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Radiant Descent into Memory and Desire

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Korngold's Die tote Stadt is an opera that asks for more than vocal splendour: it needs psychological precision, orchestral imagination, and a rare ability to preserve the work's febrile tension without allowing its luxuriant score to dissolve into decorative sound. In this concert interpretation, the Tonkünstler-Orchester Niederösterreich under Dmitri Jurowski met that challenge with remarkable confidence. The result was not merely an account of a celebrated fin-de-siècle score, but a compelling immersion into Korngold's strange, unstable world—part memory chamber, part erotic fantasy, part confrontation with grief.

At the centre of the opera lies Paul, imprisoned by mourning for his dead wife Marie and unable to separate her image from the living dancer Marietta. Eric Cutler gave this demanding role an interpretation of powerful dramatic coherence. His tenor combined heroic projection with a welcome degree of lyrical inwardness. The voice carried easily over Korngold's large orchestral forces, but Cutler did not treat Paul as a conventional late-Romantic tenor hero. Instead, he revealed the character's volatility: the tenderness of memory, the violence of possessiveness, the exhaustion of a man unable to distinguish desire from loss.

His singing in the opera's more introspective moments had a particularly compelling, almost vulnerable concentration, while the climactic confrontations acquired genuine emotional urgency rather than mere volume. Camilla Nylund was an ideal Marietta, bringing both vocal radiance and dramatic intelligence to a role that must embody the dangerous power of resemblance. Marietta is not simply Marie reborn; she is an autonomous, sensual, impatient woman whose vitality threatens Paul's constructed cult of the dead.

Nylund's soprano had the necessary sheen and amplitude for Korngold's soaring lines, yet her interpretation remained admirably detailed. She shaped phrases with flexibility and colour, moving naturally between seduction, irony, irritation, and moments of startling tenderness. Her Marietta was vividly alive, refusing to become merely an object in Paul's imagination. In the scenes where she appears as the apparition of Marie, Nylund's vocal transformation was especially affecting: the brightness of the living woman gave way to a more distant, almost spectral sound world.

The celebrated "Glück, das mir verblieb," often treated as an isolated concert favourite, emerged here as an integral emotional turning point rather than a decorative interruption. Cutler and Nylund found a delicate balance between intimacy and unease. The duet's sweeping melodic beauty was fully present, but beneath it

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one could hear the fragility of Paul's longing and the impossibility of restoring the past. Jurowski supported the singers with exceptional sensitivity, allowing the vocal lines to bloom while maintaining the subtle harmonic tensions that make this music so much more ambiguous than its immediate lyricism suggests.

Samuel Hasselhorn brought authority and refinement to the double role of Frank and Fritz. His baritone possesses an attractive clarity and a firm dramatic core, qualities that allowed him to differentiate the practical, concerned Frank from the more theatrical Fritz. In the role of Frank, Hasselhorn provided an important human counterweight to Paul's obsessive inner world. He did not overstate the character's moral function, but made him a believable friend, increasingly alarmed by Paul's emotional self-destruction. As Fritz, he brought elegant phrasing and a vivid sense of theatrical character, particularly in the Pierrot song, where the melancholy beneath the surface charm was beautifully sustained.

The smaller roles were cast with impressive care. Christa Mayer's Brigitta offered warmth, dignity, and dramatic weight, her richly grounded voice bringing emotional substance to a character who sees Paul's suffering with more compassion and realism than he can offer himself. Ilia Staple and Florentina Serles contributed bright, responsive vocal character as Juliette and Lucienne, while Daniel Jenz gave Victorin and Gaston lively theatrical definition. Matthäus Schmidlechner's Graf Albert completed the ensemble with a secure and idiomatic contribution.

The Czech Philharmonic Choir Brno brought precision, tonal richness, and a sense of collective theatrical energy to Korngold's crowd scenes, enhancing the opera's shifting movement between private nightmare and public spectacle. Jurowski's conducting was the performance's decisive force. He clearly understands that Korngold's orchestration, for all its opulence, must never become an indiscriminate flood of sound.

The Tonkünstler-Orchester Niederösterreich played with sumptuous tonal beauty, but Jurowski continually clarified the score's layers: the restless woodwind commentary, the shimmering strings, the ominous brass, and the sensuous harmonic transitions that place Korngold at the threshold between late Romanticism, Viennese modernism, and cinematic expressivity. The conductor's pacing was particularly impressive. He allowed the great lyrical arches their breadth, but retained a nervous undercurrent that made Paul's dream world feel unstable from the outset.

The orchestra's performance had both transparency and amplitude. The strings created the glowing, perfumed atmosphere one associates with Korngold, while the winds added colouristic sharpness and psychological detail. Brass climaxes had weight without brutality, and the score's many transitions between intimacy and hallucination were managed with exceptional control. Rather than treating Die tote Stadt as a precursor to Hollywood, Jurowski returned it to its original emotional and cultural context: a work born of post-war Vienna, haunted by death, memory, desire, and the fear that beauty itself may become a form of

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