

## **COMPOSERS IN THE MOVIES**

**By John C. Tibbetts**

**Four Reviews**

*Composers in the Movies* by John C. Tibbetts

Yale University, 2005.

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John C. Tibbetts's book *Composer in the Movies* (Yale University, 2005), part of the Studies in Musical Biography series, fills an important gap in a largely unexamined corner of the film canon. To say that Tibbetts has set himself a difficult task here would be an understatement, and indeed at times one has difficulty clearly discerning Tibbetts target readership. Historical musicologists will no doubt take issue with some of the monograph's methodology, including the occasional lack of empirical evidence for statements of musical biography, citations from literature that has been superseded by more recent scholarship, and a style of writing that borders on the overly emotional. Film historians, who in recent years have slowly begun to embrace the topic of film music, may still consider the subject of this monograph to be too heavily musical to be of great use, and those who do embrace it may grapple with certain issues of terminology. However, these are not uncommon issues for those who write about issues of film music, and in his defense Tibbetts does, in spite of these difficulties, manage to ford the gap between the disciplines with a reasonable, if at times cursory level of interdisciplinary sophistication.

The monograph is divided into six chapters, with half of those chapters presenting a broad and selective survey of biopics that range from films about art music composers produced between 1930 and 1960, to biopics about American popular songwriters, and lastly, what Tibbetts calls "revisionist portraits" of composers made within the past twenty odd years. While the chapter on recent biopics provides a more thorough consideration of the ideological, political, and gender issues that are always present in the filming of biopics, the other two chapters can best be described as selective and colloquial, providing a good, but not comprehensive introduction to the subject matter at hand.

The remaining three chapters in the book examine the subject with more convincing specificity, with discussions ranging from the composer biopics of Ken Russell and Tony Palmer, to an engrossing discussion of the ideological and political implications of *A Song to Remember* (1945). Here Tibbetts seems to be on much firmer ground and the comprehensiveness of his knowledge, including some very close and compelling readings of Russell's films, allows him to dig below the immediate surface and consider deeper issues such as the implications of *mise en scène*, music selection, and narrative distortion. The resulting chapters are much more satisfying in a musical and filmic sense and provide a thorough introduction into work of two of the genre's most ardent advocates.

All in all, in spite of its occasional transgressions, this is an interesting, enthusiastic, and thoughtful exploration of a previously neglected topic; one that will be of interest to a small, but interdisciplinary readership, who will find in it not only a general introduction to the topic, but also some thorough and thoughtful analyses.

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*Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography.* By John C. Tibbetts. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. [xvi, 365 p. ISBN 0-30010674-2. \$45.] Illustrations, index, bibliography, notes.

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There has been a great deal written about movies, movie music, and composers, but John Tibbetts's *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* is the first to explore the history of feature films and documentaries specifically about composers. For many viewers, these films served, and continue to serve, as introductions to these composers and their music. For example, the film *Amadeus* (1984) introduced many moviegoers to Mozart and his works. Who can forget the dramatic scene in which Mozart (Tom Hulce) dictates, with his dying breath, sections of his *Requiem* to "rival" Salieri (F. Murray Abraham)? In his introduction, Tibbetts acknowledges his fondness for composer biopics, applauding them especially for their inclusion of great music, which plays an important part in "enhancing the image and enlivening the biography" (p. 3). He also admits, and discusses throughout the book, that accuracy has not always been a hallmark of these productions. He concludes that, since Hollywood studios had full research resources at their disposal, "any alterations in the historical record were made deliberately, according to the working contexts of industry and consumer exigencies and demands" (p. 3).

An associate professor in theater and film studies at the University of Kansas, Tibbetts considers commercial films from Hollywood, independent films, and documentaries produced for television and the big screen, dividing the book into roughly four sections. The first deals with composer biopics created during Hollywood's "studio era," 1930-1960, with one chapter being devoted to *A Song to Remember* (1945), based on the life of Chopin and starring Cornel Wilde. Next Tibbetts examines biopics of popular and "Tin Pan-Alley" composers. Chapters 4 and 5 are biographical sketches of filmmakers Ken Russell and Tony Palmer. The final chapter focuses on more recent films, such as *Amadeus* (1984), and *Testimony* (1987) about Shostakovich.

In the first chapter, "The Classical Style: Composers in the Studio Era," Tibbetts describes films produced between 1930 and 1960, known by film historians as the "classical period" of the studio system and called by Tibbetts the "golden age" of the composer biopic (pp. 18-19). The films represented here were made by large Hollywood studios and by smaller British and American studios working independently or in collaboration. They represent the lives of seemingly tragic yet triumphant composers from Schubert to Johann Strauss, Jr., and Gilbert and Sullivan. Tibbetts finds the following to be among the most commonly held agendas of these productions: "1) They conform the "life" so as to make it congruent with the narrative structures and formulas common to [other genres]; 2) They "normalize" and contain the artist's life ... ; 3) They pluck the musical texts out of their historical contexts ... [and] transmute them into collages and pastiches deployed via the programmatic and leitmotif techniques of late-nineteenth-century "Romantic" composers (pp. 20-21). Tibbetts presents these films chronologically and, for each film, gives a synopsis as well as its history in terms of release dates, production problems, remakes, historical accuracy,

and reception. The sheer number of titles cited here—including original productions, remakes, and derivative titles—leaves the narrative flow somewhat bogged down. From the same era, Tibbetts devotes an entire chapter to the commercially successful film *A Song to Remember* (1945) starring Cornel Wilde as Frederic Chopin and Merle Oberon as George Sand. Clearly, this film made a life-long impression on Tibbetts. He describes his first viewing of the wholly fabricated scene in which “Chopin embarks on a suicidal concert tour to aid Polish freedom fighters. He hunches over the piano. Suddenly, a spot of blood spatters onto the keyboard.” This left a lingering memory in the mind of the 10 year-old Tibbetts, leading him to seek out information about Chopin and, ultimately, to discover other composer biopics. Tibbetts’s discussion of this film goes beyond the brief descriptions from the first chapter and delves into issues concerning Chopin’s personal life, his masculinity (or lack thereof), and his patriotism. This film was one of the first composer biopics to have an elaborate publicity campaign: Columbia Pictures claimed, for example, that it was “destined to rank with the greatest attractions since motion pictures began” (p. 81). Tibbetts offers insight into Chopin’s effect on Hollywood as well as Hollywood’s effect on Chopin’s legacy. He describes the use of Chopin’s music in this and other films of the period as representing elegant accompaniments in *Romance* (1930), sinister foreshadowing of moral collapse in *A Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), and Polish patriotism in the face of Nazi invasion in *A Song to Remember* (p. 85). Despite his reputation for powerful and patriotic music, Chopin was also seen as frail and sickly; Tibbetts discusses how Hollywood dealt with this contradiction. For example, the Production Code Administration (PCA), whose seal of approval was necessary for films of this era, was especially stringent on the portrayal of Chopin’s relationship with George Sand. Tibbetts writes that “Chopin’s contemporaries were in general agreement about Sand’s overtly ‘masculine’ role in the relationship. Hollywood’s containment and ‘normalization’ of Chopin’s life, which led to a construction of his masculine and patriotic identity ... is the primary agenda at work here. It directs and shapes the film’s numerous historical and musical alterations and fabrications” (p. 89).

Tibbetts describes a flood of films produced during the same period and based on the lives of popular composers in his chapter, “The New Tin Pan Alley.” In these pictures, “Filmmakers, sometimes assisted by the composers themselves, could recast them into any desired shape and construct a weave of fact and fiction, sacrificing biographical detail to the glory of the music itself” (pp. 102-03). He sees similarities between Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley, particularly in their beginnings, often shaped by first-generation immigrants, and their dominance in their respective industries due to efficient systems of mass production.

As in the first chapter, Tibbetts discusses more than a dozen biopics with respect to composer involvement, commercial success, use of music, behind the scenes drama and production problems, critical and public reception, and some of the composers’ post-movie successes. Some of the more prominent films in this section include *Swanee River* (1939, Stephen Foster), *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942, George M. Cohan), *Rhapsody in Blue* (1946, George Gershwin), and *Night and Day* (1946, Cole Porter).

In the next two chapters, Tibbetts introduces readers to two of the most prolific directors of composer biopics, Ken Russell and Tony Palmer. Both are British filmmakers who began their careers producing documentaries for the BBC, Russell in the early 1960s, and Palmer as his assistant in the mid-1960s. Tibbetts walks us chronologically

through the careers and films of each, featuring engaging interview excerpts. The result is a fascinating look at the development of documentaries from films deploying little more than music, narration, and still photos, to more dramatic presentations with actors in re-created or imagined scenarios. Russell was especially instrumental in these developments. Beginning with the BBC documentary *Elgar* (1962), Russell used actors, filmed at medium to long range, to portray Elgar from youth to old age, accompanied by narration and supplemented with archival footage and newsreels. In *The Debussy Film* (1965), BBC executives finally allowed Russell to utilize actors impersonating real people. Among the other composers whose lives Russell brought to film are Barta, Delius, Bruckner, Wagner, and Prokofiev. Tony Palmer, whose films have been seen more widely through releases on television as well as in public venues, is known for taking liberties with historical events in order to emphasize drama. "I have found it useful to have the composers speak to the cameras and tell their stories," Palmer told Tibbetts, "but how are we to trust what they are saying? That allows for the kind of ambiguity between truth and fiction that I need" (p. 259). He directed dramatic biopics on Shostakovich, Purcell, Wagner, Berlioz, and Puccini.

In the final chapter, "Revisionist Portraits," Tibbetts highlights three more recent efforts that have clearly broken the mold of the films earlier discussed. In these films, composers are portrayed by actors, put into scenarios loosely based on historical facts or accounts, and as Tibbetts points out, they "have burst their stereotyped frames, climbed off the mountaintop, and, like Frankenstein's monster, run amuck" (p. 264). The best and most widely seen example is *Amadeus* (1984). Tibbetts presents the history of this work from its stage origins to the silver screen. He discusses the many differences between the two productions, highlighted by interviews with Simon Callow and Tom Hulce, the actors who portrayed Mozart in the original stage production and in the film respectively, and by quotes from the play's author, Peter Schaffer. Tibbetts analyzes many of the film's stereotypes and myths about Mozart and Salieri and, in some cases, compares them to scholarship.

In sum, *Composers in the Movies* provides a strong introduction to the study of composer biopics. Tibbetts introduces us to many lesser-known films and gives new in sight into those we have seen multiple times. He includes more than fifty pages of notes, and dozens of black-and-white photos that show the films' grandeur and provide revealing looks behind the scenes.

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***Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography.*** By John C. Tibbetts. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2005.

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Motion pictures examine the past in different ways and one of the genres which has received considerable attention in the last thirty years is the biographical film, known among the cognoscenti as the “biopic.” As early as 1977, Richard Gustafson noted a special interest in the genre in an article for *Film & History* (3.3 [1977]: 49-54). Decades later, George F. Custen’s 1992 study, *Bio/pics: how Hollywood constructed public history* was a sophisticated study with emphasis on the quest for prestige by studio moguls who supported biopic projects against the advice of their marketing departments. This interest, of course, stemmed from the stubborn human interest in the “great man” approach to history. The book under review, by John Tibbetts of the University of Kansas, surveys biopics of selected composers.

Composers in this book span the decades, beginning with studio era “prestige” productions about Franz Schubert, Johann Strauss Jr., George Frederick Handel, Frederic Chopin, Niccolò Paganini, Franz Liszt, Robert Schumann, Nicholi Rimsky-Korsakov, Gilbert and Sullivan, Richard Wagner, Peter Tchaikovsky, and Ludwig van Beethoven. Independent songwriters find a chapter which includes Stephen F. Foster, George M. Cohan, Stephen Romberg, George Gershwin, Paul Dresser, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, W. C. Handy, and John Philip Sousa. The study then turns to independent film projects by Ken Russell, director of such composer films as *Elgar*, *Bartok*, *The Debussy Film*, *The Song of Summer* (Delius), *The Music Lovers* (Tchaikovsky), *Mahler*, *Listzomania*, *Vaughn Williams*, *Anton Bruckner*—films which blend “the historical figure, the myth that that figure has created, and Russell’s own vision on the subject” (164). A chapter is devoted to a lesser-known British Director, Tony Palmer, whose *Wagner*, *Puccini*, *England*, *My England* (Purcell), and *Testimony* (Berlioz). On Palmer, Simon Callow is quoted approvingly to the effect that “He has to believe the composer he’s working on is the greatest composer in history. And by the time he’s through, you believe it, too” (262). The volume concludes with an affectionate study of a justifiably praised production, *Amadeus*. (Actor Simon Callow, who played Mozart in the dark biopic, supplies a Foreward to this volume.) Both the stage and cinematic versions are examined in enlightening “stage to screen” fashion, finding the Milos Forman film to be a positive “object lesson in the adaptive process” (269). Latter portions of the book examine less known experimental studies. Tibbetts has deliberately left out films about performers such as Al Jolson, Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, referring readers to Krim Gabbard’s *Jammin’ at the Margins* (1996) for such creative performer/composers in the popular mainstream.

Methodology is addressed by the Introduction where Tibbetts gives some personal insight into why he is so absorbed, as a scholar, in the study of music and film. He limns out a variety of popular myths about composers—for example, that they are “possessed” by the muse (frequently Mozart) or that they were “possessors” of genius (Beethoven) whose extraordinary gifts permitted them to transgress moral patterns expected of us ordinary mortals. He discusses musical canons and the issues of “high” and “low” culture as they apply to film producers and film audiences alike. What makes this book a delight

to read is the combination of enthusiasm and knowledge which this scholar of cinema and student of the arts brings to his task. Many books there will be on the issue of how motion pictures treat music and composers, but few have been—or will be—essayed by someone who has credentials in the theory and practice of both art forms. Because this study will have lasting value and continued shelf life, it is recommended for all public and university libraries. More importantly, teachers in the schools should also find it very useful in guiding the iPod generation to salient composers and works of the classical and post classical musical canon.

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## **Composers in the Movies: studies in musical biography**

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*Composers in the Movies* is the product of a scholar clearly in love with his topic. His enthusiasm is contagious, making the book an absolute pleasure to read. The sheer scope of his achievement is certainly without rival in a field of study still in its infancy. Tibbetts manages to survey roughly 50 composer biopics, from formulaic studio productions loosely based on the lives of both 'classical' and 'popular' composers to more detailed overviews of the entire repertoire of two film-makers (Ken Russell and Tony Palmer), to more recent revisionist portraits on video and television. The book is diligently researched; sources include written biographies of composers, film histories, musicological and historiographic studies, film reviews, production files, and personal interviews. The information is wound seamlessly together in a narrative that raises complex issues while maintaining its clarity.

Movies about composers accomplish a number of goals. Composers' lives are full of intrigue (personal affairs, political and artistic struggles, unusual living conditions, homosexuality, antisocial behavior, and so on), which provides good story material. Movie studios and directors benefit from a prestige factor when bringing to the screen a member of the classical music canon such as Schubert, Beethoven, or Liszt, for such films simultaneously educate and entertain. In addition, montage soundtracks can be created from the original source music and sold to the masses separately from the film. If such marketing generates interest in composers and their work, all the better. Such was the case for the author himself, who as a 10-year-old viewed Charles Vidor's biography of Chopin, *A Song to Remember* (1945), on television. So powerful was the viewing experience that the boy raced out to find more of Chopin's music, to read about his life, and eventually to write the monograph at hand, which includes a chapter devoted entirely to the remarkable film.

Enthusiasm aside, Hollywood film biographies also have a downside, for they provide censored, incomplete, and selectively re-imagined depictions of the composer's lives. Often the finished products have little to do with the men or the integrity of their music. Tibbetts quotes Richard Strauss as having once remarked of an operetta about Schubert: 'As long as something like *Lilac Time* (George Fitzmaurice, 1928) is possible, no one can say that composers have any real protection' (p. 29). In *Composers in the Movies*, Tibbetts raises this issue right away: 'the urgent question arising ... over and over again throughout the pages of this book is whether the "truth" of a pictorial speculation should be allowed some degree of legitimacy alongside the historical record. Can the two coexist?' (p. 2). In a recent interview in the magazine *Film and History*, Tibbetts was questioned about the concept of biographical versus artistic truth. In response he cited the work of historians and commentators such as Simon Schama and Hayden White, who

consider 'visual discourse as a uniquely relevant and valid enterprise,' separate from the historical record (vol. 35(2) (2005), 85].

Despite such musings on the 'validity of pictorial 'truth,' Tibbetts consistently compares plot details with established factual information about each composer's life. Imaginary scenes that *might* have happened are privileged over those with no basis in fact. For example, the author denigrates Christian Jacque's *La Symphonie fantastique / The Fantastic Symphony*, a 1942 production about Berlioz shot in Paris at a German controlled studio, for its fabricated love interest named Marie, yet presents Tony Palmer's *I, Berlioz* (1992) as a 'welcome corrective.' (pp. 243-44) If the pictorial 'truth' is its own viable entity, why do we need a corrective?

And what of the music? Tibbetts includes musical discussion in each biopic overview, but his commentary is rather uneven, ranging from a mere listing of pieces (or portions thereof) included in a movie's soundtrack to detailed descriptions of music's diegetic and extra-diegetic functions. In his analysis of Ken Russell's *Ralph Vaughan Williams* (1986), Tibbetts treats readers to a marvelous description of musical sequences as they relate to meaningful locations in the film (pp. 201 -202). We often discover tantalizing tidbits such as the mysterious appearance of a 'pop tune' version of 'Siegfried's Idyll' that surfaced during the production of a Wagnerian biopic *Magic Fire* (William Dieterle, 1956). Musical supervisor Erich Korngold attempted to maintain the integrity of Wagner's work, but Korngold's son George was credited with discovering the mysterious 'Main Title Song' at the studio. His father was kept in the dark and the song was never used (in large part because Dieterle threatened to resign), but it would be interesting to know who arranged this ditty.

Tibbetts' use of musical language is at times inconsistent. Words like 'source music' and 'soundtrack' are employed with predictable ease, but with technical terms such as 'set piece' and 'leitmotif', the author is on shakier ground. The use of 'leitmotif' is particularly troubling. Used primarily for short melodies (called 'motives') that have specific referential significance in Wagner's operas, the term has also been used to describe film music such as 'Darth Vader's Theme' in John Williams' *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) score. Tibbetts makes much broader use of the term to describe instances in which the same portion of music recurs over and over again in different guises, such as the theme from Chopin's 'A-Flat Polonaise' in *A Song to Remember*. Unlike 'Darth Vader's Theme', which conjures up the image of an evil character whenever it is heard, the polonaise comes to represent different places, people, relationships, and events, all of which might conveniently be grouped under the rubric of 'patriotic commitment' (p. 95). The description of selections in *Song of Scheherazade* (Walter Reisch, 1947) as 'primary thematic material' demonstrates a much clearer use of terminology (p. 58). Likewise, Ken Russell's use of music to accompany visual montages is appropriately described as 'dramatic visualization' (p. 162), as is the comparison of this technique to music video.

The photographic stills inserted throughout the hook are charming, but do not provide additional substance, nor are they even referred to in the text. Small editorial errors are perhaps inevitable, but incorrect references to chapter numbers in *Composers in the Movies* are painfully persistent. At some point late in the hook's production, it must have been decided to take the material on *A Song to Remember* out of Chapter 1 on the 'classical' biopics and give it its own chapter; that is, Chapter 2. But the insertion of the 'new' Chapter 2 disrupts the sequencing of those that follow. Thus, the Ken Russell

chapter is repeatedly referred to as Chapter 3 (instead of 4), Tony Palmer as Chapter 4 (instead of 5), and so on.

Whatever their numbers may be the sections devoted to Russell and Palmer are by far the most interesting in the book. While Chapters 1-3 will be a useful reference source for scholars interested in the history of one film or another, the Russell and Palmer chapters will surely be the last word on the subject for some time. Readers who have never viewed a Russell or Palmer film will surely want to after reading Tibbetts. Russell's use of 'musical visualization fantasies' and Palmer's rather difficult non-linear narrative techniques are described so magnificently that the words themselves become the pictures. Can the historical record coexist with a separate visual 'truth' presented in a film about a composer? The answer is an unequivocal 'yes' as long as the viewer also owns a copy of *Composers in the Movies*.

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