sings "Good Evening." It is as if Violanta, who is the main character and namesake of the opera, sneaks underwhelmingly into the scene while simultaneously disrupting the excitement and of the moment when two men were about to pursue the opera's antagonist. It is apparent that Marietta is treated far better in *Die tote Stadt* because her entrance glorifies her presence and creates anticipation for both Paul and the audience to see her. Conversely, Violanta is undermined and seems to musically interrupt the flow of action, thus setting a disappointing tone for the rest of the opera.

### **The Object(s) of Many Desires**

It appears that Marietta is already more musically prominent than Violanta. There are many other aspects that point to this as well. Both Violanta and Marietta are the main female characters of their respective operas. The way in which the audience is lead to form an impression of each character is quite different in each opera. In this section, we will explore how Marietta not only gets the most popular aria in the entire opera (if not of all of Korngold's



operas) but also is doted upon by several other characters, even serenaded. While some of these musical events happen to Violanta, they happen very differently.

Korngold writes Marietta one of the most beautiful arias of his entire repertoire and it is presented not long after the audience first meets her. This aria, often referred to as the “Lautenlied,” serves several purposes: 1) it bonds the characters of Paul and Marietta, 2) it bonds the audience to the characters and to the opera, and 3) it gives insight into Paul’s current mental state.

Marietta and Paul establish an emotional connection to each other while the audience simultaneously becomes connected to the characters and to the opera itself. Up until this point, the opera’s music has been a whirlwind of emotion and the “Lautenlied” gives the audience a chance to finally latch on to a distinguishable aria. This is accomplished by Korngold’s use of folksong techniques. The “Lautenlied” is split into an ABA format, in which the two A sections make up two verses of a strophic folksong, while the B section acts as a dialogue between the two characters and shows further character development, especially in the case of Paul.

The “Lautenlied” can be identified as a folksong by musical analysis. Throughout the course of both A sections, the music never seems to go beyond the comfort zone of B-flat major. It also appears to be very balanced, prominently featuring four-bar phrases. The first line of text progresses from tonic, sub-mediante, dominant seventh, and back to tonic. There are apparent time changes within the score, but these appear to merely be acting as written out rubatos to accentuate certain notes, such as the high B-flat in the second line, and the C in the first measure. Another prominent feature is the fact that this entire chord progression is sustained over a pedal F. The drone gives the passage a folk-like feel (drones are very common in Scottish folk songs, for example), and it helps to build the tension of the melodic phrase until tonic is reinstated in the

fourth bar.<sup>69</sup> This effect creates very end-weighted phrases. The second line of text is a progression from tonic to sub-dominant, then tonic to dominant. The last line of the folk song is probably the most complex and interesting part of the A section, although it still keeps its simplicity. It begins on the dominant, then proceeds to tonic with a lovely dreamlike descending figure in parallel thirds. Finally, it transitions from sub-mediante to dominant and finally comes to rest on the tonic. This same harmonic passage is repeated in the second A section, only with slight variations in the vocal line as Marietta joins Paul in the last four lines of the strophe.<sup>70</sup>

It may seem kitschy to present a folk-song-like aria in the middle of such a dark and psychological opera. It may also seem like Korngold is pandering to his audiences. In actuality, the aria creates an emotional bond between the characters of Paul and Marietta. Folksongs are a prodigious way to bond people together using a similar message, as they are usually vague enough in subject matter to entice everyone. Both Paul and Marietta sing the second strophe together by the middle of the verse. In this way, it also connects the audience to the opera as well because they can understand how a simple piece of music and the act of singing it together can create a sense of unity.<sup>71</sup>

The B section of the aria (the dialogue between Marietta and Paul) is slightly more harmonically complex than that of the two A sections and allows us to delve deeper into Paul's subconscious. The text seems markedly more emphasized in this section, such as the ascension to the ninth when Paul sings, "a sad, sad song," creating an extremely moving and sentimental effect. The real reflection of action and text comes at rehearsal mark 60 of the score.<sup>72</sup> Paul is

---

<sup>69</sup> Benjamin Goose, "Opera for Sale: Folksong Sentimentality and the Market," *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 133, Part 2 (2008): 198

<sup>70</sup> Korngold, *Die tote Stadt* Vocal Score, 37

<sup>71</sup> Goose, "Opera for Sale," 201

<sup>72</sup> Korngold, *Die tote Stadt* Vocal Score, 38

obviously affected by the message of the folksong as well as Marietta's singing. This is represented by repeating ostinatos in the strings of the orchestra, creating a sense of unease and a need for resolution. When Paul sings the line "I know that song," the music shifts from dominant to tonic, while still keeping the same undulating ostinatos, as if to suggest some uneasiness in Paul's memories. The most interesting passage in the entire song appears when Paul sings "I heard it often." The text is sung over a steady on a dominant seventh for what feels like eternity. However, instead of resolving to B-flat major, as is customary in the A section, we are plunged into B-flat minor. In order to escape the clutches of B-flat minor, Korngold lurches us upward through G-flat until we finally reach the height of D-flat major, an arrival so glorious that Korngold lets us revel in its beauty for five full measures. The text reflection in this passage is equally as remarkable as the progression itself. At the arrival of B-flat minor, Paul sings "younger," which may seem like an odd choice for such a somber chord. When we arrive at the D-flat major section, Paul stresses the "more beautiful days." Korngold clearly shows us that D-flat major represents Paul's happy memories. What is also of note is that D-flat major is the furthest we ever are from B-flat major throughout the song. Korngold is subtly communicating the fact that Paul's happier days, while incredibly beautiful, are as far away from his present state as they possibly can be. The most important note in a B-flat minor chord (aside from the actual B-flat) is D-flat, for it is what gives the chord its defining color. Korngold is trying to communicate the fact that while many of our happy memories reside in our "younger" days, they are usually hidden inside and need to be brought out in order for them to be meaningful to us. This allows the audience to become more emotionally invested in the opera as well as with Paul and Marietta, something that was not managed in *Violanta*.

Clearly, Marietta is more prominent from a musical standpoint because not only is she given a clear, stand-out, “show stopping” aria, but she is also able to engage Paul so that she is able to learn a little more about him. The audience is also more emotionally attached to the character of Marietta (whom they’ve only just met at this point in the opera) and to the character of Paul as well.

Violanta is never treated with such prominence. She is never really given a “show stopping” aria nor does she really establish an emotional connection with the audience. The most beautiful section of music that Violanta has is the duet “Reine Liebe.” It is almost the opposite of Paul and Marietta’s duet. Firstly, whereas Marietta is given the entire first section of the duet to showcase her voice before Paul ever joins in, “Reine Liebe” starts with Alfonso (who was already given an aria previously) crooning the words “Pure love, that I sought throughout my life, abides with me now” over a gorgeous melody. It is only after Alfonso states a full melody that Violanta enters. She does not enter with her own melody either. Instead, she is given the melody that Alfonso sang previously by himself. The text that both Alfonso and Violanta are given offers no further insight into either character. It merely acts as an affirmation of their love for each other and expresses feelings that have already been communicated. The only difference is that this time these feelings are expressed in a beautiful duet rather than through dialogue-like passages.

Another way in which Marietta is more prominent musically than Violanta is the way in which she is serenaded for her beauty. This happens in two “show stopping” arias that are often performed outside of the context of *Die tote Stadt*. They are Marietta’s “Lautenlied,” which has already been discussed, and the “Tanzlied des Pierrots” performed by a minor character, Fritz, for the glorification of Marietta. The “Tanzlied” takes place during scene three of Act II. During

this scene, all of the actors of Marietta's troupe are taking part in a celebration after rehearsals for *Roberto Devereux* which they are in Bruges to perform. Marietta arrives to the gathering late and it is determined that she was involved in a late-night tryst with another man. It is clear that all of the men of the troupe are drawn to her as they continuously clamor for her attention. It is during this celebration that Marietta asks for Fritz to sing a song. Fritz replies, "If you command it, queen of mine, your Pierrot obeys his Columbine."<sup>73</sup> This line clearly shows that Marietta has already psychologically manipulated him enough so that he obeys commands, almost like a trained monkey as opposed to a human being.

"Tanzlied des Pierrots," or as its also known "Mein Sehnen, mein Wähnen," is quite possibly the most interesting and most beautiful piece of music composed for *Die tote Stadt*. It is interesting for its use of text painting and it also gives us a glimpse into just how effective Marietta's seduction skills are from a point of view other than Paul's. In fact, the entire point of the song might be to further display to the audience just how influential Marietta can be. The text of the song speaks of Fritz yearning and longing, and how his dreams always return to the past. We learn that Fritz first met Marietta when she came to Germany (Fritz's homeland), probably on her way through with an acting troupe. They danced together under the moonlight and Fritz became encapsulated by her beauty, especially her "heavenly blue eyes."<sup>74</sup> We learn not only did the "magic of distant lands" cause Fritz to leave Germany and join the troupe, but also his constant perusal of Marietta's affections. She clearly does not reciprocate his love, for he talks of how he "learned to love with tears and kisses."<sup>75</sup> He further states that a comedian's life is full of

---

<sup>73</sup> "Die tote Stadt Libretto," 50

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

“joy and pain, hope and strife.” Ultimately, Marietta rewards Fritz’s efforts by allowing him to kiss her on the cheek. There is not much hope for further payment.

What is further interesting about this song is that in one aria, we are basically given the entire premise for the opera *Die tote Stadt*. “Tanzlied” shows an intimate portrait of a man who gave up everything important in his life to pursue a woman that does not share the love he has for her. This constant pursuit of Marietta’s affections has caused his life to turn into a cruel joke, which is probably why both he and Marietta refer to himself as “Pierrot.” This directly mimics Paul’s transformation throughout the course of *Die tote Stadt*. Paul ruins his life and drives the people who love him the most away by his consistent pursuit of Marietta’s affections. This is further exacerbated by Paul’s imposition of the traits of his dead wife on to Marietta, many times assuming Marietta is just Marie reincarnated rather than a totally different person. In the end, Paul’s life becomes a cruel joke because he kills the one thing that he fought so hard to appease: Marietta. There are clear parallels that can be drawn between the stories of Fritz and Paul.

Clearly, Korngold is making Marietta more musically important than Violanta not only by giving Marietta part of a “showcase” aria, but also by presenting the other “showcase” aria as a serenade Marietta’s beauty, further drawing attention to the power and importance of her character throughout the story. Violanta gets similar treatment in *Violanta*, however it is not nearly on the same grand scale as that of Marietta. This is partially due to the fact that *Violanta* is a short, one act opera. However, that is no excuse for the almost consistent undermining of Violanta’s character throughout the opera.

There are only two times in *Violanta* that the main heroine gets similar musical attention as Marietta gets in *Die tote Stadt*. While Violanta does not sing a standout aria throughout the work, she does receive the affection of two men: Matteo and Alfonso. Matteo’s swooning, love-

struck explanations could hardly be considered a form of serenade. Matteo's attempt at a serenade comes in the very first scene of *Violanta*, when Barbara asks Matteo if he has seen Violanta. He, of course, says he has not but then proceeds to provide some kind of possible explanation as to where she might be. Each time Matteo begins an explanation as to where Violanta is (noted by the "Perhaps... Perhaps...") it sounds as if he is going to begin a beautiful serenade for her. Indeed, Matteo does get a couple of beautiful lines of melody which sound like a beginning to a proper aria, but each time he gets through about two lines of text, Barbara interrupts him to vanquish his imagined fantasy. After being interrupted twice, he begins a third time to start up his serenade. However, before he can even get the third "Perhaps..." out, Barbara interrupts him by shouting "You liar!" With these interruptions, Matteo can only be happy with his partial serenade and thus disappears for the remainder of the opera.

The second time Violanta is "serenaded" is when Alfonso sings his famous aria "Sterben wollt ich oft" which contains the motif that reoccurs throughout much of the opera. This could hardly be called a serenade either. This aria does not serenade Violanta for her great beauty, but it does provide interesting insight into the character of Alfonso. Although, as explained in the previous chapter, it is most likely a very beautiful delivery of explanations used to excuse his womanizing behavior, casting blame on his parents and his rearing environment rather than taking responsibility for his actions. While this aria is technically sung to Violanta, it is merely another chance for a character to overshadow Violanta in the context of the music. Unlike Marietta, every opportunity that comes about to emphasize the importance of Violanta, whether it be Matteo's failed serenades or Alfonso's paltry excuses, the opportunity is either vanquished or used to glorify another character. Even in the duet "Reine Liebe," Violanta has to take a back seat to Alfonso so that he may express his happiness and love while Violanta is left with his

hand-me-down melody. Korngold's treatment of Marietta far outshines his treatment of Violanta and shows a clear trajectory that leads one to conclude that Korngold is progressing towards, not only a more nuanced depiction of female characters, but also an emphasis on said characters that was previously lacking. How this trajectory progressed in Korngold's later operas will be shown in the next chapter.

### **Conclusions**

As this chapter has shown, Korngold and his librettist imbue the heroine of *Die tote Stadt* with dramaturgical and musical prominence that was withheld from the main female protagonist of *Violanta*. Marietta has a much more commanding presence. Almost every major musical event that occurs in the opera revolves around her. This includes the opera's two most famous arias: the "Lautenlied" and the "Tanzlied." The "Lautenlied" provides a spectacular showcase for the singer performing Marietta – something that does not happen in *Violanta*, where the role is more subdued without any virtuosic and overly impressive arias. The "Lautenlied" also provides substantial insights into Marietta's psychology, something that is missing in *Violanta* where the female lead is more superficial. The "Tanzlied" shows just how much influence Marietta has over men, along the lines of the *femme fatale* stereotype. Violanta, by contrast, gets no spectacular aria which leaves the audience unable to establish a real emotional connection with her character. She is the subject of two serenades, one of which never seems to get off the ground, the other merely a list of excuses to explain unsatisfactory behavior. Like Marietta, Violanta does get a beautiful duet with one of the male lead characters. However, unlike Marietta, Violanta must wait for the man to finish singing his melody before she can join the duet. Even then, she seems only present to mimic Alfonso's melody while simultaneously adding



spots of color throughout. This duet is truly representative of how Violanta is utilized throughout the opera, which is to say that every chance she gets to shine is thwarted and must take a back seat to the men of the opera. This further cements *Violanta* as the *more* misogynistic of the two operas. Both *Die tote Stadt* and *Violanta* are misogynistic in that both feature *femme fatale* characterizations, both objectify women, and both feature a male character killing the female lead towards the end of the opera. However, Marietta is allowed to showcase her independence and establish her musical importance. In fact, it seems as if there is not one moment of *Die tote Stadt* that does not mention or reference Marietta in some way. The differences between the two characters might also be related to the lengths of the operas. It may seem hard or even impossible to fit as much character development as Marietta experiences within the course of a one-act opera.

Several elements in Korngold's biography might account for the dissimilar treatment of the two female characters. First, as previously mentioned, Korngold had to serve in the military during the World War I, as he was working on *Die tote Stadt* much of the time. His military experience may have given Korngold some maturity through rigorous training and exposure to a more structured life style, which may have led to the new level of maturity apparent in the opera.

Second, the libretto for *Die tote Stadt* was written by Korngold and his father Julius under the pseudonym Paul Schott. It is possible that Julius and Erich imparted some of their own philosophies of women into the libretto of *Die tote Stadt*. In fact, the transformation of the second and third acts of the opera to a dream sequence was Julius Korngold's idea, stating in his memoirs that, "The transformation of the action into a dream was my idea. I suggested it to soften the impact of the strangling of a woman, to create a conciliatory, elegiac ending."<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 122

Julius's influence may have led to the ambiguity of Marietta's portrayal, although it is unclear how much influence he had on the final draft of the libretto.

Third, while composing *Die tote Stadt*, Korngold met Luise "Luzi" von Sonnenthal, who he would eventually marry in 1924. Luzi was dearly loved by Korngold, but not so much by his parents. Luzi was what would probably be considered at the time as a "modern woman." She was well educated, talented, and creative. She was a singer, a pianist, and even acted in a few silent films. With such a positive influence, it's no wonder that Korngold's interpretation of female characters might have changed. Although, it is worth noting that Julius's apparent fears of Luzi may have found their way into the libretto.

Finally, and most importantly, the changes in societal approaches to women that were taking place in Vienna after WWI might have had something to do with Korngold's change as well. Specifically, in 1918, which was the year that women officially were granted voting rights as well as the right to stand for office in Austria. The demands of war brought women further rights in that they were "permitted to become guardians and witnesses in court on the same terms as men, and improvements in the law of inheritance were introduced."<sup>77</sup> Also 1920 was an exceptional year in Austria because it brought about full legal equality of women in the Austrian Constitution, declaring that "all federal citizens are equal before the law. Privileges as a result of birth, sex, rank, class and confession are excluded."<sup>78</sup> It is possible that Korngold sought to create a more prominent female character to reflect the more prominent role women would play in society after this

---

<sup>77</sup> Harriet Anderson, *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movements in fin-de-siècle Vienna* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 120

<sup>78</sup> Anderson, *Utopian Feminism*, 120

However great these achievements may have been, there was still much work to be done. Women were still discriminated against at work, paid lower wages, and many times not given access to services they might need such as daycare or abortions. One of the biggest stigmas of this decade was perhaps how women should behave themselves. During this time, there was a lot of emphasis placed on education of women, particularly those from the middle class.<sup>79</sup> However, women were often subject to double standards. While a woman might be educated, she should still be able to take care of whatever domestic chores she may be stuck with along with balancing work.<sup>80</sup> The subject of women's sexuality was often a "hot button" issue. Sexual proclivity among women was frowned upon by much of society, including even some feminists. Mayreder, a famous feminist of this time period, had this to say: "To descend to the level of soulless sexual intercourse... that means for woman merely that she is once again the object of male sexual aggression without having the possibility of appropriating the natural advantages of masculinity."<sup>81</sup> Marietta is portrayed as beautiful and independent. However, not only is she killed because of her actions, she is also portrayed as nasty and immoral at times. Korngold may have written *Die tote Stadt* in reflection of the misfortunes that supposedly befell women who followed the path of promiscuity.

However, due to his "modern" girlfriend, his parents' emphasis on education, and his social ranking, it is entirely possible that Korngold is showcasing how a woman can be beautiful, strong, and independent. While Marietta does have negative qualities, like her manipulative skills and the like, she still possesses traits that women could aspire to have, such as

---

<sup>79</sup> Anderson, *Utopian Feminism*, 120-123

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Anderson, *Utopian Feminism*, 123

independence, assertiveness, confidence, and a drive to let nothing stand in the way of getting what you want.

#### IV. The Final Frontier: *Das Wunder der Heliane*, the Absence of *Femme Fatale* and the Manifestation of Integrity in *Heliane*

*Die tote Stadt* achieved abundant acclaim throughout the world, thus cementing Erich Korngold as an eminent opera composer. His opera was performed by virtually every major opera house in Europe and America and would enjoy rotation in the repertoire for many years to come. One would think that Korngold would be eager to repeat his success by completing another opera as soon as possible. This was not the case, however, as Korngold would wait almost four years before composing his next opera. On top of that, he began a second career as an arranger and successfully managed to arrange and popularize many of the operettas of Johann Strauss II, including *Eine Nacht in Venedig*. These adaptations took up most of his compositional time from 1926 until 1933.<sup>82</sup>

Arranging was not the only new adventure Korngold embarked on in the early 1920s. On April 30, 1924, Korngold married the love of his life Luzi von Sonnenthal. While Erich and Luzi were ready to begin their life together, their marriage was not approved of by all. Both Erich's and Luzi's parents opposed the union. In fact, Luzi's parents gave the couple an ultimatum. They could either end the relationship or commit and get married. In spite of tensions from both sides of the family, Erich and Luzi would only have eyes for each other until Erich's death in 1957.

It was not long until Korngold began to set his sights on the operatic world yet again. He eventually found a subject matter that intrigued him enough to set it to music. In early 1923, Korngold somehow acquired a manuscript that would eventually be turned into his *Das Wunder der Heliane*. It was a poetic mystery play titled *Die Heilige* by Hans Kaltneker. The play and poetry so captivated Korngold that he excitedly met Luzi at a café in Vienna and immediately

---

<sup>82</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 163

requested that she read its entirety in one sitting. Once finished, Erich asked her “Well, shall I do it?” Luzi remarked about the incident in her memoir, stating, “I knew that he didn’t need my approval anymore – he had already decided to compose [*Die Heilige*] and had, in fact, already started.”<sup>83</sup>

The facts surrounding Korngold and Kaltneker are as strange as they are interesting. Korngold was as drawn to Kaltneker’s poetry as Kaltneker was to Korngold’s music, although the two never met, Kaltneker having died in 1919. It was confirmed in 1927 that Kaltneker’s publisher Zsolnay actually sent the play to Korngold.<sup>84</sup> Only after he finished writing the score did Korngold learn that Kaltneker had actually written the play for him and intended him to adapt it into an opera.<sup>85</sup>

Kaltneker was a strange and largely forgotten figure of fin-de-siècle Vienna. Born in Romania, he grew up and lived the rest of his life in Vienna. All of his works are heavily influenced by Wagner and are immersed in mysticism. His best known work, now largely forgotten today, was an “expressionistic redemption” trilogy of plays: *Bergwerk*, *Die Opferung*, and *Die Schwester*.<sup>86</sup> Like *Die Heilige*, these works saturated with an exaggerated and extreme atmosphere. Unfortunately, the manuscript *Die Heilige* remains lost. The only evidence that remains of the original story, according to Carroll, is a 1931 dissertation on Kaltneker by Emily Wohanka.<sup>87</sup> While some elements of the story may have changed, the atmosphere of the work seems to remain intact.

---

<sup>83</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 163

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 163-164

<sup>86</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 164

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

Korngold set to work finding a librettist for this work. Again, he called upon Hans Müller to help him adapt the libretto. Müller previously helped Korngold adapt *Violanta* and was now anxious to help him draft a libretto again after having declined to help Korngold with the text for *Die tote Stadt* and witnessing its tremendous success. Unfortunately, no record remains of when Müller began his treatment, how many revisions there were, and or how much input Erich Korngold had on the final libretto. Only in later correspondence between Erich and his father do we discover that Julius actually contributed a good deal to the libretto as well. The opera was finished in May of 1927 and premiered in October of the same year.

This opera shows Korngold writing music for a completely new type of female lead. In fact, this is Korngold's first full-length opera that does not feature a *femme fatale* as the main female character. This chapter shows that in *Das Wunder der Heliane*, Korngold abandoned the concept of *femme fatale* although he previously relied on it so much. Through his musical setting, Korngold imbued his main female character with a sense of integrity and altruism that seems to escape every other character in the opera. I also will show that this interpretation of a female lead corresponds with the feministic trends that were changing Viennese culture and society in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

### **Deciphering the Libretto**

Korngold was often quoted as saying that *Das Wunder der Heliane* would be his greatest masterpiece, so undoubtedly he saw something within the libretto that truly captured his imagination and inspired his work on the project. While the libretto is certainly imaginative, it is at times so vague it can be difficult to decipher how the plot is being furthered or what certain

characters are speaking about. An exploration of the libretto will identify instances of Heliane's beauty and honorability as well as demonstrate her importance throughout the opera.

Act I opens in a prison cell that is adjacent to what appears to be a chapel. We are immediately introduced to the Stranger, who is imprisoned in the cell before the start of the opera. It is never stated directly why the Stranger was imprisoned, but a vague dialogue between him and the Porter suggests that it has to do with spreading love and joy throughout the kingdom. The dialogue also shows that a Ruler governs the kingdom with an iron fist and seems determined to stifle his subjects' happiness. The Ruler comes to visit the Stranger in the cell and it is then that the audience learns that the Stranger is condemned to die for his actions. The Ruler tries to force his tyranny on the Stranger, but the Stranger seems unperturbed. After the Ruler leaves, Heliane visits the Stranger in his cell in order to comfort him before his imminent execution. The Stranger, overcome by her miraculous beauty, tries to force himself on her, pleading her to "love" him the night before his execution. Heliane declines but allows him to see her naked body before she goes to the adjacent chapel to pray for him. The Ruler enters again once Heliane leaves and gives the Stranger an ultimatum. He will be forgiven of his crimes if he convinces Heliane to love the Ruler. It is then that the audience learns that the Ruler spreads hate throughout the land because he cannot succeed in wooing his wife, Heliane. The Stranger repeatedly declines the offer until Heliane emerges from the chapel, still naked, and begs them for silence. The Ruler flies into a jealous rage and orders the guards to capture Heliane so they can take her before the Judges to answer for her crime of infidelity.

Act II opens with a conversation between the Messenger and the Ruler. The Messenger has summoned the Judges to the council chambers to hear Heliane's case. The audience also discovers that the Messenger and the Ruler were once lovers, but the Ruler has long forgotten the



Messenger after meeting and wedding Heliane. Once the Judges are assembled, Heliane is brought before them to answer for her adultery. She explains the situation, how she let the Stranger see her naked body but did not lie with him. The blind Judge asks Heliane “Were you his?” to which she replies, “I was his in my thoughts... / yes, I was!”<sup>88</sup> This ambiguous response sets the Ruler into another rage, so he decides to bring forth the Stranger. After being brought before the council, the Stranger asks for a moment alone with Heliane. The Ruler is furious but all eventually agree to allow them to have a brief moment together. The Stranger explains to Heliane that she cannot be free unless he dies, so he begs her to kill him. After she refuses, she forces a kiss on her and then commits suicide by stabbing himself with a dagger. Once the council discovers what took place in the chamber during their absence, they take Heliane in front of the city where the Ruler declares that if she really is pure, she will be able to raise the Stranger from the dead. After much deliberation and doubt, Heliane agrees to the Ruler’s challenge.

Act III begins with a commotion among the citizens, all clamoring to witness Heliane’s miracle and debating as to whether she is capable of such a feat. The Judges, the Ruler, and Heliane all appear before the town for the spectacle to being. Heliane makes a couple of attempts at resurrecting the Stranger before she admits that she cannot do it. She then admits that she really did love the stranger, they kissed, and she renounces her divinity and purity stating “I am a woman! / Nothing but a woman, and his unto death!”<sup>89</sup> Once the crowd and the Ruler are worked into a frenzy as to what Heliane’s punishment will be (presumably death) the strangest moment in the opera occurs. In a fabulous *deus ex machina*, a sudden clap of thunder erupts from

---

<sup>88</sup> “Das Wunder der Heliane Libretto,” in accompanying booklet, *Das Wunder der Heliane* performed by Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Harmut Welker, and the Berlin Radio Orchestra conducted by John Mauceri, Decca, 1993, CD, 22

<sup>89</sup> “Heliane Libretto,” 41

nowhere and the Stranger is suddenly risen from the dead. The Stranger then explains that because Heliane gave her love (not her body) to him, she was in fact pure and “may approach His [God’s] presence!”<sup>90</sup> The crowd at this point is thoroughly encapsulated in the events unfolding before them. Once the Ruler realizes that he is no longer the center of attention and will never be able to achieve consummation with Heliane, he swings his sword and stabs her in the heart. The crowd is disturbed by this grotesque display and proceeds to exits, leaving Heliane and the Stranger alone together. Rather than showing them die, the opera ends with a love duet as Heliane and the Stranger walk into paradisiacal afterlife together.

Clearly the libretto and plot are quite comparable to many other modernist/symbolist plays of the time. There are a number of interesting elements that can be derived from the libretto. Firstly, the well-defined moral of the story that permeates throughout the work is that love is an unstoppable force that triumphs over all evil, which seems juxtaposed to many of the operas of the time that expressed and intensified psychological struggles. There is also an impressive amount of irony and juxtaposition that is present within the text. The Ruler cannot persuade Heliane to love him, so he spreads hatred throughout his kingdom. Yet it is precisely this hatred that keeps Heliane from being able to love the Ruler. The crowd praises Heliane as a saint and begs the Lord to hear her when she attempts to raise the Stranger, yet immediately calls her a strumpet and shouts for her execution when she cannot perform the miracle. The Judges claim “Blasphemy” when the Ruler charges Heliane with raising the Stranger from the dead, yet offer no comment when the Stranger is actually raised from the dead or when the Ruler kills Heliane out of jealousy. All of the negative elements of other characters accentuate the positive

---

<sup>90</sup> “Heliane Libretto,” 44

traits of Heliane, for she has the most uprightness of any character portrayed throughout the work.

### **Distinguishing Heliane**

Heliane is quite different from Violanta or Marietta. While she shares the same sex appeal of the two earlier females, she is purged of any vengeful or hostile feelings and is imbued with constancy and decency. As we know from previous chapters, *femme fatales* are always quite beautiful and they use this beauty ensnare men in traps or influence them to carry out a deed for them. Heliane is much like Violanta and Marietta in the fact that she is incredibly attractive but that is where the similarities stop, however. Heliane never uses her beauty to trap or influence men. Violanta uses her beauty to lure Alfonso and Marietta uses hers to influence Paul. Heliane's beauty does deeply affect the Stranger as well as the Ruler, but she never uses it to consciously influence others. It is almost as if Heliane is completely unable to control how her beauty's affects others, thus becoming an unwilling partner in its influence.

*Femmes fatales* typically create some kind of dispute among the characters of the story. Violanta's tempting beauty worries Barbara and she warns Matteo to stay away. Marietta's beauty and its effect it has on Paul worries Frank and Brigitta respectively. Although Frank eventually bends to the will of Marietta, Brigitta is so troubled by the whole affair that she joins a convent to get away from the situation altogether. While Heliane is very beautiful, she never seems to cause any kind of disagreement among any of the characters, except for possibly the conflict between the Ruler and the Stranger. That conflict, however is not so much a direct result of Heliane, but rather a combination of the Ruler's fierce avariciousness and intense loathing and

jealously towards the Stranger. All of the characters comment on and recognize Heliane's great beauty, but it is her purity and innocence that seems to affect people more than anything else.

In fact, the only character that seems to ever be bothered by Heliane is the Messenger. The Messenger, a slightly older woman, shows much hostility towards Heliane throughout the entire opera. One might conclude that the motivation behind such hostility would be jealousy over Heliane's natural beauty. In fact, the reason for the Messenger's antagonism is revealed at the beginning of Act II. The audience discovers that the Messenger is a former lover of the Ruler and was discarded after he met Heliane. This is further accentuated through the rest of the opera by her consistent degrading and insulting interjections aimed directly at Heliane.

Finally, *femme fatales* usually influence or cause a psychological change in the men they pursue. While both Violanta and Marietta actively pursue men for personal gain or pleasure, Heliane does not. In fact, people seem to be equally attracted to her beauty and her strong and upright character. For example, in the first act, the Porter particularly accentuates her morality by stating that "she is as kind as she is beautiful" and "if she had her way—believe me, no one would lie in chains in this land."<sup>91</sup> Her kindness and gentleness are also displayed in the first act when she goes to visit the Stranger in prison to ease his suffering. She allows the Stranger to fondle her hair and to touch her feet. In doing this, she claims that she is giving them as "gifts" in hopes to alleviate his anguish.

These moral aspects not only distinguish Heliane from the characters within *Das Wunder der Heliane*, but it also distinguishes her from his previous operatic heroines. Violanta's agenda throughout her opera is to seduce Alfonso so that her husband can kill him. Marietta seems to love receiving attention from men and will use every ploy she has to make sure she receives as

---

<sup>91</sup> "Heliane Libretto," 3

much attention as possible. Heliane's only motivation throughout *Das Wunder der Heliane* seems to be comforting others in hopes of alleviating some suffering from this world. Clearly, Korngold is not just moving away from *femme fatale* portrayals, he is moving towards a portrayal of a woman that is highly selfless and altruistic.

It is also important to note that many characters featured in *Das Wunder der Heliane* grapple with selfish problems that they seem unable to overcome because it creates further separation between Heliane and the other characters of the opera. Many of them suffer from problematic traits colloquially referred to as the "seven deadly sins." For example, the Ruler suffers from wrath, particularly when he discovers Heliane naked with the Stranger. Rather than interrogating her, he flies into a jealous rage and orders that they both stand before trial. It is this wrath and anger that keeps Heliane from loving him. The Messenger suffers from malicious envy and greed. She is envious not of Heliane's beauty, but rather because the Ruler is so focused on winning his bride thus virtually ignoring his former lover. She might also be considered greedy for power because she wants to be in Heliane's position as the Queen. She is also greedy for social status as is indicated by her "strumpet" insults that are aimed directly at Heliane as if to make herself feel morally superior to the Queen. The Stranger suffers from lust when he begs Heliane to lay with him the night before his execution. He is so consumed by his lust that he does not even consider the consequences of his actions, thus landing in further trouble with the king and ultimately committing suicide to escape execution.

Heliane, like the rest of the main characters, suffers from an affliction that affects her throughout the opera. However, while the other characters suffer from selfish conditions, Heliane is altruistic. Heliane exemplifies many virtues such as temperance, courage, faith, hope, and charity or love. This is particularly accentuated after the Stranger attempts to convince Heliane to

love him. She does not fight or shout. She merely waits for him to finish his monologue and then says “I shall pray for you... and for myself.” This negates the Stranger’s robust attempts at seduction by combatting it with an honorable and more dignified response.

One final way that Heliane is distinguished from other the other characters in *Das Wunder der Heliane* is by her name. In all of Korngold’s previous operas, names were not only important to distinguish characters from each other, but they were also sometimes given in reference to each other. Such is the case with Marie and Marietta from *Die tote Stadt*. Names are clearly important to Korngold. He changed the names of the main characters in *Die tote Stadt* to Paul and Marietta from previously less musical sounding names.<sup>92</sup> This might be why in *Das Wunder der Heliane*, the opera’s namesake is the only character featured throughout the entire opera that has a name. All of the other characters throughout the opera are diminished to existing as mere titles, such as the Stranger, the Messenger, the Ruler, the Porter, the Judges, the Blind Judge, the Young Man, and the Crowd. Even the ethereal chorus that begins the opera and interjects throughout is referred to simply as “Angelic Voices.” Müller and Korngold distinguish Heliane and make her more personable by giving her a finite identity rather than a vague descriptive title.

### **Heliane’s Musical Importance**

Korngold appears to have an affinity for writing lead female characters. In fact, all of his full-length operas feature a prominent female character that is central to the plot. For *Die tote Stadt*, it is the infamous Marietta. For *Das Wunder der Heliane*, it is the glorious and beautiful Heliane. In 1937, ten years after completing *Das Wunder der Heliane*, Korngold would

---

<sup>92</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 122

embark on his final major operatic adventure with *Die Kathrin*, which also features a prominent female lead character. What is true after examining the libretto and the score of *Das Wunder der Heliane* is that Heliane seems to stand out from Korngold's previous opera leads in many different ways. The music of *Violanta* does not glorify nor accentuate the operas namesake, but rather her nemesis Alfonso. Korngold's music for *Die tote Stadt* balances accentuating Marietta's beauty and influence with reflecting Paul's psychological deterioration. The music of *Das Wunder der Heliane* is unique in that there are several instances throughout the opera that are strictly written to glorify Heliane, whether it be her beauty or strength of character.

The first time the audience encounters a glorification of Heliane is in the first scene of Act I. The Porter leaves food and drink for the Stranger, as well as a Bible for his spiritual needs. He is also given orders to remove the Strangers shackles. It is during this friendly conversation between the Porter and the Stranger that the beauty and kindness of Heliane is mentioned. The Porter says that the Ruler fears the Stranger and keeps Heliane locked away. The Porter then says, "But she is as kind as she is beautiful. Her eyes observe the suffering of all, sick with longing, and if she had it her way – believe me, no one would lie in chains in this land."<sup>93</sup> What is particularly interesting about this line is that while the Porter sings it, there is a musical quote from the climax of Heliane's Act II aria "Ich ging zu ihm." This aria is an important showcase for Heliane and its significance will be explained in the coming pages. Korngold clearly wanted the music to reflect the beauty and sensitivity of Heliane while also giving it a melody distinctly associated with her, thus emphasizing her musical importance.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the anticipation for Marietta's entrance is intensely built up effectively by Paul asking God to return Marie to him. His penetrating

---

<sup>93</sup> "Heliane libretto," 3

emotional cry is released by Marietta's entrance music that perfectly accentuates her beauty and importance. There is a similar effect in *Das Wunder der Heliane* that is even more focused on the importance of Heliane. In the third scene of Act I, the anticipation for Heliane's entrance is built-up in a particularly interesting way. In this scene, the Stranger realizes that his punishment for his crimes is death and cries out the window for anyone to help him. Once he realizes no one is listening, he begs God to save him from his sentence or at least give him comfort.

Upon closer examination of the score, we can witness the effect Korngold is trying to achieve. When the Stranger asks, "God? You? To you?"<sup>94</sup> the strings feature a melody containing a half-note tied to an eighth-note followed by a quarter note and then an eighth-note. The pitches and rhythms contained within this line are once again a version of the motive from the climax of Heliane's main aria in Act II. The motif is further elongated and manipulated under the next line of the Stranger's text: "God! You, in whom I do not believe, if you are with frightened children, if you give consolation to the most wretched hearts, will you forsake me this hour?!"<sup>95</sup> The Stranger is no longer asking God for help from his sentence but merely for comfort in his time of darkness. Korngold is communicating to the audience in his own unique way that Heliane is soon to arrive on stage and is, in fact, the comfort that the Stranger has been looking for. He also draws a clear connection between Heliane and divinity as if to suggest that Heliane's altruism is saint-like.

The harmonies for the section that immediately precedes Heliane's entrance are unusual and not as consonant as the tones that preceded Marietta's entrance. However, what Heliane's entrance music lacks in washing the audience in beautiful consonant tones it makes up for in

---

<sup>94</sup> "Heliane libretto," 7

<sup>95</sup> "Heliane libretto," 7



emphasizing Heliane's importance to the opera by presenting her theme. This is something he does not do for either Marietta or Violanta. Korngold treats the passage as if Heliane is so important and so beautiful it is difficult for the mind to comprehend, thus accounting for the consonant yet complicated musical language. The ethereal quality of this music also accentuates the directions in the libretto that "magical light suffuses the chapel" upon Heliane's entrance, further accentuating her beauty and almost divine presence.<sup>96</sup>

One way Korngold made his female lead more prominent in *Die tote Stadt* was by giving her an important aria. While Marietta's aria "Glück das mir verbliebt" is a step above Violanta's complete lack of an aria, it is not without its problems. It serves a great purpose to establish an emotional connection between the audience and the opera's female lead as well as between Marietta and Paul. However, in doing so, Marietta must share her "showcase" aria with Paul. While Marietta gets to shine during the first strophe, Paul's entrance in the second strophe turns the piece from an aria into a duet. For the first time in any of his full-length opera compositions, Korngold gives Heliane a "showcase" aria that belongs to her alone. Not only is she the only one that sings it, but the motifs used within it are strictly connected to Heliane throughout the entire opera.

Heliane's aria appears in the third scene of Act II. It occurs during the middle of her interrogation from the Ruler and the six Judges. What also sets this aria apart is that this is the only time in Act II that Heliane has a significant amount of dialogue. Previously, she only gave one word or brief responses to the questions she was posed by the six Judges and the Ruler. In the first half of the aria, she details the events that occurred between herself and the Stranger. In this moment she also further showcases her ethical and altruistic characteristics, by describing

---

<sup>96</sup> "Heliane libretto," 7

how she made gifts of her hair and feet so that the Stranger might find some comfort in his hour of need. The Ruler attempts to interrupt Heliane's aria by shouting "Do not allow her to continue!"<sup>97</sup> The Rulers attempt at sabotaging Heliane's aria is negated when the blind Judge seeks further explanation by asking "Were you his?" thus allowing Heliane to continue.<sup>98</sup>

The second half of Heliane's aria is one of the most musically important pieces in the entire opera. It also further displays Heliane's purely ethical mentality. Her answer to the Judge's question is "I was in my thoughts... yes, I was!"<sup>99</sup> It is after this that her virtue is showcased when she says that she prayed to God "to give me strength to fulfil it."<sup>100</sup> Rather than succumbing to "sins of the flesh," Heliane consults with a higher power to give her strength in her faithfulness to her husband. She then proceeds to tell the council "I did not love him, my body was not inflamed with desire for him... And if I inclined to him, I did it so that his poor eyes might yet see love before they dimmed... it was not the blood's desire that drove me to this youth, but I bore his grief with him and in sorrow, in sorrow I became his."<sup>101</sup> The famous Heliane motif that was so prominent in the first act comes out in full force during the second half of this aria, presented in Korngold's favorite key of F-sharp major.<sup>102</sup> It begins on the line "And if I inclined to him..." and climaxes on the line "but I bore his greif with him..." particularly accentuating the word "Schmerzen," which in this context could mean pain, suffering, or sorrow, with a high A-sharp above the treble staff. The effect of the tension being built up along with the final release is similar to that of the "Liebestod" from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Heliane is

---

<sup>97</sup> "Heliane Libretto," 21

<sup>98</sup> "Heliane Libretto," 22

<sup>99</sup> "Heliane Libretto," 22

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> "Heliane Libretto," 22

<sup>102</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 195

not in love with the Stranger, but merely empathetic towards his suffering and willing to do almost anything to abate his burden. Korngold is not only associating this motif with Heliane, but he is also associating it with selfless and righteous behavior, thus intertwining the two. This way, the motif as well as Heliane herself are consistently associated with moral superiority, thus elevating Heliane's importance above the rest of the characters portrayed in the opera.

We have seen previously how love duets have been treated in a variety of ways throughout Korngold's operatic works. In *Violanta*, Alfonso and Violanta sing a glorious love duet titled "Reine Liebe." However, in doing so Korngold first gives the melody to Alfonso while Violanta is left to repeat melodies that Alfonso has already stated. This act of having Violanta be consistently second to Alfonso is present throughout the entire opera. Marietta and Paul share a love duet in *Die tote Stadt*, although it is not a traditional one. "Glück das mir verbliebt" is really a folk song expressing sentiments about love that is lost rather than about the love the two characters share. While it works simultaneously as Marietta's showcase aria and also establishes an emotional connection between the two main characters, it is not a duet expressing love for each other. This makes Marietta and Paul's relationship interesting and superficial since they never share a true duet expressing love for one another. In *Das Wunder der Heliane*, Korngold finally gives the two main characters a love duet that allows them to express their emotions equally rather than one dominating over the other.

While there are a few love duets presented throughout the opera, one of the most memorable ones is the final duet from scene four of Act III. At this point, the Stranger has been raised from the dead and Heliane was declared a saint by the crowd. In a jealous rage, the Ruler killed Heliane and now the two are standing in what can be thought of as a median between

Heaven and Earth. Heliane is at first confused, asking the Stranger, “Is this death?”<sup>103</sup> Once she becomes more understanding of this she asks the Stranger, “Do you still love me?”<sup>104</sup> It is then that the couple begins their glorious love duet. What is markedly different about this love duet as compared to the ones we have looked at in *Die tote Stadt* and *Violanta* is the fact that both Heliane and the Stranger start on the same pitch and with the same rhythm. This symbolically shows that both characters in this moment are equal having stayed true to their morals.

The most interesting part of this final love duet is when both parties begin to sing the final two lines “only hearts have this power – and love alone is eternity, eternity.” The duet up until this point has been harmonically explorative. Once this section is reached the lovers revel in the key of B-major until the end of the piece. Upon closer inspection of the melodies presented in these final two lines, we can see that it is clearly an altered form of the climax from Heliane’s “Ich ging zu ihm.” Previously in the opera, this melody is not only associated with Heliane but also used to accentuate her exceptionally upright character. In the final duet, the theme not only accentuates Heliane’s importance right up to the end of the opera, but it also helps to cement the overall point of the work. The last word is the most accentuated word in the duet: “Ewigkeit” or eternity. Both Heliane and the Stranger sustain this word on a high B performed at fortissimo before resolving to an F-sharp, drawing a clear connection between Heliane’s second act aria and the lover’s final duet. Korngold is communicating that the power of love can overcome almost any obstacle and, by using this augmented theme from Heliane’s major aria, he gestures that Heliane and the “moral of the story” are of equal importance and should not be thought of as separate but rather be entwined.

---

<sup>103</sup> “Heliane Libretto,” 46

<sup>104</sup> “Heliane Libretto,” 47

## Premiering Korngold's Masterpiece

With the smash success of his previous operas *Der Ring des Polykrates/Violanta* and *Die tote Stadt*, one would think that staging the next great operatic masterpiece by Erich Korngold would be a relatively easy endeavor. Unfortunately for Korngold, this proved not to be the case. He wrote the part of Heliane specifically for the woman that originated the role of Marietta in *Die tote Stadt*: Maria Jeritza. He even sent copies of some of Heliane's vocal excerpts in hopes of enticing her to play the role. Ultimately, Jeritza declined the role in order to travel to America to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. Perhaps as a consolation to Korngold, Jeritza would go on to perform *Violanta* in the title role for the American premiere. Korngold was approached by his publisher who suggested that Lotte Lehmann, another Viennese prima donna, might accept the role of Heliane. Initially, Lehmann refused to be Korngold's second choice, but after he invited her to dinner and played her the entire opera in his charming manner, Lehmann agreed to the role and enjoyed much success.

Another obstacle that Korngold had to face when premiering *Das Wunder der Heliane* was finding a venue. This had not been the case with *Die tote Stadt*, as there was such fierce competition for it that it was ultimately given a dual premiere in two different cities. Korngold had to essentially shop *Das Wunder* around a little before it was finally decided that the premiere would be held in Hamburg, since Korngold's father did not want his influence in Vienna to effect its reception, although that did not stop him from still causing a spectacle in the local papers. A foreboding incident occurred in Nürnberg while Korngold was shopping for venues that would foreshadow his future as well. While there to discuss the possibility of staging *Das Wunder*, Luzi Korngold witnessed a gathering of the National Socialist Party. She describes in her memoirs watching the Nazis march past her hotel window with fear and dissolution. She

said, “As I heard the dull drumbeat mixed with the high-pitched sound of the piccolo, an inexplicable fear gripped me concerning Erich.”<sup>105</sup>

Another element that Korngold had to compete with was his father Julius’ reviews and his penchant for tearing down new operatic works that did not fit his definition of a great art. This was true for many operas that premiered around the same as *Das Wunder*, including Hindemith’s *Cardillac*, Berg’s *Wozzeck*, Strauss’ *Die ägyptische Helena*, and Křenek’s *Jonny spielt auf*. All of these new works were met with disdain by the elder Korngold, however it was Křenek’s work that caused Julius the most grief and gave him the most ammunition to wage a full-fledged assault against what he considered to be “the corruption of modern opera.”<sup>106</sup> This, coincidentally, provided an unpleasant milieu in which Erich’s masterpiece opera was to be premiered. Julius panned Křenek’s work, calling it “a text which could have been written by a high school pupil.”<sup>107</sup> Once he realized he was not enough to dissuade public interest, Julius enlisted the help of his friend Franz Schalk who in turn looked to his German Nationalist friends. The Nazis flooded Vienna with anti-Křenek propaganda, describing it as “the Jewish desecration of the State Opera by a work containing jazz tunes and a pornographic plot.” Ultimately, Korngold’s opera was overshadowed by the drama that unfolded in the press as well as by the enemies his father had made for him. While the premiere of *Das Wunder der Heliane* was successful, it was not to last nearly as long and virtually died once premiered in Berlin, the home of many Křenek supporters.

---

<sup>105</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 191

<sup>106</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 197

<sup>107</sup> Carroll, *Prodigy*, 198

## Conclusions

The trajectory of Korngold's interpretations of female characters is fascinating in how it seems to mirror political and societal changes. Korngold began his serious operatic career with a *femme fatale* who appeared so unimpressive that her character was overshadowed consistently by the opera's main villain, Alfonso. *Das Wunder der Heliane* moves away from traditional *femme fatale* portrayals to depicting a main female character as exceptionally musically important and almost goddess-like in her integrity. He gives Heliane far more musical precedence than he does Violanta, and he expands upon the priority placed on Marietta while adding a distinctly moral aspect that Marietta did not contain. Heliane's motif is referenced many times throughout the opera in many different forms, including the first time it is presented when the Porter describes her great attractiveness and gentle nature. The motif is presented at its most distinguished during Heliane's aria "Ich ging zu ihm." With this aria, Korngold gives more to his female heroine than he ever did in his previous works: a full length aria that showcases just Heliane's characteristics rather than having to share the piece with anyone else. Finally, Korngold gives the Stranger and Heliane a love duet in which they both get equal amounts of music and sing proportionately. Moreover, it cannot be denied that Heliane's importance is more accentuated than the Stranger's by Korngold including Heliane's motif in the final two lines of the glorious duet.

The changing attitudes to female characters in Korngold's operas correspond to the transformation in how Central European society viewed women. This is directly reflected in *Violanta* by the main heroine struggling to find a musical identity or essential place within the work and ultimately succumbing and being manipulated by a man she previously despised. After the Great War, the feminist movement in Austria picked up momentum, ultimately resulting in women being granted the right to vote as well as being able to serve public office. This era found

many artists representing women in various ways, possibly trying to give inspiration to women as to what they may be able to achieve with their new found freedom. This is reflected in Marietta, who is given much more musical importance and seems to have a definite place within the opera. She also has many characteristics women might have aspired to, such as confidence, assertiveness, individuality, and a goal-oriented mindset that always allows her to be able to achieve her goals. However, the feminist community probably looked poorly on Marietta's erotic appetites. While women were given a new found independence, it was paramount that they be taken seriously by continuing to receive a quality education as well as tending to actions considered "women's work" such as cooking, cleaning, and other household chores.<sup>108</sup> Korngold infused Heliane's importance within the musical score, consistently associating her with virtue and kindness. This mirrors many feminists' thoughts that women should remain steadfast in their constancy in order to be taken seriously.<sup>109</sup>

Let us not forget how these operas follow the path of Korngold's own life as well. *Die tote Stadt* was written while Korngold was getting to know the person that he would soon marry, Luzi von Sonnenthal. Thus, the woman plays a more integral role in the music of the opera and is much more self-reliant. *Das Wunder der Heliane* was written after Korngold was already smitten with Luzi and enjoying his life in wedded bliss. This is characterized with Heliane's tremendous importance throughout the musical score, as well as her sense of strong moral character, possibly suggesting Luzi's importance in his life. Clearly, Luzi had a lasting effect on the rest of Korngold's musical career. His last major opera, *Die Kathrin*, also features a prominent female character with a strong sense of morality. After their move to Hollywood, Korngold would enjoy

---

<sup>108</sup> Günter Bischof, Anton Pelinka, Erika Thurner, ed., *Contemporary Austrian Studies, Volume 6: Women in Austria* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 10

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.



many years of scoring music for the female leads on screen, perhaps always keeping in mind his own female lead in his life.

Unfortunately, Heliane's forthright selflessness in comparison with Marietta's selfish behavior might also be parallel with another political movement taking place in Austria and Germany. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Nazi party would grow from a small radicalized faction to the dominating ideology, culminating in the election of Adolf Hitler. While it may have seemed like the Nazis might look favorably on Korngold after producing so much propaganda against Křenek, they ultimately would stifle any further productions of Korngold's works as well. This resulted in Korngold being largely forgotten in the decades that followed WWII. Because the Nazis were anti-Semites, it is possible that someone involved with *Das Wunder der Heliane*, whether it be Hans Müller, Erich, or Julius Korngold, inserted the idea of Christianity briefly into the libretto. When the Ruler kills Heliane, the crowd exclaims in despair that he killed the one "through whose mouth Christ, Lord Jesus Christ comforted us!" God is mentioned somewhat in Korngold's other operas but usually when characters are in desperation. This insertion seems very strange given the fact that, while there is mention of God throughout this opera, there is no mention of what religion the kingdom is practicing until this moment. There are also no references to Christian sacraments, rites, or iconography. As briefly as this reference appears, it is never mentioned again. It is possible that this insertion might have been included to stave off possible anti-Semitic reviews that might have resulted from Korngold being Jewish, though not practicing. Given the particularly large faction of Nazis who were Christians, it is possible this insertion might have been included to appease them, seeing as how they played a major role in the reception of *Jonny spielt auf*. In fact, the Nazi party had particular interest in the morality of their women, especially with the later formation of women's and girl's leagues to

teach the principals of “proper Aryan ladies.” With this in mind, not only might Heliane’s morality have been emphasized to appease the feminists’ opinions, but she also might have been meant to find favor with the Nazi party as well, who seemed to be gaining considerable momentum in the political climate. While it might have been conceived to find favor with the growing political party, it also speaks strongly against it. The Ruler and his defeat by love and divine intervention might be considered a symbol for Hitler and other militant rulers like him. Whatever the case may be, *Das Wunder der Heliane* is a glorious work that not only emphasizes the importance of its female lead but also the content of her character, a feat that had not been previously performed in Korngold’s operatic works and surely cannot be rivaled.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Harriet. *Utopian Feminism: Women's Movement in fin-de-siècle Vienna*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Bischof, Günter, Anton Pelinka, Erika Thurner, ed. *Women in Austria*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998.
- Carroll, Brendan G. "Korngold's 'Violanta'." *The Musical Times* 121, no. 1653 (Nov. 1980): 695-698.
- . *The Last Prodigy: A Biography of Erich Wolfgang Korngold*. Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1997.
- Clement, Catherine. *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Good, David F., Margarete Grandner, & Mary Jo Maynes, ed. *Austrian Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives*. Providence: Bergham Books, 1996.
- Goose, Benjamin. "Opera for Sale: Folksong, Sentimentality, and the Market." *Journal of the Royal Music Association* 133, Part 2 (2008): 189-219
- Korngold, Erich Wolfgang. *Violanta, Oper in Einem Akt*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1916.
- . *Das Wunder der Heliane*. Mainz: B. Schott's Söhne, 1927.
- . *Die tote Stadt*. Conducted by Erich Leinsdorf. Recorded with Carol Neblett, René Kollo, the Munich Radio Orchestra, and the Bavarian Radio Chorus. RCA Victor Opera Series 7767-2-RG, 1975. 2 CDs.
- . *Violanta*. Conducted by Marek Janowski. Recorded with Eva Marton, Siegfried Jerusalem, and the Munich Radio Orchestra. CBS Recording Masterworks MK 79229, 1980. CD.
- . *Das Wunder der Heliane*. Conducted by John Mauceri. Recorded with Anna Tomowa-Sintow, Hartmut Welker, John David de Haan, RSO Berlin, and Rundfunk Chor Berlin. Decca 478 3429 DMO 3, 2012. 3 CDs.
- . *Die tote Stadt*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc, 2013.
- McClary, Susan. *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

———. *Cambridge Opera Handbooks: Carmen*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Menon, Elizabeth K. *Evil by Design: The Creation and Marketing of the Femme Fatale*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Schorske, Carl E. *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1981.

Stricker, Terri L. "A Comparative Study of Femme-Fatale Imagery and Its Significance in Selected Fin-de-siècle Art and Literature." PhD dissertation, University of Arkansas, 2000.