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Ken Russell: Musical Mythmaker

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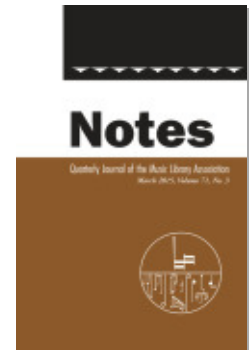
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Michael Adams

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VIDEO REVIEWS

EDITED BY LESLIE ANDERSEN



This semiannual column presents reviews of significant video releases of interest to the field of music and to music libraries, as well as occasionally briefly noting other interesting titles. All genres of music in all video formats will be covered, with a preference given to those in DVD. All Web sites accessed 28 May 2009.

KEN RUSSELL: MUSICAL MYTHMAKER

BY MICHAEL ADAMS

No film director has made as many films about classical music as Britain's Ken Russell. After joining BBC's arts program *Monitor* in 1959, replacing John Schlesinger, who left to make feature films, Russell went on to make groundbreaking, often controversial short films about composers and other musical topics, as well as art and literary topics, before launching a long and even more controversial career in feature films, which includes *Women in Love* (1969), *The Devils* (1971), *Altered States* (1980), *Crimes of Passion* (1984), and *Gothic* (1986). A true auteur he also writes or co-writes most of his films. The DVD release of four early music-related films as part of the six-film *Ken Russell at the BBC* (BBC Video 3000017038 [2008]; DVD) provides an opportunity to witness the development of this distinctive artist. Considering these early efforts more than forty years after they were first televised also sheds new light upon Russell's subsequent work.

Filmmakers, especially in Hollywood, have always been fascinated by the romance of classical music composers. But until Russell came along, these biopics were too worshipful, often whitewashing their subjects, as with such examples as *The Great Waltz* (1938), with Fernand Gravey as Johann Strauss; *A Song to Remember* (1945), with Cornel Wilde as Frédéric Chopin and Merle Oberon as George Sand; *Song of Love* (1947), with Paul Henreid and Katharine Hepburn as Robert and Clara Schumann, and Robert Walker as Johannes Brahms; and *Song without End* (1960), with Dirk Bogarde as Franz Liszt. Anyone familiar with the subjects, these performers, and the lavish production values of the time can imagine almost blow-by-blow accounts of the films without seeing them, though Wilde actually looks more like Beethoven. Some European efforts, as with Abel Gance's *Un grand amour de Beethoven* (1937), while romanticized, were at least less predictable.

Taking slow steps at first and tackling subjects about whom he had passionate interests, Russell broke away from this reverential, gauzy approach with a vengeance, offering warts-and-all portraits, though some have complained he has provided too many warts. In *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography*, John C. Tibbetts does not exaggerate when he claims that Russell made the first adult musical biopics.¹ According to Joseph Horowitz, “only Stanley Kubrick, among major contemporary filmmakers, treats music with something like the respect and understanding Russell accords it.”² Russell’s contributions are significant because over the past half century he has given thousands of viewers their first exposure to Debussy, Delius, Elgar, Liszt, Mahler, Tchaikovsky, and others. It is also interesting to contemplate the similarities between his treatments of these composers and his occasional forays into popular music.

The BBC hired Russell on the basis of three amateur films he made while working as a photojournalist—one of which used a score by Benjamin Britten. His first significant BBC film about a musician was the forty-five-minute *Prokofiev: Portrait of a Soviet Composer* (1961). Other music-related television films, ranging from fifteen minutes to an hour, not included in *Ken Russell at the BBC* are *Variations on a Mechanical Theme* (1959), about musical instruments; *Guitar Craze* (1959), about folk musician Davy Graham; *Gordon Jacob* (1959); *Marie Rambert Remembers* (1960), about the ballet star; *The Miners’ Picnic* (1960), about brass bands; *Cranko at Work* (1960), about choreographer John Cranko; *The Light Fantastic* (1960), a look at dance in England; *Lotte Lenya Sings Kurt Weill* (1962); *Bartok* (1964); *Don’t Shoot the Composer* (1966), about film composer Georges Delerue; *The Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), about Richard Strauss; *The Planets* (1983), a look at the solar system inspired by Gustav Holst; *Portrait of a Composer: Ralph Vaughan Williams* (1986); *Ken Russell’s ABC of British Music* (1988); *Méphistophélès* (1989), the Arrigo Boito work by the Geneose Opera; *The Strange Affliction of Anton Bruckner* (1990); *The Secret Life of Arnold Bax* (1992), with Russell himself as the composer; *The Mystery of Dr. Martinu* (1993), about Bohuslav Martinů; *Classic Widows* (1995), about the wives of Benjamin Frankel, Humphrey Searle, Bernard George Stevens, and William Walton; and *Elgar: Fantasy of a Composer on a Bicycle* (2002), as well as the video *Sarah Brightman: Diva* (2006). While *Don’t Shoot the Composer* is not available on DVD, excerpts appear in *Music for the Movies: Georges Delerue* (1994).

1. John C. Tibbetts, *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2005), 188.

2. Joseph Horowitz, *The Post-Classical Predicament* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 23.

Elgar

Elgar: Portrait of a Composer (1962) is arguably Russell's most significant BBC film because its success led to greater freedom for the director and eventually to feature films. It is also notable for how the young filmmaker overcame the limitations imposed upon him. *Monitor* host Huw Wheldon wanted his arts films to be documentaries rather than dramas and would not allow Russell to use speaking actors. The five actors playing the composer are presented as vague figures appearing in what could have been newsreel footage, with Wheldon supplying a rather dry narration explaining the significance of the images. Yet the images are so striking, emphasizing the beauty of the composer's native Malvern Hills, that they overcome the relative banality of the commentary. A scene of Elgar bicycling over the hills in sync with the *Introduction and Allegro for Strings* captured the public imagination such that, according to Russell, the images were to appear on many album covers.³ Wheldon failed to recognize the vitality of such shots, objecting to the inclusion of too many "childish images."⁴

Elgar: Portrait of a Composer follows Elgar from his learning music from the books and instruments lying about his father's music shop to his marriage to one of his piano students and her efforts to help him become a great composer to his success following many years of obscurity, after Hans Richer and other Germans became the first to recognize his genius. Elgar is presented as understandably upset when *Pomp and Circumstance* becomes associated with World War I and anti-German feelings. The film builds slowly to the creation of the *Enigma Variations*, whose "Nimrod" theme is heard throughout the film, and the resulting long-delayed acclaim from Elgar's home country.

Russell expertly blends beautiful black-and-white images, shot by cinematographer Ken Higgins—soon to gain acclaim for his work on such films as *Darling* (1965) and *Georgy Girl* (1966)—of an idyllic rural England with photographs and stock footage of Elgar and his times. *Elgar: Portrait of a Composer* would serve as a template for Russell's subsequent television films, alternating broad and subtle strokes to elicit an understanding of the artist, his art, and his times. Russell's feature films, alas, would too often be less subtle. The film ends sadly with the Elgar of the late 1920s perceived as the relic of a passé romantic era.

In his autobiography, Russell claims that Elgar's work had fallen out of fashion until his film reignited interest, resulting in more recordings becoming available and the composer's ascension to being acclaimed as

3. Ken Russell, *Altered States: The Autobiography of Ken Russell* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 25.

4. *Ibid.*, 25–26.

one of England's greatest. The film, according to the director, was selected in a poll of viewers as Britain's favorite television program of the 1960s.⁵ Tibbetts considered it "still the greatest of all composer films."⁶ Russell blends facts with imaginative flights of fancy in ways never seen before in musical documentaries.

Debussy

The Debussy Film (1965) finds Russell trying to stretch himself considerably and mostly succeeding. Not content to repeat a standard biography, Russell switches back and forth between the seminal events in the composer's life and a film being made about him, with characters played by the same actors in both narratives having parallel yet different relationships with each other, while Debussy's music plays constantly. Russell and co-writer Melvyn Bragg, his frequent collaborator, anticipate the similar blending of filmmakers and period characters by director Karel Reisz and screenwriter Harold Pinter in their 1981 adaptation of John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.

As he often does, Russell aims for jarring effects at the very beginning of *The Debussy Film*, opening it in the present with arrows being shot at an attractive blonde, offering a mod counterpoint to *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien*. Soon afterward, several blondes are sunning in bikinis. What is going on, the viewer asks? What does this have to do with a French composer who had been dead almost fifty years before the time of the film? Such disorientation is typical of Russell's *infant terrible* persona, his eagerness not to be boring, and his insistence, whether rightly or wrongly, of always making a "Ken Russell Film," in which his vision sometimes threatens to overpower the art of his subjects.

The director (Vladek Sheybal) of the film within *The Debussy Film* explains that he is not shooting in France because double the crew would be required. One of the most striking qualities of Russell's BBC films is that each was shot entirely in England though the settings range from France to Russia to the United States. Working with limited resources seemed to spur the director toward greater creativity.

As a film about making a film, *The Debussy Film* is especially self-conscious about cinematic technique. Tibbetts calls it Russell's equivalent of Federico Fellini's *8 1/2* (1963).⁷ Silent films were prevalent during the final two decades of Debussy's life, so Russell employs the sped-up images familiar to viewers of his time from having seen silent films projected at the wrong speeds. More importantly, Russell exhibits

5. Ibid., 27.

6. Tibbetts, xii.

7. Ibid., 168.

his debt to the foreign films of the previous decade, a rich period of innovation. There are visual allusions to François Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962), also a major influence on *Isadora Duncan: The Biggest Dancer in the World* (1966), as well as mise en scène reminiscent of the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Luis Buñuel, Jean Cocteau, and Jean Renoir.

Striking images in *The Debussy Film* include the composer's lover, Gaby Dupont (Annette Robinson) playing with a balloon in a forest while Debussy reclines in a hammock and smokes a cigar, all while "Clair de lune" plays in the background. Russell tries to coordinate the movement of the balloon to the tempo of the music.

Many of the actors play dual roles. Oliver Reed is both Debussy and the actor playing the composer. Sheybal is the director of the film within the film as well as Debussy's friend and collaborator, Pierre Louis, who wrote erotic verse under the name Pierre Louÿs. Russell's artists are surrounded by lovers, would-be lovers, and friends who tempt them into excess, though Russell refrains from demonstrating directly the poet's influence on Debussy.

When the director tells the actor that ninety percent of Debussy's music was influenced by art or literature or other musical forms, such as the jig, the actor responds, "What did he do for kicks?" The director replies, "It's all in his music." This view of Debussy is clearly that of Russell toward all his subjects. The only things of interest about their lives are what was fodder for their art. Without the art, the lives are mundane. Hanky panky is merely hanky panky unless it has a creative outlet. The older Russell would stray a bit at times from this viewpoint.

The art of the past remains fresh through being reinterpreted. Having the actors dance the twist to Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* might seem trite and mocking, but such, according to Russell, is what keeps art alive. On the other hand, following dancing to the Kinks' "You Really Got Me" during a swinging London party, the actor asks, "Does anybody want to shake to Debussy?" When no one does, he begins stripping to the music. The actor's apparently aimless life has a parallel to the composer's when Debussy marries the wrong woman (Penny Service) and abandons her, leading her to suicide. In some instances, Russell seems merely to be striving for a surrealistic effect, as he does again when the actors play bumper cars, a foreshadowing of a similar scene in *Tommy*.

The turbulence of Debussy's private life, his inability to find peace through his music, is presented as a cause of his infatuation with Edgar Allan Poe, two of whose works, "The Devil in the Belfry" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," the composer attempted to adapt as operas, never completing either. As with most of Russell's subjects, Debussy, who declares, "I am Roderick Usher," emerges as a romantic unable to reconcile his life and his art.

Isadora Duncan

Shortly after deciding to make *Isadora Duncan: The Biggest Dancer in the World*, Russell discovered that director Karel Reisz was planning a big-screen biography of the dancer, ironically co-written by Russell's frequent collaborator Melvyn Bragg, but he convinced the BBC to go ahead with the project. Russell's interpretation of Duncan is much more modest than that in *Isadora* (1968), yet while Reisz's film is held together by a luminous performance by Vanessa Redgrave, it is generally plodding and flat. Russell's attempt is nothing if not energetic.

Best known as the preoccupied mother of Bud Cort's suicidal character in *Harold and Maude* (1971), Vivian Pickles at first seems an odd choice to play the revolutionary dancer, lacking Redgrave's beauty and grace, but as Russell points out in the extras, Pickles did have a dancing background and Duncan herself was more charismatic than glamorous. Whether the real Isadora had Pickles' braying voice is another matter. Regardless, *Isadora Duncan: The Biggest Dancer in the World* is one of Russell's most entertaining and informative films, easily the most energetic of his BBC music films.

Russell begins with an homage to *Citizen Kane* (1941) through a newsreel of the highlights of Duncan's controversial life, though no newsreel would include footage of the nude dancer scandalizing Boston. The director then shifts to Sewell Stokes, a British journalist who became friends with Duncan toward the end of her life and wrote a memoir, *Isadora: An Intimate Portrait* (1928). Stokes, who receives co-writer credit on the film, appears occasionally to comment, but Russell keeps these interruptions to a minimum. According to Stokes, Duncan, by introducing a new, freer form of dancing to American and European audiences, helped lead the way to an unfettered approach to the arts in the early decades of the twentieth century.

While Russell occasionally struggles to keep a balance between the public and private lives of his subject, Duncan, despite her many love affairs, is more devoted to her art than to her lovers, allowing dancing to interfere with her romances rather than the opposite. Telling the wealthy Paris Singer (Peter Bowles) she will dance all night, she proceeds to do so, while he watches until he falls asleep. The Duncan-Singer relationship also echoes that of Orson Welles's Charles Foster Kane and Susan Alexander Kane, the would-be opera singer. The way Russell shows the drowning deaths of Duncan's two children with Singer is clearly influenced by *Jules and Jim*.

The film has a madcap pace, following Duncan from lover to lover, cause to cause, as she is alternately acclaimed and rejected by audiences,

falling into alcohol and drug abuse, reduced to dancing drunkenly in a brothel for a time, embracing communism only to find poverty and disappointment in the Soviet Union. Russell uses a wide array of music not just to accompany Duncan's performances but to underscore her ever-changing moods: Satie, Wagner, John Philip Sousa, Noel Coward, "Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie," "Bye, Bye, Blackbird."

Highlights of *Isadora Duncan: The Biggest Dancer in the World* include a montage of aphorisms in which the dancer tries to define her allusive, seemingly uncontrolled art and a scene in which a suitcase of love letters, which she always insists upon having with her, becomes scattered in a frosty Russian forest, beautifully photographed by Dick Bush and Brian Tufano. The film ends with a coda following Duncan's death, as she runs, to the accompaniment of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy," down a hillside with the hundreds of students she has had over the years. In an extra, Russell discusses the difficulty of choreographing five-hundred young girls and shooting the footage at six times the normal speed to create the impression that the dancers were floating down the hill.

Russell's much-shorter film provides a more complete vision of Duncan's importance than does Reisz's more somber treatment. More perhaps than anywhere else, Russell seems to be saying that what matters most is his subject's devotion to her art rather than her life as a whole, as interesting as that is. The director clearly identifies strongly with this woman willing to try anything to discover and advance her art. Tony Palmer, future director of *Wagner* (1983) and many other biographical films about composers, served as Russell assistant here and clearly learned considerably from the master.

Delius

Song of Summer (1968) is perhaps the most straightforward and dramatically effective, not only of Russell's television films, but of his musical films overall. Russell tells the story of the last days of Frederick Delius (Max Adrian) from the point of view of Eric Fenby (Christopher Gable), a young Yorkshire pianist who volunteers to help the blind, wheelchair-bound composer complete his unfinished pieces at his home in Grez-sur-Loing, France. Delius hires Fenby even though his primary experience is playing the organ to accompany silent films. Fenby, who narrates the film, says hearing Delius's music on the radio by chance changed his life, just as Russell has said the same about Tchaikovsky. As Tibbetts has noted, Fenby may be the closest Russell comes to presenting an autobiographical character in his musical films.⁸

8. *Ibid.*, 174.

At first rather tentative and insecure, Fenby slowly begins to exert his personality, often daring to disagree with the always irascible, frequently irritable Delius. “English music?” says Delius. “Did you say English music? I’ve never heard that.” Russell’s Delius is conflicted because he has no national identity, unable to consider himself English, German, American (having lived in Florida), or French, despite having spent years in the French countryside, though Adrian puts a decidedly Germanic spin on the character. Delius considers Beethoven, Bruckner, and Mahler composers of bad music crammed with filler, unlike the music of nature to which he aspires. Russell demonstrates the contradictory side of the artistic process by having such a curmudgeon create beautiful music, especially the title piece, finished with the help of Fenby, presented as the essence of the composer’s aspirations.

Adapting Fenby’s *Delius as I Knew Him* (1936) and giving his source co-writer credit, Russell conveys better here than anyway the combination of inspiration and hard work going into the creative process. Never becoming sentimental, the filmmaker shows the respect and affection the two men develop, as well as Fenby’s admiration for the much-put-upon Jelka Delius (Maureen Pryor), who is completely devoted to her husband. Russell reveals character through such quiet scenes as the devoted Fenby, who spent five years with the composer, and Jelka reading to Delius, who delights in hearing Mark Twain over and over, and the composer listening to popular music, such as a recording of “Old Man River,” reminding him of how he was inspired to express himself in music after hearing blacks singing during his Florida days.

Adrian and Gable appear in several Russell films but do easily their best work here. Adrian makes Delius a tortured genius without reducing the composer to sentimental clichés. Gable, once a ballet dancer, is sometimes unsure of himself as an actor, a quality that actually aids in conveying Fenby’s uncertainties. It also helps that he can play the piano.

When Fenby seeks solace in his faith, visiting a nearby church only to find the priest (Russell himself) rolling around on a pew with a female parishioner, Gable gives a perfect reading of the young man’s bitter request for confession. Fenby will keep the faith even while those around him are not all they should be. “English music,” says Delius, “will never be any good until they get rid of Jesus.” Gable also ably shows Fenby’s shock when he finally learns Delius’s infirmities are the result of syphilis, a betrayal not only of the devotion of Jelka, who gives up her painting career to look after him, but of the artist’s responsibility to his art and his public, represented by Fenby. (Delius’s niece tried to prevent the broadcast of the film because of the inclusion of syphilis.)⁹

9. *Ibid.*, 170.

Highlights of *Song of Summer*, at seventy-four minutes the longest of the BBC musical biographies, include brief appearances by Delius's friend Percy Grainger (David Collings), another of Russell's favorite composers, whose eccentricities to which he hoped to devote a film. Collings portrays Grainger as a mischievous imp, seemingly dropping from the sky for his first appearance. Grainger and Fenby go for a jog, with the younger man struggling to keep up.

Grainger is prominent in the film's best scene, as Delius recalls how, just before he lost his sight completely, Grainger, Jelka, and a servant carried him in a chair to a mountaintop in Norway, where he then lived, so that he could experience one last time a sunset in all its glory. Russell's composers are always turning their experiences into art, but Delius struggles more inwardly to create, searching for memories of such experiences and the emotions they elicit. The pacing and composition of the Norwegian ascent, beautifully photographed by frequent collaborator Dick Bush, is one of the most magical moments in Russell's oeuvre. It is fitting that the best scene is set in Scandinavia, for *Song of Summer* has an austerity worthy of Ingmar Bergman compared with most of Russell's other work.

Other BBC Films

Dance of the Seven Veils (1970), Russell's controversial portrait of Richard Strauss and his first television film in color, is not included in *Ken Russell at the BBC*, despite some publicity saying otherwise, because the composer's family has had it banned until copyright on the music expires in 2019.¹⁰ In linking Strauss to the Nazis, Russell complained that he was merely trying to widen the composer's audience.¹¹

As for the two non-musical films in *Ken Russell at the BBC*, music plays only a small role in *Always on Sunday* (1965), Russell's portrait of Henri Rousseau, played by painter James Lloyd, subject of a 1963 Russell film. Because his paintings are not selling, Rousseau is reduced to playing his violin on a bridge, earning coins from passersby. There is also a scene of Rousseau's students playing, badly, in an amateur band. Throughout Russell's career, the arts merrily intermingle and cross pollinate. The main carryover from Russell's other television work of the period is his use of a restrained Oliver Reed as narrator. One of Russell's very best films, *Dante's Inferno* (1967), an examination of the fevered life of Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Oliver Reed), perfectly captures the inventiveness and contradictions within the Pre-Raphaelite movement. The film's musical moments of note include an automaton playing the zither and an

10. Roger Lewis, "From Sublime to Just Stupid," [London] *Mail on Sunday*, August 17, 2008, 10.

11. Ken Russell, "Sex, Drugs and Symphonies," *The Times*, April 6, 2007, 17.

anachronistic “There’s No Business Like Show Business” featuring a calliope.

Extras

Russell at Work is a short television documentary about the director made after his first BBC successes. Russell talks about playing the music of his subjects over and over before beginning filming and playing it on his sets to create the appropriate moods. He explains how he uses music to work against itself, as with optimistic music for negative images in *Elgar: Portrait of a Composer*. Russell goes into detail about the process of dubbing the music for *Isadora Duncan: The Biggest Dancer in the World* and editing the film.

In *Ken Russell in Conversation*, recorded in February 2008, Russell, relaxing on a park bench, discusses his ten years with *Monitor* and its successor, *Omnibus*, as footage of the young, already rotund Ken, somewhat resembling Orson Welles, is displayed. Russell talks about choosing Prokofiev as the subject of his first longer *Monitor* film, being allowed to use actors for the first time in *The Debussy Film*, and employing long shots to mask the identities of the actors impersonating Elgar. Russell, who grew up in Eastbourne on the Hampshire coast, identifies with Debussy because of their shared love of the sea. The director considers *La Mer* the masterpiece of the composer whose honeymoon took place in Eastbourne. Russell talks about casting his films with actors unfamiliar to British television viewers, choosing Pickles because she had some dancing background. He discusses writing several Delius scripts before being satisfied and recalls how Fenby, after first declining to visit the set, lurked in a dark corner crying at the sight of his younger self talking with the composer. Russell is proud to call himself “a traveling preacher” because so many people have told him he has changed their lives with his films by introducing them to the arts.

Any fan of beautiful black-and-white cinematography should rejoice in *Ken Russell at the BBC*, for the films have been lovingly transferred to DVD. There are crisp images throughout, especially in *Song of Summer*. The series, as well as the feature films to come, also demonstrate an undervalued Russell talent: his ability to elicit almost uniformly excellent performances. The BBC films showcase a stock company in the making with many actors appearing in several of these films as well as in later features, most notably Reed, Sheybal, Gable, Adrian, and Izabella Teller. Reed can be seen in these films serving almost as Russell’s alter ego, an id on the rampage, heading valiantly toward possible disaster, willing to risk oblivion for art.

Tchaikovsky

The Music Lovers (MGM/UA Home Video M202331 [1991]; VHS), the director's first foray into musical biography on the big screen, is touted in the opening credits as "Ken Russell's Film on Tchaikovsky," ostensibly to distinguish it from a recent Russian film about Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky, but also making certain that viewers will understand the film is a highly personal interpretation of the composer. *The Music Lovers* emphasizes not how Tchaikovsky's homosexuality informs his art, but how his music, according to Russell and screenwriter Melvyn Bragg, offers a respite from his discomfort with his sexual orientation, his desperate longing to fit into and be approved of by Russian society, and his fear of women—with the notable exception of his sister, Sasha (Sabina Maydelle). The filmmakers never quite make a convincing case that their quivering mass of insecurities (ably played by Richard Chamberlain) can find time to concentrate on composing. The film gives equal time to how Tchaikovsky's refusal to consummate his marriage to Antonina ("Nina") Milyukova (Glenda Jackson) drives poor Nina mad, giving Jackson a chance to revisit her *Marat/Sade* (1967) days.

Russell's film is at times hysterical, never more so than when the Tchaikovskys become intoxicated in a railway carriage in hopes of finally having sex. As Nina removes all her clothing and begins writhing on the floor, her motions in sync with the train's side-to-side swaying, while Peter cringes in terror at the sight of her quivering flesh, the viewer is likely to admire Jackson's confidence in her director, her willingness to risk appearing ridiculous, while joining Tchaikovsky in turning away from the sight as the scene goes on and on. Perhaps never has a director made a naked body seem so unappealing. The memory of this image is more likely to stay with viewers than anything conveyed about Tchaikovsky's artistry.

Though Tchaikovsky's music is dismissed by Nicholas Rubinstein (Max Adrian) as "woman's stuff," the selections, ranging from the B-Flat Minor Piano Concerto to the *1812 Overture*, suggest a conflict between the composer's feminine and masculine sides. By presenting Tchaikovsky's sometime lover, Count Anton Chilovsky (Christopher Gable), as a mincing villain who betrays the composer by revealing his decadent ways to his adoring patron, Madame Nadedja von Meck (Izabella Telezynska), *The Music Lovers* might be charged with presenting homosexuality unsympathetically.

In *Directing Film: The Director's Art from Script to Cutting Room*, Russell points out that Tchaikovsky's Manfred Symphony was inspired by the

Byron poem about the poet's obsession with his sister, paralleling the composer's feelings for Sasha.¹² (Russell would later explore Byron's incestuous feelings in *Gothic*.) Russell's use of the Manfred Symphony during Nina's wild attempt at seduction underscores his hero's confusion about women. The performance by the London Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Andre Previn, of excerpts from *Eugene Onegin*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and other major works is one of the film's highlights.

The best scene in *The Music Lovers* is its first. As Tchaikovsky plays the B-Flat Minor Piano Concerto at Rubinstein's music school, Russell depicts the varying responses of Nina, Sasha, von Meck, and Chiluvsky, each evoking romantic fantasies, and economically demonstrates how the composer can seem to have multiple identities. The irony of *The Music Lovers* lies in his inability to locate such a fantasy for himself.

The Boy Friend

Begun as a half-joking effort to turn his friend, Twiggy, the 1960s supermodel, into an actress, Russell's 1971 adaptation of Sandy Wilson's 1953 musical *The Boy Friend* (MGM/UA Home Video M200306 [1990]; VHS) is alternately a sweet and sour experience. Wilson's stage production, which introduced Julie Andrews to American audiences in 1954, is a loving, nostalgic pastiche of 1920s musicals, while Russell's version pays homage to American film musicals of the 1930s, especially those, such as *42nd Street* (1933), choreographed by Busby Berkeley. While the original is a straightforward musical, Russell's *The Boy Friend* alternates between the singing and dancing onstage and the backstage lives of the performers.

The play within the film is a third-rate Portsmouth production of Max Mandeville (Max Adrian), who longs for the much brighter lights of London's West End. When his star (Glenda Jackson) breaks her foot, a completely unprepared understudy, Polly Browne (Twiggy), must take over. To his horror, Max discovers that a famous film director De Thrill (Vladek Sheybal) is in the audience. Russell presents both the clumsy efforts witnessed by De Thrill and the much more polished numbers imagined by the performers. In the latter songs, as Russell pays tribute to such films as *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), a sense of joy at the glories of the musical is conveyed, especially during "I Could Be Happy with You," when Polly and Tony Brockhurst (Christopher Gable) dance in elegant evening clothes on a giant turntable, and the "Sur le Page" and "Won't You Charleston with Me" duets between Tommy (Tommy Tune) and Maisie (Antonia Ellis).

12. Ken Russell, *Directing Film: The Filmmaker's Art from Script to Cutting Room* (Washington: Brassey's, 2001), 32.

In keeping with the often cynical tone of 1970s cinema, the backstage lives of the performers are rather tawdry, with pettiness, bitchiness, and delusions of grandeur on the rampage. Russell attempts to convey the disparity between the onstage and offstage lives of performers. Twiggy is likable if limited at acting, dancing, and singing, and Tune receives his best film showcase for his inimitable dancing talents. Shirley Russell's costumes, Tony Walton's production design, and David Watkin's cinematography help to make *The Boy Friend* worth a viewer's time, even if the film is constantly at odds with itself.

Russell may have adopted this backstage approach to *The Boy Friend* because of similarities between Wilson's musical and his first feature film, *French Dressing* (1964), a seaside farce co-written by songwriters Ronald Cass and Peter Myers, responsible for popular West End revues following World War II, with a score by Georges Delerue. The most obscure of Russell's features, *French Dressing* was merely a learning experience, according to the director.

Mahler

While the 1974 film *Mahler* (Public Media Home Vision 2997HVC98 [1998]; VHS) shares some of the characteristics of *The Music Lovers*, it is in many ways a more sympathetic and unified treatment of the composer that Russell has identified as his favorite.¹³ Because Mahler had a less dramatic life than Tchaikovsky, the screenwriter-director concentrates more on his subject's music. The film takes place during the composer's final train trip back home to Vienna, with Russell cutting from 1911 to earlier events that explain Mahler's character and music. This structure is similar to that of other biographical films but has a more elegant clarity than usual.

Mahler has one of Russell's strongest openings, as a small hut beside a lake, later revealed as the workplace of Gustav Mahler (Robert Powell), bursts into flames. Then a body on a rocky beach emerges slowly from its chrysalis to begin crawling toward a large rock chiseled to resemble the composer. This dream is only the first for Russell's Mahler. Tormented by being persecuted as a Jew and by the possibility of the infidelity of his wife, Alma (Georgina Hale), Mahler imagines, to the accompaniment of the Fifth Symphony, being cremated alive by Alma and Max (Richard Morant), her apparent lover. (This casting eliminates the twenty-year age difference between the Mahlers since Hale is a year older than Powell.) This scene is one of several involving Nazi images, though

13. Russell, *Altered States*, 165.

Russell's liberties with time succeed much better than they later would in *Lisztomania* (1975).

The major fantasy sequence, and one of the most notable and effective of the many in Russell's films, involves Mahler winning the favor of Cosima Wagner (Antonia Ellis), the most powerful force in Austrian and German music, by converting to Catholicism. The process is presented as "The Convert," a silent film with music and intertitles, as Cosima, with helmet, whip, and swastika on her leather miniskirt, has Mahler take a sledgehammer to a giant Star of David, smashing it into a sword which he takes into a cave to destroy the old gods. He returns with a pig's head, which he eats before singing with Cosima about his conversion to the tune of her late husband's *Ride of the Valkyries*.

There are flashbacks to the composer's discovery of music as a boy (Gary Rich), his strained relationship with his hot-headed father (Lee Montague), and his introduction to the joys of nature, perhaps the most significant influence on his music, by a kindly peasant (Ronald Pickup). One of the film's loveliest scenes, set to the Third Symphony played by the Concertgebouw Orchestra, conducted by Bernard Haitink, involves the young Gustav's encounter with a white stallion in a forest, as Russell merges nature, power, freedom, and sexual energy into vivid images, beautifully photographed by Dick Bush.

Mahler's personal life is more of a disruptive force than an inspiration, as he suspects Alma of infidelity and fears losing his creativity through infirmity, while she resents his refusal even to look at her compositions. When Mahler tells her about his dream, "You were a living creature struggling to be born," Alma replies, "At last, you've noticed." In a touching scene, Alma is shown burying her scores, her true identity, in a forest. She resents only being his shadow, and, despite his neglect, he is afraid of losing her. *Mahler* has obvious parallels with *The Music Lovers* but, despite the fantasy sequences, is a calmer examination of a flawed marriage.

Mahler is tired of people who tell him what his music means, insisting that his art is nonverbal. Tormented by visions of heaven and hell, he is a true soul in torment. Of Russell's heroes, Mahler perhaps most resembles Rossetti, finding solace only in his art but unable to do anything about the chaos raging in his mind and heart. An expert at suffering, having starred in an excellent television production of *Jude the Obscure* (1971), Powell as Mahler gives a riveting performance. His anguish would continue in Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977).

Mahler ends on an unusually positive, even sentimental, note for Russell with the composer declaring his expression of his love for Alma in his music, notably the Sixth Symphony. "As long as my music lasts, our

love will last” would not be out of place in a florid Hollywood biopic. The film concludes with Mahler, who will die soon afterward, telling his doctor (George Coulouris) he will live forever, a statement more poignant than ironic. In the view of Russell, the old art worshiper, he is, of course, right. Out of context the fantasy sequences in *Mahler* might seem a bit much, but they succeed much better than many of those in Russell’s other films, unifying the film’s themes and providing visual splendor.

Tommy

Tommy is perhaps most notable as one of many precursors to the music video genre. Russell, at the peak of his excessive period, struggles to find visual equivalents to the Who’s music, while constructing a narrative to link the fifteen songs from the original rock opera. The three most notable scenes offer some of the musical and visual energy associated with music videos, as well as what some might term their weaknesses. One is “Pinball Wizard,” sung by Elton John while Tommy (Roger Daltrey) plays pinball on a stage before a screaming horde of fans. The enormous platform shoes worn by John are typical of Russell’s penchant for excess while poking fun at the rock star fashions of the mid-1970s. Tina Turner’s “Acid Queen,” arguably the best performance in the film, includes considerable camera movement to follow the singer’s perambulations, another staple of music videos. During “Acid Queen,” Tommy is encased in a huge, gleaming silver sarcophagus, an echo of the robot in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), and shot through with syringes, a blending of rock and science fiction also frequently found in music videos.

Most outrageous of all is “Champagne,” performed by Ann-Margret. After watching a television appearance by her son, Nora Walker throws a champagne glass through the television screen, unleashing an avalanche of the products she has just seen advertised, including the suds from a washing detergent, canned beans, and chocolate. (Russell once made such commercials.) She rolls around in the resulting goop with erotic abandon as Russell, at his most blatant, tries to show how the media, advertising, consumerism, and sex converge, leaving a messy residue behind. Such sophomoric surrealism passing as social commentary is, alas, another feature of music videos.

Although *Tommy* may point toward the future as a music-video ancestor, it is a film very much of its time. Russell has his camera zooming toward and away from the actors frequently, a long-dead technique overused by American, British, and continental filmmakers during the 1970s. While Russell’s visual style is fairly consistent throughout his career, with most scenes arranged in medium and long shots, he overuses the close-up here, making Tommy’s blank gaze too repetitive, Oliver

Reed's sweaty surliness even more of a clichéd villainy, and Ann-Margret's sultriness too tawdry. Directors are often said to be making love to their performers with their cameras; Russell's approach borders on rape. Nevertheless, this effect seemed to work at the time, earning Ann-Margret an Oscar nomination and a Golden Globe.

Other Russell touches in *Tommy* include, during a scene of the London Blitz, women running through the streets in their undergarments wearing gas masks. Similarly, Nora takes Tommy for a possible miracle cure to a church where Marilyn Monroe is worshipped. Russell also evokes his frequent water imagery, having Tommy reborn by plunging into a stream and emerging in a waterfall. The ending of *Tommy* is also a signature Russell scene, with the hero ascending a small mountain to glory in a sunset, recalling Delius in *Song of Summer*.

Russell throws himself completely into *Tommy* as yet another of his portraits of misunderstood, abused artists. Tommy's fans turn against and attack him, killing his mother and step-father. Given the abuse heaped upon all of Russell's films since *Women in Love*, the director may have seen the film as an opportunity for a self-portrait, presenting himself as determined to survive and prosper.

Lisztomania

Russell followed *Tommy* with his most reviled film and the one which best summarizes his talent for extremes, for doing whatever pops into his head without considering how appropriate it might be as art or entertainment. Nothing about *Lisztomania* (Warner Home Video 11117 [1989]; VHS) works. The American distributor, Warner Bros., showed some candor by proclaiming in the film's trailer, "You won't understand it, but you'll love every minute of it!"¹⁴

While Russell's other musical biographies are faithful to the general details of his subjects' lives and to their art, *Lisztomania* blends the more sensational events from Liszt's life and career into an uneasy amalgam of a *Tommy*-esque rock opera. Liszt was popular in his time as both composer and performer, so Russell, also the screenwriter, makes him a bare-chested pop pianist (Roger Daltrey) adored by screaming female fans. Russell says he sold this premise, following the success of *Tommy*, as being about someone who was the Elton John of his day, though the audience response is more in line with reactions to the Beatles, as well as to Frank Sinatra in his prime. The filmmaker uses this concept as an excuse to try anything, whether it is Liszt kissing the naked breasts of Marie d'Agoult

14. Tibbetts, 195.

(Fiona Lewis) in time to a metronome, having the composer perform a lengthy Charlie Chaplin pantomime, or riding a giant penis. As Liszt tells his pal Richard Wagner (Paul Nicholas), “Well, we are in show business, Dickie.” Later Wagner becomes a vampire biting Liszt on the neck.

The premise of *Lisztomania*, widely seen as Russell’s weakest effort, might be amusing as a short film but becomes deadly dull through constant repetition of the same thematic elements. Worst of all is its failure to pay tribute to Liszt’s music, mostly ignored at the expense of a banal pop reimagining of the First Piano Concerto, the *Totentanz*, and other works. The closing credits smugly credit the score to Yes keyboardist Rick Wakeman, “assisted by Franz Liszt and Richard Wagner,” with lyrics by Daltrey, Russell, and Jonathan Benson.

Russell, a huge fan of his own work, blames the film’s commercial failure on interference from producer David Putnam¹⁵ and on the “fact that the treatment of the subject matter was symbolically and intellectually above the heads of the Daltrey fans was unfortunate, for the film was pure magic.”¹⁶ *Lisztomania* is no *Plan Nine from Outer Space* camp romp, fun because of its silliness. It is often painful to watch.

Formats

It is not possible to judge *The Music Lovers* with its 2.20:1 aspect ratio, *The Boy Friend* (2.20:1), *Mahler* (1.85:1), and *Lisztomania* (2.35:1) completely fairly in the VHS format. Not only are the images cropped, but the pictures are fuzzy and the sound, a tad important in the musical biopic genre, weak. For those with multi-region players, a UK *Mahler* DVD appeared in 2005, though with a 1.33:1 aspect ratio, and a UK *Lisztomania* was scheduled to appear in 2009. (A 1999 PAL DVD of *Mahler* is out of print.) In fact only a small portion of Russell’s enormous output, with eighty-three titles listed by the Internet Movie Database, are available on DVD and none in Blu-ray as of March 2009.

Opera

Russell admits in his autobiography that he once hated opera and agreed to direct a production of Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress* (1951) in Florence only because he needed money.¹⁷ The DVD of his 1985 Vienna State Opera production of Charles François Gounod’s *Faust* (Deutsche Grammophon B0005829-09 [2006]) is the only record so far of his operatic work. With Francisco Araiza as Faust, Ruggero Raimondi as

15. Russell, *Altered States*, 167.

16. Russell, *Directing Film*, 20.

17. Russell, *Altered States*, 243.

Mephistopheles, Gabriela Beňačková as Marguerite, and Erich Binder conducting the State Opera orchestra, the production seems relatively tame for a Russell venture. There are a few of his patented touches, including making Marguerite a nun. The director has often been taken to task for imposing Catholic imagery unnecessarily into his films. Given the extravagant excesses of such films as *Tommy* and *Lisztomania*, the sets and costumes are fairly tame, though Russell does turn a giant bull's head statue into a slot machine.

Russell provides both stage and television direction, with the latter being surprisingly conventional, like that of almost any televised opera. He opens with a street scene outside the opera house before shifting to the clichéd hum of the audience awaiting the performance. Once proceedings begin, Russell offers standard cutting from long to medium shots. The nature of recording a live performance with an audience drastically reduces the opportunities for close-ups or camera movement. Even considered within the context of Russell's oeuvre, few would recognize his touches in this *Faust*. As with most videotaped television efforts of a certain age, *Faust* does not make a crisp transfer to DVD, with many images too dark or muddy. The DVD is most notable as evidence of yet another facet of Russell's varied career.

Compilations consisting of short films by different directors are one of cinema's least successful genres. With exceptions such as *Dead of Night* (1945) and *Paris je t'aime* (2007), few of such collaborations have been well received by critics or audiences. Released in 1987, *Aria* (Image Entertainment ID1763LYDVD [1999]; DVD) has been one of the less notable compendiums. Directors such as Robert Altman, Bruce Beresford, Jean-Luc Godard, Derek Jarman, Nicolas Roeg, and Julian Temple contributed visual interpretations of arias from famous operas. The emphasis is on sex, with a little violence, especially in Russell's "Nessun dorma," from Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot*.

As in each short film, there is no dialogue. The nine-minute "Nessun dorma" opens with a dancer (Linzi Drew) standing still with a crown on her head, red stones on her elbows, more stones on her knees and feet. After her face is branded with a hot iron, Russell makes clear that the ornaments represent the wounds the woman has received in a traffic accident. The director cannot resist close-ups of her bleeding wounds. Russell alternates between the woman's surgery and the completely different world she is imagining, with images recalling the crucifixion of the title character of *Tommy*. Back at the operation, the woman's breasts flop about, Russell's apparent homage to Glenda Jackson in *The Music Lovers*, until she is restored to life and health.

While no desecration of Puccini, the film is not that enlightening either, telling the viewer more about Russell's obsessions than about his ostensible subject. In the director's defense, the other films, including that in which John Hurt roams as Pagliacci, are little better.

Folk Music

The 1997 documentary *In Search of the English Folk Song* (Kultur D4231 [2007]; DVD) opens in Russell's typically wacky, self-mocking style with the director seated in his conservatory wearing sunglasses with "Fall" over one eye and "ing" on the side of the frames. The director then begins talking to his dog, Nipper, about English folk songs, playing some scratchy 78 rpm recordings before deciding to hit the road in search of the identity of this music.

He and Nipper walk to the local pub where Russell is confronted by a loud rock group. This performance sets up Russell's thesis that English folk songs are so diverse they defy definition. He illustrates this point by traveling with his producer, Maureen Murray, to various locales to listen to a protest song, a bawdy ballad, country music in the American vein, ethnic music, and more traditional songs. In addition to the Percy Grainger Chamber Orchestra and the folk group Fairport Convention, the mostly obscure performers were clearly chosen for being as eccentric as Russell himself. There is also an interview with the 1960s folk singer Donovan. This fifty-minute film is less enlightening about its ostensible subject than about Russell's eclectic tastes. Nipper, who reappears at the end for his master's summation, is an attentive, delightful pooch, the highlight of the film.

Conclusion

Scenes involving music appear frequently in Russell's non-musical films. In *Billion Dollar Brain* (1967), Françoise Dorléac twice rehearses, badly, on the cello, and Michael Caine meets Oskar Homolka at the conclusion to a Shostakovich concert. Glenda Jackson, Jennie Linden, and Eleanor Bron perform a modern interpretive dance in *Women in Love*. In addition to Delerue, Russell has worked with other notable composers, such as John Corigliano on *Altered States* and Thomas Dolby on *Gothic*. He has also made music videos for Elton John, Dave Clark, Cliff Richard, Bryan Adams, Pandora's Box, Andrew Lloyd Webber, and others.

Russell has had several unrealized musical projects, including a biography of Vaslav Nijinsky, who appears as a minor character, played by Anthony Dowell, in *Valentino* (1977). Improbably, because of his stout build, the director studied ballet as a young man. Russell had planned

for the star of *Valentino*, Rudolf Nureyev, to play Nijinsky, though he became too old after the project was delayed several times.¹⁸ In a memorable scene Valentino teaches Nijinsky to tango. A film about Beethoven, with Anthony Hopkins, Glenda Jackson, and Jodie Foster, was canceled shortly before shooting was to begin.¹⁹ The same romantic plot was later realized by writer-director Bernard Rose as *Immortal Beloved* (1994). A film about Maria Callas collapsed when star Sophia Loren objected to the parallels between the singer's marriage to an older man and her marriage to producer Carlo Ponti.²⁰ Projects about Dvořák²¹ and George Gershwin²² have been unrealized. Russell tells a fascinating story about how a year of work on *Evita* came to naught.²³

Russell explained in *The Times* in 2007, "It's easy to see why 'serious' composers are treated like sacred cows. It goes with the territory—with our studied awe and intimidated respect, with their lofty accomplishments and complex talents, with their . . . seriousness. No denying it, that's how composers are perceived the world over. But not by me. And not by themselves, I'll warrant."²⁴ The occasion for this comment was Russell's publication of four erotic novels about composers: *Beethoven (Confidential)*, *Brahms Gets Laid*, *Elgar: The Erotic Variations*, and *Delius: A Moment with Venus*. Every chapter in the latter, according to Russell, was "inspired by one of Fred's masterpieces."²⁵

In his autobiography Russell comes closest to stating his filmmaking manifesto while recounting a disagreement with a Soviet tour guide at the Tchaikovsky Museum in Klin following the release of *The Music Lovers*. When the guide objected to the director's desecration of the beloved composer by turning his life into a carnival, Russell responded, "Great heroes are the stuff of myth and legend, not facts. Facts are for computers. I'm a myth-maker."²⁶ Indeed, he is. If his myths may sometimes seem the products of an overheated ego, they are always, nonetheless, fascinating. Russell's legacy is his having rescued musical biographies from the oversimplified, sentimental, schoolmarm-ish approaches of the past. One can only hope that more of his work comes to DVD, especially the missing BBC films.

18. Russell, *Altered States*, 34.

19. Russell, *Altered States*, 232.

20. Russell, *Altered States*, 231.

21. Tibbetts, 215.

22. Russell, *Altered States*, 166.

23. Russell, *Altered States*, 232–238.

24. Russell, "Sex, Drugs and Symphonies," 17.

25. *Ibid.*, 17.

26. Russell, *Altered States*, 57.

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