



# FOR THE GLORY OF BERGMAN & BACH

This July will be the centenary of Ingmar Bergman's birth.

**Albert Ehrnrooth** looks at the role classical music played in his films and theatre from *The Magic Flute* to *Fanny and Alexander*

In Ingmar Bergman's 1978 autobiography *Laterna Magica*, he wrote about Bach's joy: "All through my conscious life, I had lived with what Bach calls his joy. It had carried me through crises and misery and functioned as faithfully as my heart, sometimes overwhelming and difficult to handle, but never antagonistic or destructive. Bach called this state his joy, a joy in God. Dear Lord, may joy not leave me."

It was an astonishing confession, coming from a man who in many of his films concluded that religion provides no answers and little comfort. Few directors have so relentlessly explored the human condition and questioned the existence of God. Bergman's admission that he was totally devoted to Bach came as less of a surprise. It had been evident all along on the soundtracks of many of his films; Bach, Chopin and Beethoven were his household gods.

Apart from Ken Russell, can you think of any other film director who so frequently delved into the minds and private lives of musicians? In almost half of Bergman's movies and films for television some form of classical music can be heard. In early films it can just be a Bach cantata played by church bells or a Mozart melody whistled by a protagonist. Bergman also commissioned original music by contemporary Swedish composers,

but after Lars Johan Werle's very effective, modernist soundtracks for *Persona* (1966) and *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) the "demon director" (an epithet he liked) relied almost solely on classical music for his films. By the time he made his most well-known film, the family saga *Fanny and Alexander* (1982), the musical repertoire had expanded but, with the exception of Britten, didn't include 20th-century composers. He claimed that ideas for several screenplays had come to him while listening to music. Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* provided him with the theme for his most parodied film, but absolute classic, *The Seventh Seal* (1957).

Although not a musician himself, he was briefly married to the Estonian-Swedish concert pianist Käbi Laretei, who said in an interview that Bergman accused her of having taken his musical virginity. Before he met her he had listened unjudgementally to music, just enjoying it. After a few years it turned out that they only had their interest in music in common, but after their split she continued to be his musical adviser, as well as recording piano pieces for several of his films.

## COULD HAVE BEENS

In the end, Bergman only made one real musical film, a spirited version of *The Magic Flute*. There were

a number of could-have-beens: just imagine Barbra Streisand as a saucy Merry Widow joined by Al Pacino as Count Danilo. Gustav Mahler's life story could have provided the material for a rousing Freudian potboiler, but Bergman didn't show interest in the project that the composer's daughter Anna offered him. It was probably only a joke by the director himself, but after his marriage to Laretei there were reports in the Swedish press that Bergman was taking a sabbatical to write a biography about his beloved JS Bach. But instead Bergman made one of his most violent films, *The Virgin Spring* (1960), which won the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film.

## NO JOY

Ingmar Bergman was born on July 14, 1918 in Uppsala, Sweden's oldest university town. His father Erik was a Lutheran pastor which gave him ample opportunities "to catch a glimpse behind the scenes of life and death". The upbringing was strict and Erik would physically punish his two sons, which led to a fraught relationship. He loved his mother Karin who he described as "beautiful, desirable and unattainable". Many female characters in Bergman's films display facets of his mother's cool and restrained personality. In general his women can be said to be more complex and rounded than the men that often seem naive or self-conceited.

At home there was plenty of music making, but the repertoire consisted mostly of folk songs. On Sundays young Bergman had to attend his father's sermon which he found boring. "But it was a very beautiful church, and I loved the music and the light streaming through the windows. I used to sit up in the loft beside the organ".

When he was 13, he was taken to see *Tannhäuser*, which instantly turned him into a Wagnerian. The price for a seat in the gods at the Royal Opera was cheaper than a cinema ticket and he started to go to performances on his own. He was already re-enacting the classics and making up stories for his puppet theatre. When his elder brother was given a *laterna magica*, Bergman swapped his tin soldiers for the early projector and his love of moving images was born.

Instead of devoting time to studying at university he put all his effort into the student theatre. In 1939 he was hired as a production assistant by the Royal Opera House in Stockholm. Five years later his first screenplay



“WHEN BERGMAN WAS 13, HE WAS TAKEN TO SEE TANNHÄUSER, WHICH INSTANTLY TURNED HIM INTO A WAGNERIAN”

Above: Stig Olin and Maj-Britt Nilsson in Bergman's film *To Joy*

was made into a film. Bergman was only 26 years old when he was appointed director of the Helsingborg City Theatre. During his time there he would sit in on rehearsals of the local symphony orchestra. They lacked sophistication but he admired their total commitment to the music they played. He gave the orchestra a starring role in his eight film *To Joy* (1950), which takes its title from Beethoven's setting of Schiller's famous ode to universal brotherhood. It is a morality play disguised as a melodrama, but it contains many seeds that flowered in Bergman's later, full-blooded dramas.

The plot sees Stig and Martha meet while playing in an orchestra. They marry, have a child, but Stig selfishly pursues his ambition to become a soloist. He fails miserably, starts an illicit affair and splits up with Martha. The reconciliation process has started when Martha and their youngest child die in an accident. Only then, while rehearsing Beethoven's Ninth, does Stig come to terms with his mistakes. It is a flawed picture with enthusiastically, but rather badly performed excerpts, from Beethoven's Symphony, as well as the very public slaughter of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. The stirring lecture by the conductor (played by the eminent director Victor Sjöström) on the nature of Beethoven's joy is quite instructive.

## A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

In 1953, Bergman became artistic director of Malmö City Theatre where he formed an ensemble that he fell back on for most of his films in the 50s and 60s.

Bergman, who wrote most of his own screenplays, was often accused of lacking an ear for natural dialogue. Many of his (later) detractors claimed that comedy didn't come naturally to him either. Those critics had forgotten that Bergman's international breakthrough came with the superb comedy of manners *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955). Erotic sparks fly between the couples



Left: Bergman and his concert pianist wife Käbi Laretei and their son Daniel

threatening to un-couple while the stylised dialogue wittily penetrates the Edwardian moral facade. Bergman successfully reworked elements of the classic Hollywood ‘comedy of remarriage’ but added a good dose of libertinism. *Smiles of a Summer Night* inspired composer/lyricist Stephen Sondheim (together with book writer Hugh Wheeler) to compose one of his most popular musicals, *A Little Night Music* (1973). Bergman denied Sondheim the right to use the film title and instead the musical was named after Mozart’s serenade *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*. This must have amused the Swede whose screenplay is slightly reminiscent of Lorenzo Da Ponte’s librettos for Mozart operas.

**THE MAGIC FLUTE**

Bergman saw his first *Magic Flute* as a boy and tried to stage it in his puppet theatre. Together with his sister he prepared all the costumes and scenery but the project fell through because it was too expensive for them to purchase a complete recording of the opera. Still, *The Magic Flute* became his “companion through life”.

An aria made an appearance in his gothic fantasy *Hour of the Wolf* (1968), which takes place on an island where an artist (Max von Sydow) is hoping to find refuge from the phantasmagoria inhabiting his psyche. At one point a man-eating horror cast of aristocrats welcome the painter and his wife to a supper. Afterwards they are treated to *O ewige Nacht*, which is bizarrely performed by a mini-figure in a marionette theatre.



Above: Eva Dahlbeck and Jarl Kulle in Bergman’s *Smiles of a Summer Night*

Bergman finally got his chance when Swedish TV and the Film Institute in 1974 gave the green light to *Trollflöjten*. The opera was sung in Swedish, which always seemed odd, but it works. Bergman turned out to be a perceptive, witty Mozartian, allowing us backstage in the interval with the pantomime dragon stomping around, someone having a fag in front of a no smoking sign, and singers reading *Donald Duck* or the score of *Parsifal*.

**THE MERRY WIDOW**

Before the success of *The Magic Flute*, Bergman was dismissed by many Swedish cultural establishment

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“FOR THE TITLE ROLE OF THE MERRY WIDOW HE WAS HOPING TO ATTRACT BARBRA STREISAND WHO WAS CURIOUS”

figures as a representative of the bourgeoisie. Internationally his reputation at the same time was reaching new heights after the unexpected commercial success of *Cries and Whispers* (1973). It was surprising because this psychodrama centres around two feuding sisters and a third who is dying an extremely painful death. Marriage is a tissue of lies and one of the sisters illustrates this by mutilating her labia with a piece of glass. Then she smears the blood across her face while smiling wryly at her husband. Bergman asked Laretei to record for the soundtrack her interpretation of Chopin’s “sad” mazurka (Op 17, No 4 in A Minor), which he had loved hearing her rehearse at home.

The success in the US led to Hollywood showing serious interest in what the ‘gloomy Swede’ had to offer next. Bergman came up with an updated version of *The Merry Widow*. He had directed Lehár’s operetta in Malmö 20 years earlier and set an audience record, 155,000 visitors, that lasted well into the 80s. For the title role he was hoping to attract Barbra Streisand. She was curious and even invited the director and his wife to a pool party. Bergman wanted Al Pacino as Count Danilo, but worried that he would be too short (“dwarflike”). Things probably started to go awry once Streisand actually read the script. Apparently it is rather salacious and judging by the Swede’s most recent films, one can assume that some nudity was on the cards. Why the project faltered hasn’t been revealed, but Bergman swore to never have anything to do with Tinseltown again.

## AUTUMN SONATA

Bergman wanted to compose *Autumn Sonata* (1978) so the film structurally resembles a sonata. It does have three different movements. The plot has Charlotte (Ingrid Bergman), a world renowned concert pianist, visiting her daughter Eva (Liv Ullmann), who she hasn’t seen for seven years. In an early scene Eva plays

for her mother Chopin’s Prelude, Op 28 No 2 in A Minor. It is a passable stab at a treacherously difficult piece. Eva then foolishly insists that her mother plays it for her. Charlotte first explains how she thinks it should be performed (“the prelude speaks of suppressed emotion, not reveries”) and then gives a little lecture about Chopin, the man: “Chopin was proud, sarcastic, impetuous, tormented and very manly. He was no sentimental old woman.”

Charlotte’s interpretation is deeply felt, but eventually the camera zooms in on Eva staring, almost glaring at her mother, full of resentment. There can’t be any reconciliation and this time the music has no healing effect, it only creates an even deeper chasm. Once more Ingmar’s ex-wife recorded the piano parts and whenever Ingrid Bergman is seen playing it is in fact Laretei’s hands that tinkle the ivories.

## FANNY AND ALEXANDER

The family saga *Fanny and Alexander* (1983) also confounded his critics. It was the most expensive Swedish production ever and he was accused by younger colleagues of clearing out the Film Institute’s coffers. It made a solid profit and today is Bergman’s most popular (and most accessible?) movie, winning four Oscars. The soundtrack brims with a wide variety of music from a 17th-century Hebrew song, to Christmas and drinking songs, as well as a traditional march and choir song. Most of Bergman’s favourite composers have also been included: Schumann, Chopin, Britten and Bach. In 1991, Bergman collaborated with the Swedish composer Daniel Börtz to create an opera based on Euripides’s play *The Bacchae*, which was staged at the splendid Royal Swedish Opera and it also broadcast on television.

## SARABAND

Aged 84, Ingmar Bergman announced that *Saraband* (2003) would definitely be his final (television) film. After 30 years, Bergman revived two of the protagonists, played by Liv Ullmann (Marianne) and Erland Josephson (Johan), from his influential television series *Scenes from a Marriage* (1974). They have buried their feuds and are briefly reunited, but more interesting are the two other characters in this claustrophobic chamber drama: Johan’s son Henrik who is a destitute professional musician and his daughter Karin who is a promising cellist. Henrik is a controlling – verging on the incestuous – father and a lousy teacher who insists on preparing his daughter for the conservatory’s entrance exam. Karin is saved and gets an opportunity to study under Claudio Abbado, who unfortunately doesn’t appear in the movie. The title was inspired by the intimate *sarabande* movement from Bach’s Cello Suite No 5 in C Minor (BWV1011), which can also be heard in *Cries and Whispers*.

Bergman spent his last years at his home on the small Baltic Sea island of Fårö, listening to his favourite composers. He died on July 30, 2007 and at his request Bach’s Cello Suite No 5 was played at his funeral. You can almost be certain that somewhere above the gloomy Swedish skies, Ingmar Bergman is forever playing four hands piano duets with Johann Sebastian Bach. ●

Above: Liv Ullmann and Ingrid Bergman in *Autumn Sonata*