

KORNGOLD: *Symphonic Serenade*; 2006
GRIFFES: *Roman Sketches*

London Symphony/ Simone Pittau
ASV 4020—50 minutes

I'd like to pay homage, in regard to Korngold, to a dear friend of mine, a collector of movie soundtracks who died last June. For many years in the 60s and 70s, Court Actinger ran the record department of The Bon Marche department store in Seattle at a time when such stores offered a wider variety of services and merchandise (including classical recordings) than they do today. Court introduced me to Korngold via the wonderful RCA film music series under the baton of Charles Gerhardt. We spent hours discussing film music. One day, when Miklos Rozsa walked into the store, Court grabbed the two Polydor copies of *Miklos Rozsa Conducts His Great Film Music* and had Rozsa sign one for me. Court was a gentleman and an aficionado of great music at a time when the chain of classical music-making and merchandising involved knowledgeable people who cared about customers in a way that no Internet website can.

The RCA film music series brought Korngold's music into wide public recognition. I remember going to a screening of *The Sea Hawk* at a revival house and witnessing several in the audience applaud when Korngold's credit appeared on the screen. That was an indication of the acclaim generated by those first two heavily romantic Korngold albums, *The Sea Hawk* and *Elizabeth and Essex*.

It wasn't long before Korngold's non-film music began to appear on records as well. The

Symphonic Serenade is scored for a large string orchestra. It was premiered in 1950 by the Vienna Philharmonic led by Wilhelm Furtwängler. According to the ASV notes, Korngold began composing it in Los Angeles in 1947 just after his first heart attack. He'd begun to return to his mainstream classical roots after many years in Hollywood. This composition is one of his masterpieces, and it shows that he could disengage himself from the hyper-romantic Hollywood style he was best known for and write music of beauty, dignity, and depth, in the romantic vein, for the concert hall.

Simone Pittau and the London Symphony give a somewhat fuller, richer performance than John Mauceri on Decca. The strings are warmer and the Londoners play a bit more sensitively than their German counterparts—enough so that I would recommend this 2004 Abbey Road recording as essential.

The Griffes is no less fine. It is billed as the world premiere of the full orchestral version, the two inner movements having been orchestrated by Craig Leon from the original piano score. Griffes, an American impressionist, often sounds here like Debussy or Ravel, with lush tone colors and alluring harmony that border on, but never quite lapse into, an imitation of the Frenchmen.

The juxtaposition of Griffes and Korngold is apt, justified by the dual influences of French impressionism and German romanticism. My only complaint concerns the insufficient pause between the two compositions. The music, performance, and sound are a treasure.

HALDEMAN