’Magic Fire’: a Wagner Film with a Difference

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Magic Fire: A Wagner Film with a Difference

Ben Winters

The history of Wagner biopics is well documented in both the film-music and Wagner literature. From Gaumont’s 1913 The Life and Works of Richard Wagner directed by Carl Froelich, in which the score’s composer (Giuseppe Becce) also played the title role, to Tony Palmer’s 1983 film, Wagner, and the 1986 West German/French film, Wahnfried, Wagner has been well represented on the silver screen.¹ The 1955 Republic Pictures film Magic Fire, which was based on Bertita Harding’s novel of the same name and starred Alan Badel as the composer, is usually given rather short shrift by critics. However, F. Jane Schopf, for instance, notes that ‘neither the film nor the book make any attempt to explore the philosophical, political or artistic issues relevant to Wagner and his work. Harding was too intent on creating a hagiographic bio-fantasy.’² Criticised for its shoddy acting and its use of the cheap ‘Trucolor’ colour process, it is admittedly an easy film to overlook. Yet, for all its faults, it nonetheless offers us a chance to see and hear Wagner through the eyes and ears of a composer who brought together the worlds of opera and the movie theatre in provocative ways: Erich Korngold. Korngold’s role in arranging Wagner’s music for the film, and in supervising its performance and recording by artists including Hans Hopf, Otto Edelmann, Annelies Kupper, and Leonie Rysanek, was his final contribution to movie music before his death in 1957. He even makes a brief cameo appearance as the conductor Hans Richter. His involvement, moreover, is a reminder of the enormous significance of Wagner’s legacy for Hollywood film scores, one that continues to shape large parts of the discourse. In this article, then, I want to introduce the film and the circumstances of Korngold’s involvement in its production, before turning to Magic Fire’s most notorious problem: the fact

that Republic Pictures cut large portions of the film at the behest of its distributors. By consulting items in the Erich Wolfgang Korngold Collection at the Library of Congress, I will reveal how currently available versions of the film offer us only a partial idea of what the film might have been. As such, Magic Fire is a useful reminder that for all their apparent permanence as works of entertainment destined for mechanical reproduction, films’ textual status, given production and presentation practices, can often be surprisingly fluid. When considered alongside products of Wagnerian art that aimed for maximum control in their staging, we find “music drama” and film to be less different kinds of Text than we might suppose. Approaching each other from opposite sides, as it were, Hollywood film and Wagnerian music drama thus meet each other through a prism reflecting the difficult post-production of Magic Fire and the figure of Erich Korngold.

**Magic Fire and Korngold**

Korngold (1897–1957), a former child prodigy and rising star of the 1920s Viennese operatic world turned Hollywood movie composer, had long since retired from his work for Warner Bros. when in 1953 director William Dieterle proposed Magic Fire as a project. In a newspaper interview in 1946, on plans to return to the concert hall, Korngold commented ‘I feel I have to make a decision now, if I don’t want to be a Hollywood composer the rest of my life.’ He had finished work on what he thought was his final film Deception in September 1946—although the late release of Escape Me Never ensured his name was still visible on cinema screens in late 1947. He was, though, content to move away from the silver screen, opting instead to divert his energies into theatre with his new musical comedy Die stumme Serenade and a significant

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3 The fact that Harding’s novel is dedicated to Charlotte and William Dieterle ‘whose wide knowledge of theatre gave dramatic shape to this work’ might suggest that Dieterle was involved with the project from its very inception. See Bertita Harding, Magic Fire (London: George G. Harrap & Co., 1954), 5.

reconceptualising of the instrumental genres of string quartet, concerto, and symphony through
the incorporation of musical material first used in his film scores. As his widow, Luzi, later
reported in her biographical study of the composer, though, two considerations prompted him
to accept the invitation to work on *Magic Fire*: the prospect of a collaboration with Dieterle, and
the possibility of being present at the performance of his new Symphony in F sharp in Vienna
scheduled for October 1954.\(^5\) Indeed, Korngold had first worked with the German-speaking
Dieterle as early as 1934 on the composer’s first film project, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and
further collaborations at Warner Bros. included Korngold’s work on *Juarez* from November
1938 to April 1939. They had become firm friends, such that when principal photography on
*Juarez* finished on 6 February 1939, Dieterle and his wife, Charlotte, invited the Korngolds to a
dinner party to ‘salute the completion of the picture’ before Korngold’s scoring work had even
began.\(^6\) Perhaps their friendship was forged over their experiences of *Another Dawn*, a picture
that Korngold was somewhat forced into scoring between November 1936 and March 1937 and
for which Dieterle (as director) had a firm dislike. Both were compelled to participate by
Executive in Charge of Production at Warner Bros., Hal B. Wallis. The two couples remained
friends, and when Dieterle’s plans emerged to make a Wagner film for Republic Pictures—a
movie studio that with the exception of a few prestige pictures such as John Ford’s *The Quiet
Man* was largely known for Westerns, stunt serials, and vehicles for Vera Hruba Ralston—
Korngold was the obvious choice to arrange the music and supervise its recording. His presence
alone would raise the prestige of the project. According to the composer’s son, George—who
also worked on the film as a music editor—Korngold was ‘free to choose repertoire, artists,
orchestra, chorus and the recording venue, and his wishes in music/dramatic matters were to be
adhered to without any interference.’\(^7\) Such claims are frequently made in connection with

performance of the Symphony was with Harald Byrns and the Vienna Symphony Orchestra.
\(^6\) Erich Wolfgang Korngold Collection, Library of Congress, Box B Folder 1 ‘1939/Correspondence/General’.
\(^7\) George Korngold, liner notes for *Magic Fire: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*, Varèse Sarabande VCL 1107 1071.
Korngold’s work for film and after examination of the archival evidence often turn out to be substantially exaggerated; however, in this case, the freedoms afforded Korngold seem plausible given Dieterle’s central role as both director and producer.

The film’s screenplay was by Harding, E. A Dupont, and David T Chandler, a pseudonym for Dieterle himself, according to George Korngold. Like the novel, it concentrated on ‘Wagner’s women’ with the composer’s works sometimes appearing to be a mere plot device for advancing the main story of his romantic entanglements with Minna Planer (Yvonne De Carlo), Mathilde Wesendonck (Valentina Cortese), and Cosima Liszt (Rita Gam). The novel had added as a fourth significant admirer of the composer King Ludwig II, and named each of its four parts accordingly. The film, however, rather plays down the role of Ludwig (Gerhard Riedmann), who receives relatively little screen time. Instead, it is Franz Liszt (Carlos Thompson) who is treated as a central figure in the narrative, and whose reconciliation with his daughter Cosima is triggered by his playing of Parsifal extracts with Wagner at the film’s close. The combination of Korngold, Harding, and Dieterle should have been something of a winning formula: it had likewise shaped the 1939 Warner Bros. film Juarez, which was based on Harding’s historical novel The Phantom Crown and told the story of Benito Juarez and Maximilian I of Austria. Admittedly, that project was under the overall supervision of Hal. B Wallis rather than Dieterle, and in any case had not been without its problems, but Korngold had good reasons to feel cautiously optimistic about Magic Fire’s chances. Although he later insisted that he had only taken on the project to protect Wagner’s works from an unscrupulous film studio, the prospect of filming on location in Germany must also have appealed. More significantly, though, it offered him a chance to form strong working relationships with European collaborators, including Rudolf Hartmann, the director of Bavarian State Opera, who would direct the opera scenes. As a consequence, perhaps, Korngold’s most famous opera of the 1920s, Die tote Stadt—

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8 Ibid.
9 Although this episode features in the novel, it is presented as the climax of the film, followed swiftly by Wagner’s death. See Harding, Magic Fire, 373.
performances of which had become rather sporadic—was given a full production by the Bavarian State Opera in 1955 with Hans Hopf, who had appeared in Magic Fire, taking on the central role of Paul. Magic Fire also allowed Korngold to forge a strong working relationship with the conductor Alois Melichar. Korngold’s own poor health prevented him from conducting the recording sessions for the film and, as a result, Melichar was brought on board—though Luzi reports that Korngold conducted a single eight-hour recording session with ‘slow not strenuous pieces’.\(^\text{10}\) The strong bond formed between the two, which had already been established through prior correspondence, led to Melichar later conducting a broadcast performance of the composer’s Symphony in F Sharp in Graz in April 1955, one of only three performances of the work in the short remainder of the composer’s lifetime.\(^\text{11}\) It is clear, then, that working on Magic Fire was an opportunity of which Korngold made the most. For all the film’s later problems, Luzi reports that the period working on Magic Fire was a happy one and that ‘Erich said that at least he had a good time at work.’\(^\text{12}\)

The exact extent and duration of Korngold’s role on Magic Fire is relatively difficult to assess since studio documentation is scant and there is little relevant material in the Korngold Collection at the Library of Congress.\(^\text{13}\) A self-penned article, a copy of which resides in the Collection, nonetheless reveals that it was Korngold’s intention to use Wagner’s music without changing the orchestration of any of the lengthy operatic excerpts used—though he was compelled to ‘to transpose some passages into different keys in order to avoid adding “bridges” or modulations.’\(^\text{14}\) The composer also commented that he was forced to ‘insist on livelier tempos than the strict Wagnerian may be used to’ but that he still had ‘a clear conscience’ about his

\(^\text{10}\) ‘Schließlich setzte Erich es sogar durch, daß er eine acht Stunden dauernde Orchestersitzung mit “langsamen, nicht anstrengenden Stücken” selber dirigieren durfte.’ Korngold, Ein Lebensbild, 96.


\(^\text{12}\) ‘Erich meinte, er habe wenigstens während der Arbeit eine schöne Zeit gehabt.’ Korngold, Ein Lebensbild, 100.

\(^\text{13}\) The Republic Pictures Archive at UCLA Special Collections includes only the film’s shooting scripts.

‘initial purpose of using Wagner’s music in its original and undistorted form.’ In addition, though, Korngold opted to use material from chronologically appropriate Wagner operas as musical underscoring, and occasionally to make use of existing leitmotifs where appropriate: thus, when Wagner is banished from Germany, after a passage drawing on the opening of Lohengrin’s Act III Scene 3, we hear Telramund’s music in recognition of the threat to our ‘hero’; and when Wagner reveals his plan for the Richard Wagner Theatre in Munich, Korngold introduces the Walhalla motif from the Ring—a motif that is repeated when Wagner lays the foundation stone of the Festspielhaus itself. Other uses of Wagner’s music as dramatic underscoring include an extract from the Vorspiel to Die Walküre as Wagner approaches the villa bearing news of the Franco-Prussian War: it rather invests his leisurely walk through the trees with greater menace than the image itself would suggest, and reveals Korngold’s understanding of how music can signify quickly in such scenes. Indeed, Cosima’s line when he enters (‘Richard, why are you so excited?’) only really makes sense in the context of the provided music.

Filming took place in Bavaria Studios in Munich, beginning in August 1954, but since the film also included lengthy extracts from the operas and music dramas, the bulk of the music would have been recorded first in Munich by Melichar and the Bavarian State Opera Orchestra and Chorus, and played back for both musicians and actors to allow them to synchronise their performances. Korngold himself made the piano recordings to which the actors playing Wagner, Liszt, and Hans von Bülow would enthusiastically mime. Theatres used for filming performances of the operas and music dramas, which were staged and directed by Hartmann, included not only the Festspielhaus at Bayreuth but also that town’s Markgräfliches Opernhaus, which substituted for Dresden’s Königliches Hoftheater in the sequence showing the first performance of Der fliegende Höllander (Dresden, lying in East Germany, was inaccessible to the production). The Großes Haus of the Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden likewise doubled for

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15 Ibid.
16 George Korngold, Magic Fire liner notes.
17 Korngold, ‘The Music of Wagner in “Magic Fire”’. 
the Salle Le Peletier, the home of the Paris Opera in 1861, when the film recreates the Paris 
version of *Tannhäuser* (Figure 1a). It is supposedly Melichar himself who appears on the rostrum 
in this sequence—though we only see him in an extreme long-shot (Figure 1b). This was not the 
only instance of a real musician appearing in front of the camera, though. In filming a montage 
of scenes from the *Ring* in the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, Korngold was persuaded to take on the 
role of Hans Richter when the actor supposedly hired did not turn up. Dressed in a beard and a 
wig, the composer was given a number of lengthy close-ups, allowing a unique chance to see his 
conducting technique documented on film (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: The Venusberg scene from *Tannhäuser* (a) with Melichar on the rostrum (b)

Figure 2: Korngold as Hans Richter conducting the *Ring* at Bayreuth

A document at the Library of Congress reveals that a staged *Tristan und Isolde* scene was also 
planned, since alongside descriptions of stage designs for Act III of *Höllander*, Act I of 
*Tannhäuser*, Act III of *Meistersinger*, and the various parts of the *Ring* filmed, there was also an 
entry for Act II of *Tristan*, though this is admittedly less detailed than others: ‘A garden with tall 
trees in front of Isolde's room, on one side, with steps leading up to it. Bright and inviting 
summer night. Torch burns at the open door. Flower bank.’ The fact that Joseph Breen of the 
Production Code Administration wrote to Republic Pictures asking them to remove evidence of 
excessive passion in the *Tristan und Isolde* scenes might well suggest, though, that part of Act II

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18 ‘Ein Garten mit hohen Bäumen vor dem Zimmer von Isolde, auf der einen Seite, Stufen führen hinauf. Helle und 
 einladende Sommernacht. Fackel brennt an der offenen Tür. Blumenbank.’ Erich Wolfgang Korngold Collection, 
Library of Congress, Box 10 Folder 6, ‘Typescript synopsis’.
was indeed filmed, but fell foul of the censor.\textsuperscript{19} It was not the only sequence to be excised, as we shall see. After filming finished, Korngold would have completed the remainder of the score to Dieterle’s preferred cut.

**Studio Cuts**

In a typed German-language letter from Charlotte Dieterle to Erich and Luzi (Lucy) dated 1 April 1955, which began by expressing concerns about the health of both addressees and their lack of correspondence, news was reported of continued difficulties with the Wagner film:

> Unfortunately, the Wagner film is still not here, and we really can't imagine what might have held it up again. It's a shame, because a few weeks of the best rental opportunities of the year go by that are hard to catch up.

> I just called Republic and found out that during the demonstration it turned out that only 50\% of the copies are flawless, and that the other 50\% now have to be worked on again. We are all really beside ourselves about it [but] of course we cannot do anything, because if we were to exert any pressure, the laboratory and all employees would have the best excuse if the copy might not then be flawless.\textsuperscript{20}

The letter seems to reveal just how invested in the production Dieterle and Charlotte were.

Concerns about the processing and distribution of the film, though, pale in comparison with the subsequent difficulties surrounding the cuts imposed by the studio. The film as presented by Dieterle was over two-and-a-half hours, and Republic reportedly insisted it should last no longer


\textsuperscript{20} ‘Der Wagner Film ist leider immer noch nicht hier, und wir koennen uns eigentlich nicht recht vorstellen, worum es denn nun wieder gehangen haben mag. Es ist zu schade, denn auf die Weise gehen einige Wochen der besten Verleihmoeglichkeiten des Jahres vorbei, die man kaum wieder aufholen kann. Eben habe ich mit Republic telephoniert und erfahren, dass bei der Vorfuhrung sich herausgestellt hat, dass 50\% der Kopie nur einwandfrei sind, und jetzt an den andern 50\% nun wieder weitergearbeitet werden muss. Wir sind alle recht ausser uns darueber, können natuerlich gar nichts machen, denn wenn wir irgend welchen Druck ausueben wuerden, haette das Laboratorium und alle Mitarbeiter die beste Ausrede, wenn die Kopie womoeglich dann nicht einwandfrei sein sollte.’ Erich Wolfgang Korngold Collection, Library of Congress, Box H Folder 20, ‘1955 / Correspondence / Dieterle, Charlotte’.
than two hours. In response to the demands of distributors, however, that running time was further reduced to ninety-three minutes, necessitating the loss of large stretches of filmed performance.\textsuperscript{21} The result is a film with a complex textual history, to say the least. We know from George Korngold that a 125-minute version of the film was shown at a Royal Command Performance in London in 1955, and extracts from that were later presented in a soundtrack recording.\textsuperscript{22} The film versions that survive today are much shorter, however. A television version bearing the ‘Cinecanal Classics’ logo comes in at just over ninety-four minutes whereas a 2013 DVD release, which attempted to restore lost footage from a German-language version and included extra footage in a ‘deleted scenes’ section (some of which appears in the ‘cinecanal classics’ version anyway) clocked in at 103 minutes.\textsuperscript{23} The textual problems with both these contemporary versions, though, are manifold.

We can explore these issues in the context of one of the few scenes for which Korngold’s original handwritten notes survive.\textsuperscript{24} The scene in question was shot at the Schlosstheater in Schwetzingen, which is presented as the Großherzogliches Hoftheater in Weimar,\textsuperscript{25} and shows a fugitive Wagner sneaking into a Liszt-conducted concert performance that includes extracts from \textit{Lohengrin}. After an initial conversation with a steward who allows Wagner to enter the back of the hall on hearing that he is a ‘Wagner fan’, and after Wagner’s subsequent hurried exit on seeing an armed solider, we see various shots of Wagner in the gallery, of Cosima watching—and fantasising about a staged version of the opera—and of the performers on stage. Both English-language film versions viewable today, though, are rather unsatisfactory with respect to this scene, which stages a performance of Lohengrin’s Act III aria.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} George Korngold, \textit{Magic Fire} liner notes.
\item \textsuperscript{22} The original soundtrack was released on LP in 1983 as STV 81779 by Varese Sarabande and subsequently rereleased on CD in 2007 as a ‘Limited Collector’s Edition of 1000 copies.’
\item \textsuperscript{23} The Cinecanal Classics version is currently available on YouTube with Spanish subtitles.\url{https://youtu.be/Dcaem82Z8zA} (Accessed 4 June 20201). The DVD was released in 2013 published by Filmjuwelen 6414361.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Erich Wolfgang Korngold Collection, Library of Congress, Box 10 Folder 6, ‘Handwritten cue sheet in pencil with markings in red pencil’.
\item \textsuperscript{25} In the English-language version, this is simply presented as a concert at ‘Court Theater Weimar’, though it is still presented in German Fraktur script.
\end{itemize}
‘In fernem Land’. In the English-language track of the 2013 DVD, as Wagner crosses the foyer and talks to the steward, the music begins with ‘Des Ritter’s drum sollt Zweifel ihr nicht hegen’, fifteen bars before Fig. 63 in the score. At the point at which we cut to a view of the stage from the gallery, we have reached six bars before Fig. 63, but the music is forced to jump back to seventeen bars before Fig. 63 in order to synchronise with the footage of the performers and Lohengrin’s singing (see Figure 3). The scene then plays out until its close, the 2nd bar of Fig 63, at which Korngold has brought the music to an end. It is undoubtedly the case that this rather unfortunate musical edit and repetition has been made by the creators of the DVD in attempting to ‘restore’ lost footage and in combining the existing English and German prints. Although the cut in the music and repetition of material already heard is unfortunate, it at least synchronizes picture and sound in showing us Lohengrin singing the music we hear. The same cannot be said for the ‘Cinecanal Classics’ television version (whose audio track is entirely in English), which starts at the same place but is a shorter version of the scene that cuts a number of the shots of Cosima, the audience, and the performers. As such, although it has no need to repeat any of the music and thus preserves its integrity, it is quite obvious that the music is not aligned with the picture: this is most obvious when we see Lohengrin singing. Both these English-language versions are thus unsatisfactory: one from a filmic perspective in abandoning sound and image synchronisation, the other from a musical one in necessitating a clumsy edit and repeat. The version of the music heard on the soundtrack recording, in contrast, gives us an initial glimpse at an alternative slightly longer version of the scene.26 This begins eleven bars earlier than either the surviving English-language film versions at Fig 62+11 (‘selbst wer von ihm in ferne Land’ent sendet’) and might reveal the substance of the 125-minute version of the film, with a longer initial period of dialogue. It accords with the German-language track on the DVD, which suffers from none of the musical cuts and repetitions heard in the English-language track on the same

26 Track 11, which combines the underscoring derived from Act III of Lohengrin with the Lohengrin performance scene.
disc. What the original version in Dieterle’s original English-language cut may have looked like, though, is only revealed by consulting Korngold’s handwritten notes.

Figure 3: Lohengrin singing (a), as imagined by a watching Cosima (b)

Korngold was used to working with cue sheets at Warner Bros. where either a music editor or sometimes Korngold himself would watch an already-edited scene for which post-production music was required, and make notes of the length of certain sections in both elapsed time and in feet and frames. The Magic Fire notes, though, appear to be more in the manner of shooting scripts created prior to filming and to allow the recording of extracts to be planned. In the case of the Lohengrin notes, Korngold wrote in his almost impenetrable hand in a typical mixture of English and German. The notes were then transcribed and typed (though Korngold subsequently corrected the transcription). Although the document is undated, it nevertheless gives us the best opportunity to see what the scene might have looked like in its original version:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Melichar und Thompson</th>
<th>LOHENGRIN</th>
<th>Schwerzingen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Is [sic, ‘as’] Liszt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

52 Dialog
53 Stairway: “alljährlich naht vom Himmel eine Tabue…” etc.
54 Eintritt in die Galerie: “Der Gral und selig reinster Glaube….
Wen nun dem Gral…”
56 Bei “Gral” (Fis Dur) “zu Wiener [corrected in EWK’s hand to dienen] ist erkoren…” Cut zu Bühne:
Sänger, Liszt und Orchester (4 Takte).
und Sänger.

57-61 Cosima und diverse Zuhörer shots, zurück zu Bühne und auch zu
Wagner (Galerie)

Vom Gral, Bei “Gral”; Verwandlung in Lohengrin (Silberrüstung)
bis: “bin Lohengrin genannt.” Nach “gennant”
(Beckenschlag), Rückverwandlung zu Wirklichkeit:
Bühne, Sänger, Liszt, Orch.
It seems that shots 53, 54, and part of 56 along with their music were excised as part of the editing process, since the surviving scene on the DVD jumps from the dialogue in shot 52 to shots of the singers, Liszt and the orchestra, but these shots are not aligned with the music specified in the cue sheet. Only once we reach shot 57 does the version we hear in the German-language track of the DVD align with the above. The cue sheet, then, reveals the scene as planned and possibly filmed to be at least sixteen bars longer than surviving sources—were the music to start with ‘alljährlich naht vom Himmel eine Tabue…’ for the scene on the stairway, which is no longer extant. In all likelihood, though, the scene began earlier than this with more dialogue included. Indeed, it even seems possible that it originally began at the beginning of the aria (‘In fernem Land’) in the fifth bar of Fig. 61, a full thirty-one bars longer than the version heard on the soundtrack album or the German track on the 2013 DVD, and thus containing some forty-two bars of extra material when compared with the English track heard on the 2013 DVD version. It then would have played out without any cuts until a concert ending in the second bar of Fig. 63.

Film and Music Drama as Text

The *Lohengrin* scene thus reveals some of the inherent issues regarding the instability of Magic Fire as Text. The film clearly once existed in English in a two-and-a-half hour cut, a 125-minute cut, and a ninety-three-minute cut, of which we presume only the last survives, but this situation has been further complicated by releases of the film for television and other home entertainment formats, especially when they have attempted to mix footage from the contemporary German-

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27 Erich Wolfgang Korngold Collection, Library of Congress, Box 10 Folder 6 ‘Typescript cue sheet with markings in red pencil’.

28 ‘55’ is missing from both Korngold’s original handwritten version and the typed transcription.
language prints of the film. This would all seem to fly in the face of the popular understanding of
the differences between objects like films and works of art like a Wagnerian music drama. The
former, we might imagine, is a fixed Text that can be endlessly repeated; the latter is an ideal
object, of which we only see individual representations in live or recorded performances. In
many respects, though, film shares more of these ‘performative’ characteristics than we might
imagine, in that an individual film frequently exists in multiple edits with various footage excised
for certain performance circumstances. Even in films that are not troubled by the post-
production difficulties faced by *Magic Fire* such variabilities are common. The concept of the
cinematic roadshow from the 1930s to the 1960s is a prime example of this, where films would
be presented in a particular edit for a limited run—often with added music for entrance,
intermission and exit—before a film went on general release with scenes removed and the extra
music cut. It seems likely that the 125-minute version of *Magic Fire* shown in London was a
roadshow version. Moreover, the release of film in home entertainment formats can result in yet
further variants that unwary spectators might assume to be the only version. At the same time,
we are also confronted by the concept of a Wagnerian music drama that in certain respects aims
for the kind of textual fixedness more commonly associated with cinema, not least in Wagner’s
attempts to specify the nature of its performance. As Gundula Kreuzer notes, Wagner attempted
to control not only the libretto and the music, but also the staging; that he ‘increasingly focused
not just on the presentation but also on the perception of his works, to a point where
everything—gestures, blocking, lighting, design, costumes, scene changes, even acoustics and
architecture—became essential for the *Gesamtkunstwerk’s* desired multisensorial experience.’
Such desired control is, of course, just one aspect of the numerous proto-cinematic
characteristics of Wagner’s work—characteristics that Korngold undoubtedly understood, as is

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evident in his approach to using Wagner’s music in Magic Fire in ways that Hollywood audiences familiar with techniques of orchestral underscoring in Hollywood films of the 1930s and 40s would have recognised. In a scene at Tribschen, for instance, after a tender moment between Wagner and Cosima in which she dedicates her life to him as ‘your friend, your manager, your sweetheart, your inspiration’ and the couple exchange a passionate kiss, we see a figure approaching through the window in the background. Cosima sees him, breaking off the embrace to announce: ‘it’s Father’. This is skilfully aligned by Korngold with a moment of climax and interruption in the Siegfried Idyll (Example 1) that is perfectly congruent with the techniques of Classical Hollywood scoring.

Example 1: Use of the Siegfried Idyll for a scene at Tribschen (extract)

Indeed, this practice of using existing musical works to function as underscoring in film was something at which Korngold was particularly adept—from the use of Liszt’s overtures in his score to the 1935 Warner Bros. film Captain Blood and his own concert overture Sursum Corda in The Adventures of Robin Hood (1938) to the remarkable use of Schubert’s Symphony No. 8 in Deception (1946), the practice of reuse and recycling was a key aspect of Korngold’s film scoring. In that sense, Magic Fire completed the circle for Korngold, since the composer’s first assignment for Hollywood was to arrange Mendelssohn’s music for the 1934 Max Reinhardt version of A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Though it is upon Korngold’s ‘original’ music for film that his reputation as one of the founding fathers of Hollywood scoring rests, arrangement was a key aspect of his work for films. As such, Magic Fire became a fitting final film project for Korngold—one that acknowledges the post-Wagnerian operatic culture in which he had first

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flourished as a composer, and its continued relevance for the models of film scoring of which Korngold was a noted pioneer. That Korngold had no difficulties in seeing the potential for Wagner’s music to work as underscoring reinforces and realises those proto-cinematic qualities that commentators have long-since recognised, and reminds us of Wagner’s continued legacy for mass-entertainment film into the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, that the film has suffered from numerous and particularly protracted textual problems is also a potent reminder that the worlds of opera and film, though demonstrably different in some respects, are not necessarily so far apart in their capacity to present an aesthetic object whose identity is both multi-faceted and open to negotiation. As such, *Magic Fire*—for all its hagiographic tendencies, its poor colour, and its hammy acting—is nonetheless significant for the history of film music, and its complex relationship with the world of both Wagnerian and post-Wagnerian opera.
Cosima: ‘I knew what to expect when I came to you. I knew there was a price to pay, and I’m willing to pay it.’