

# “The Adventures of Robin Hood” (May 11, 1938)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

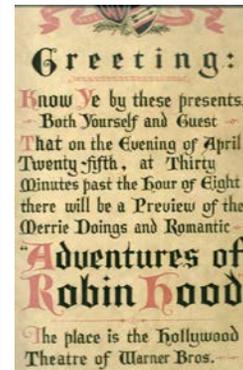
Essay by Brendan G. Carroll (guest post)\*



*Korngold*



*Shellac master*



*Premiere invitation*

Of all the swashbucklers made by Errol Flynn during Hollywood’s Golden Age, “The Adventures of Robin Hood” is perhaps the most beloved and is, undoubtedly, his signature role.

Released by Warner Brothers in 1938, the film was lavishly made in Technicolor and was one of the most successful films of the 1930s. It was also critically acclaimed and a box office sensation grossing almost \$4 million on its first release. It received three Academy Awards—for film editing, art direction and, above all, for its extraordinary and colourful music score, written by Erich Wolfgang Korngold.

The head of the film’s studio, Jack Warner, and the film's producer, Hal B. Wallis, recognised that Korngold’s epic score for the film was a remarkable work and unique plans were made for a special broadcast of substantial excerpts from the score, to be conducted by its composer with story narration by Basil Rathbone, one of the film’s stars.

It was also intended that this broadcast would be issued commercially on gramophone records, as part of the promotion of the film, which would have been a unique accolade for a film score; prior to this, the only film music that had been released commercially on record was that written by Arthur Bliss for the British film of H.G. Wells’ futuristic classic “Things to Come” in 1936, and of that, just two short sequences were recorded.

The decision to use Korngold’s music as a kind of radio trailer for the film underlined the industry-wide practice in those days of using radio as an important tool in film promotion (much as television is used today), though usually the practice was limited to presenting soundtrack excerpts, especially from musicals, or “live” broadcasts from star-studded previews or premieres.

On at least one previous occasion, a film's music score was used to promote a major motion picture and that was three years earlier, for a film also made by Warner Brothers and also involving Korngold.

That was for a special one-hour broadcast in October 1935 to promote the Max Reinhardt production of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," for which Korngold had created a score based on music by Felix Mendelssohn.

This was Korngold's first film assignment, the film that brought him, at Reinhardt's insistence, to Hollywood in the first place. And the special broadcast featured spoken contributions by Jack Warner, Hal B. Wallis, many of the stars of the film and, uniquely, Korngold himself, who also conducted the studio orchestra. Unfortunately, this remarkable broadcast does not survive—but, happily, "The Adventures of Robin Hood" does.

Warner Brothers was actually the only film studio to own its own radio station, KFVB, which had been established as early as 1925. Jack Warner had realized the enormous potential of reaching a vast portion of the movie audience through the new medium of radio, and reaching them directly in their own homes.

Consequently, by 1938, the idea of mounting a special broadcast of Korngold's score for what was the most expensive film in the studio's history up to that time (it cost over \$2 million) was not as radical as might be supposed.

Although Korngold's music for "Robin Hood" is regarded to this day as one of the greatest film scores of all time, he originally refused the assignment, feeling that the film was too action-oriented to suit his particular talents.

He had been summoned from his home in Vienna to write the score in January 1938--a significant date in history. Just a few weeks later, Nazi Germany annexed Austria (the so-called Anschluss) and therefore made it impossible for Korngold (who was a Jew) to return to his home. Under the circumstances, then, Korngold reluctantly began to write the score, on a week-by-week basis, with a clause in his contract that allowed him to stop if he felt it was beyond his abilities. Hal Wallis agreed, knowing only too well that once Korngold started, he would be swept up by the romance of the story and finish the job. And, just seven weeks later, Korngold had produced one of his greatest scores, one that remains an influential benchmark for every adventure film made since.

Of the film's brisk 102 minutes, some 78 minutes are scored. For the 30 minute broadcast, Korngold selected ten sequences all linked by a narrative script read by Basil Rathbone.

The sequences he chose were:

1. "March of the Merry Men" (the main title music of the film, described on air by Rathbone as "The Prologue")

2. "The Banquet at Nottingham Castle"
3. "Robin's Entrance to the Castle"
4. "Robin Meets Little John"
5. "Friar Tuck"
6. "The Attack on the Treasure Wagon"
7. "Feast and Flirtation in Sherwood Forest"
8. "The Gallows and Robin's Escape"
9. "Lady Marian's Heartsong" (and the subsequent love scene between Robin and Marian)
10. Duel and Epilogue—"It is Victory!"

The augmented Warner Brothers Studio Orchestra comprising of 65 players, all of whom had worked long and hard under Korngold's baton recording the score to the finished film the preceding month, were transported in coaches to the newly opened and much expanded studios of KFWB at 5833 Fernwood Avenue in downtown Hollywood, on the afternoon of May 11, 1938. There, they had sound checks and a run-through. The actual broadcast went out "live" that same evening beginning at 7:30pm and was heard, coast-to-coast, via the NBC Blue Network.

Simultaneously, the broadcast was transcribed onto shellac masters as it was transmitted, for the proposed commercial release, but an unfortunate echo marred the introductory announcements. In addition, the fidelity of the music recording was clearly lacking (compared to the vivid soundtrack of the actual film) and it was for these reasons (together with the financial risk involved of issuing film music on records) that, I believe, the plans to release the broadcast commercially were subsequently aborted by the cost-conscious Jack Warner.

However, as a souvenir of the occasion, Warner asked that approximately eight sets of discs be produced from the master for those involved with the production. Of these very rare discs, only three complete sets are known to have survived (one of which is in this author's collection) although individual discs occasionally turn up.

It was from one of these sets (owned by music copyist Albert Glasser), that the heavily edited version released on LP by Delos in 1975 held by the Library of Congress derives. This was subsequently re-released on CD by FACET in 1987.

A complete transfer of the entire unedited broadcast from the original shellacs was included on the two-disc Special Edition DVD of the restored film by Warner Bros. in 2003 and it was also included subsequently on the special Blu-ray edition.

The day after the broadcast, on May 12, "The Adventures of Robin Hood" received a gala black-tie premiere at the Warner Hollywood Theatre before going into general release on May 14.

On February 23, 1939, the Motion Picture Academy held its annual Academy Awards ceremony at the Biltmore Hotel and, to the surprise of no one, esteemed composer

Jerome Kern stepped up to the microphone and presented Erich Wolfgang Korngold with the Academy Award for Best Original Score, the first time that an individual composer was so honoured (prior to this, the award went to the head of the studio music department).

In fact, it was Korngold's impassioned complaint, when his first Oscar for his epic score for the film "Anthony Adverse" in 1937 was given to music chief Leo Forbstein and not to him, that led to a change in the Academy rules!

"The Adventures of Robin Hood" has grown in stature over the years and is now considered one of the greatest classics of Hollywood's Golden Age. The famous broadcast of its score was an important milestone in the wider acceptance of music written for the cinema being considered an important art form in its own right.

It was also the very first time that a film score was heard by millions on radio without its accompanying images.

*Brendan G. Carroll is the biographer of Erich Wolfgang Korngold. His book "The Last Prodigy," widely regarded as the definitive biography of the composer, was published in 1997 by Amadeus Press. It was revised in a German translation in 2013 and published by Boehlau-verlag, Vienna. In 1980, he annotated and prepared the inventory of Korngold's manuscripts before they were donated by the Korngold Family to the Library of Congress.*

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