

## **Musical Biography and Film: An Interview with John Tibbetts, by Jim Welsh**

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**Prologue:** This interview marks the publication of *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography*, just published by Yale University Press, written by John C. Tibbetts of the University of Kansas. Dr. Tibbetts was interviewed by Jim Welsh for *Film & History*. Welsh recently retired as the co-founding editor of *Literature/Film Quarterly*.

**JW: Would you explain the genesis of your book?**

**JCT:** A personal note is in order. As a boy growing up in a small Kansas town, Leavenworth, I was greatly impressed by a late-night telecast of Charles Vidor's *A Song to Remember* (1944), a "life" of the Polish pianist/composer, Frédéric Chopin. Its vivid hues, heightened drama, and exciting musical presentation were unforgettable. That splash of Technicolor blood on the white piano keys during Chopin's (Cornel Wilde) fateful concert tour (surely the best remembered, albeit most notorious moment in the entire oeuvre) was particularly startling. I hungrily watched the newspapers for re-runs. For years thereafter I embarked on a search for more information about Chopin. I attended concerts and haunted record stores trying to identify the music I had heard. I even fell upon James Huneker's biography of Chopin and eagerly devoured its overheated effusions (which rivaled those of the film). As the years passed, I encountered more composer biopics and was similarly stunned by the delirious waltz sequences of Julien Duvivier's *The Great Waltz* (1938); James Cagney's recreation of George M. Cohan's "Give My Regards to Broadway" routine in *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942); the paralyzed Frederick Delius' (Max Adrian) musical dictation to his amanuensis Eric Fenby in Ken Russell's *Song of Summer*; Mozart's (Tom Hulce) last gasps of the "confutatus maledictus" to Antonio Salieri (F. Murray Abraham) near the end of *Amadeus*; and Joseph Stalin's gigantic statue looming over the pathetic, shuffling figure of Dmitry Shostakovich (Ben Kingsley) in Tony Palmer's *Testimony* (1987). I am unabashed in my affection (and in some cases, guilty pleasures) for such films. And even in the most wretched of them, say, the Schubert biopic, *New Wine* (1940), I can find points worth talking about.

**JW: Do you consider the composer biopic as a distinct genre? If so, what specific rules does the formula follow?**

**JCT:** The better question is, are BIOPICS in general a distinct genre? I would prefer to see them as a subset of the GENRE OF HISTORICAL FILMS, i.e., those which mandate at least a casual adherence to the historical record and to real-life historical figures. Further, within the subset of BIOPICS we have the ARTIST BIOPICS, which are distinguished by their preoccupation with creative agency and artistic invention. The remaining question is, should we then separate the COMPOSER biopics from other ARTIST BIOPICS about painters, writers, sculptors, dancers, etc. Do the COMPOSER

BIOPICS' audio-visual depiction of musical creativity differ from the depiction of literary, painterly, and other creative activities? I, for one, hesitate to keep breaking down these films into ever diminishing subsets. However, I do feel there has not been enough discussion of biopics in general as either a genre or a part of a genre. As for a "formula" of the general category of biopics, I offer the following: They reveal the following commonly held agendas: 1. They adapt and rewrite the narrative structures and formulas common to romantic melodramas, musicals, westerns, horror films, etc. 2. They "normalize" and contain the artist's life—depicting him or her, on the one hand, as a somewhat marginalized individual struggling against stifling societal conformism; and, on the other, as a citizen striving to compose a "song of the people" that reflects and confirms the community's own commonly held experiences. 3. They tailor the artist's life to the prevailing screen images of the actors that appear in the cast. 4. They cater to the "prestige" ambitions of the studio producers. 5. They "adjust" the life against possible litigiousness from relatives of the subject (an especially important consideration in the Tin Pan Alley biopics). 6. And they pluck the musical texts out of their historical contexts and, in addition to exploiting their familiarity and performance values, transmute them into collages and pastiches deployed via the programmatic and *leitmotif* techniques of late nineteenth-century "Romantic" composers.

**JW: I think your book deserves a better title. *Composers in the Movies: Studies in Musical Biography* lands with a thud. I know you had a better, even lyrical, title in mind. Wouldn't the title of your Introduction (an homage to Gance?), "The Lyre of Light," make a better and more poetic title for the book? Are you at liberty to explain what happened?**

**JCT:** Alas, the title was not my choice. Up until the eleventh hour, the title was going to be "The Lyre of Light: Studies in Musical Biography" (my own tribute to Abel Gance!). But the Powers That Be at Yale decided it didn't clearly signal the content of the book. (Maybe they were afraid that "Lyre" would be misunderstood as "Liar" in conversation.) I had no choice, really, in the title change.

**JW: The book unites two of your passions—music and cinema. How did you manage to strike a balance between the two?**

**JCT:** Must I "strike a balance"? I'm quite capable of discussing each in terms of its own separate identity! However, it is true that I'm certainly neither the first nor the last to discern in cinema a vehicle for the "affective" properties of music, and in music the "cinematic" aspects of light, rhythm, sound, silence. I have long been fascinated by the longstanding dispute between those who find programmatic connotations in music and those who insist that music is entirely abstract in form and expression; similarly, that the temporal-spatial structuring of images does or does not constitute a "music" of its own.

**JW: The biopic is a mendacious genre that may have little to do with historical or biographical truth. Can you justify your interest in movies that exist mainly to tell entertaining lies?**

**JCT:** Well, storytelling should be a big part of the vitalization of historical issues on screen. The word “story” is contained in the word “history,” after all. Yet, composer biopics, no less than biopics in general, have been consigned by many critics and historians to the margins of cinematic discourse for their biographical fabrications and musical distortions. Graham Greene’s criticism is typical of those who attack these pictures: “There is a hideous vulgarity, indeed, about all these pictures based on composers’ lives. The human melodrama belittles the music all the time like programme notes so that . . . [the] music becomes only a sentimental illustration to sentimental dialogue.” Composer Richard Strauss lived long enough to fear the worst, when he commented on the biographical and musical transgressions of an operetta about Franz Schubert, “As long as something like *Lilac Time* is possible, no one can say that composers have any real protection.” Strauss didn’t know the half of it—years later he, too, would fall “victim,” to Ken Russell’s *Dance of the Seven Veils*. Undaunted, I make no apology for my own personal affection and regard for these films. In the first place, they contain wonderful music, music that plays its own part in enhancing the image and enlivening the biography. To that end, I can only echo “Corsino’s Toast” in that curious collection of stories and sketches by Hector Berlioz, *Evenings with the Orchestra*:

Here’s to Music, gentlemen, her reign has come! She protects the drama, dresses up comedy, glorifies tragedy, gives a home to painting, intoxicates the dance, shows the door to that little vagabond, the ballad opera, mows down those who oppose her progress, flings out the window the representatives of routine.

Moreover, in the main, these films *are* well made, benefiting from the full resources of the Hollywood studio system and the idiosyncratic brilliance of impassioned European individualists like Ken Russell, Tony Palmer, Milos Forman, Mike Leigh, Renato Castellani, Gérard Corbiau, and others discussed in the book. Moreover, an examination of the production records of many of these films confirms that exhaustive time and money were expended on researching and compiling thick volumes of factual, biographical detail (even if the results often seem to contradict that). Thus, any alterations in the historical record were made deliberately, according to the working contexts of industry and consumer exigencies and demands. And we should never discount the allure of the ready-made prestige of a celebrated artist’s name as a validation of studio respectability. “I want to bring culture and taste, in the form of enlightenment, to the masses,” proclaimed MGM studio chief Louis B. Mayer.<sup>1</sup> This was no idle boast. Try as I might to smile cynically that old pirate, I am forced to admit he achieved his ambition, perhaps in spite of himself. Millions of viewers have been introduced in dramatic fashion to lives and music they otherwise might never have encountered. This writer is one of them.

**JW:** Would you name some of the more honest and truth-ful biopics covered in your book? Is it possible to compromise biographical truth in order to achieve a higher musical or artistic “truth”?

**JCT:** Must we persist in privileging professional literary historiography over the products of media dramatists? There exists already a body of commentary and analysis from professional historians and media commentators alike that reconsider the relationship of visual media to historical representation and supports visual discourse as a uniquely relevant and valid enterprise. Rather than denigrating the uses of images for historical purposes, they sought to validate them. In the forefront are works by Pierre Sorlin, Robert Rosenstone, Vivian Sobchack, Marcia Landy, Simon Schama, and Hayden White. They take the academy to task for, as Schama put it, “having largely abandoned, until recently, the importance of storytelling as the elementary condition of historical explanation.” White, a pioneer in the field of historical film studies, was one of the first to propose in a series of essays in the 1980s that visual-auditory discourse, which he dubbed “historiophoty,” while related in many ways to traditional historiography, possesses its own unique credentials for historical representation. Historiophoty is particularly relevant to our postliterate media culture, he explained, which “is as much visual as it is oral and written.” He challenges professional historians to recognize that visual discourse is “capable of telling us things about its referents that are both different from what can be told in verbal discourse and also of a kind that can only be told by means of visual images. . . .” Specifically, “sequences of shots and the use of montage or close-ups can be made to predicate quite as effectively as phrases, sentences, or sequences of sentences in spoken or written discourse.” This imagery, moreover, is complemented by “a distinctive verbal content that need not sacrifice analysis to the exigencies of dramatic effects.” White concludes: “We have not on the whole exploited the possibilities of using images as a principal medium of *discursive* representation, using verbal commentary only diacritically, that is to say, to direct attention to, specify, and emphasize a meaning conveyable by visual means alone. . . . There is no reason why a filmed representation of historical events should not be as analytical and realistic as any written account.”

How about those apples?

**JW:** Well, “historiophoty” seems to me a unique (and awful) coinage, more awkward than elegant. I know that, following M. Gance, who once said “Enthusiasm is essential in the cinema,” your selections were fed by your own enthusiasm. Care to tell us about some of your favorite composer biopics?

**JCT:** I’m glad to say that I feature in my book some composer biopics that are exceptional by any standard of measurement, historical or dramatic. For example, I devote a lot of time to James Lapine’s satiric *Impromptu* (1991); Renato Castellani’s epic-length and densely detailed *Life of Verdi* (1982); Ken Russell’s *Song of Summer* (1967), a film about Frederick Delius and his amanuensis, Eric Fenby; Tony Palmer’s *Testimony* (1987), about the symbiotic relationship between Dmitri Shostakovich and Josef Stalin; Mike Leigh’s *Topsy-Turvy*, an amazing backstage portrait of Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*; and, perhaps a masterpiece in its own right, Fritz Lehner’s *Mit meinen heissen Traenen* (“With My Hot Tears”), an Austrian three-part television series about the last days of Franz Schubert. I would even place Charles Vidor’s *A Song to Remember* (1945), a biopic of Frédéric Chopin, among the very best biopics from Hollywood’s “classical” studio era (I devote a whole chapter to it). This last film sacri-

fices the biographical truth of Frédéric Chopin, i.e., that he was not a political activist in the Polish cause, in favor of producing a World-War II patriotic drama that depicts Chopin as a devoted Polish patriot. The agenda here was very much in accord with the Office of War Information's mandate that Hollywood produce films promoting the democratic struggle against fascism. Thus, *A Song to Remember* is not so much a biography of Chopin as a revelation of Hollywood's willing participation in the government's wartime propaganda agendas. That is very much a "history" on its own, isn't it? But it's a history that must be teased out of the film's text and context. And that is the work of today's educators and commentators.

**JW: Your opening chapters on "The Classical Style" and "Chopin Goes to War" seem almost obligatory; but am I right in regarding Chapter 3 on "The New Tin Pan Alley" as being really groundbreaking work? What took you from Chopin to Tin Pan Alley?**

**JCT:** Because Hollywood's Tin Pan Alley composers are brothers under the skin with the classical composers. Both classical and pop composers are subjected to the same formulas and agendas of the studios; and so they emerge on screen looking and acting very much like each other. Hollywood was very much concerned with bringing the classical composer down from his canonical pedestal into the ranks of "the People" and elevating the hack tunesmith to the more hallowed realms of the genuine Artist. So, they meet somewhere in the middle, in that "juste-milieu" so desired to appeal to the widest possible audience. The drama for both is that they temporarily over-reach themselves, i.e., the classical composer forgets the common man, and the pop composer sells out the potential of his artistry for rank commercialism. The lesson each learns constitutes the resolution of the picture: The classical composer writes his Great Work for The People; and the pop composer takes his tunes to Carnegie Hall.

**JW: Two of your chapters are devoted to specific directors. One of them, Ken Russell, is known in America, but the other, Tony Palmer, is not so widely known. So why do you devote nearly 50 pages to his work? Why should Americans care about Tony Palmer?**

**JCT:** I would like to think that my research into the life and work of British director, Tony Palmer, is the book's most valuable contribution to biopic scholarship. No one, save Ken Russell, has devoted more of his film career to the dramatizations of the lives of composers, both popular and classical. Yet, he is conspicuously absent in extant scholarship. I could have provided many more pages about Palmer's work, in particular, his documentary portraits of composers, but space restrictions prohibited it. As things stand, however, I'm happy that I was able to devote an entire chapter to him, and to introduce readers to his films, particularly *Testimony* (Shostakovich), *The Strange Love of Defina Potovka* (Chopin), *God Rot Tunbridge Wells!* (Handel), and *Puccini*.

**JW: Your own credentials include a dozen books devoted to film, but you also have written a book on the Czech Republic's most famous composer, and you have also now produced a 15-CD set devoted to Robert and Clara Schumann and the glory of**

**Romantic piano music, a series that has been aired in the Kansas City area and, I understand, is soon to be featured on Chicago public radio, with possible international syndication. How did you come by this specialized interest and how did you make your contacts with the artists, historians, and critics interviewed?**

**JCT:** As for the Dvorak, that grew out of my trip to Spillville, Iowa, on assignment for *Musical America* magazine, to write an article on Dvorak's stay there in the summer of 1893. Then, after attending the Dvorak Sesquicentennial Conference at the University of New Orleans in 1991, I decided to expand the project to encompass an entire book on Dvorak's three-year sojourn in America, 1892-1895. Many of the contributors I recruited from the Conference. I suspect because I am not a musicologist and therefore not involved in any of the backbiting and bickering that attends any scholarly subject, and because I was not a competitor to any of the contributors, I was able to gain their trust and cooperation. Of all my books, that is the one I'm proudest of! Even after more than ten years it still remains the definitive book on the subject (if I may say so!).

Now, for background on how the Schumann series project came to be. . . . I was only twelve or thirteen when I first heard the music of Robert Schumann. While twelve is a wonderful age, it can also be a dangerous age. You're acutely sensitive to the world, but you're highly vulnerable to it, too. Everything is new. Everything is a shock to the system. As the song says in Kander and Ebb's musical, *Zorba!*, "Everything that happens is happening *for the first time*." Thus, in 1962, my first hearing of the Arthur Rubinstein/RCA "Dynagroove" recording of Schumann's *Carnaval* and the *Fantasiestuecke*, Opus 12 was a warning shot across the bow of my musical horizon. A new world fraught with magic, mystery, and heartbreak lay dead ahead. At that same time, Ingrid Haebler's recording of the *Papillons* and *Kinderscenen* on the Epic label introduced me to more Schumannian wonders. Haebler's LP (remember LPs?) had escaped the flames of a Kansas City record store fire, where I found it in a "damaged record" bin. Further sealing my fate, Robert Haven Schauffler's 1946 biography of the composer, newly reprinted in 1962 by Dover Press, dropped out of the skies into my waiting hands. By the way, since then, I have read all the biographies I could get my hands on, by Ostwald, Taylor, Walker, Boucourechliev, Daverio, and others, but to this day I retain a special affection for Schauffler's unabashedly hagiographic book.

It wouldn't be long before I considered the notion of putting together a series of radio programs on Schumann's life and music. By that time, in the early 1980s, I had survived military service, completed a Doctorate in Theatre and Film, and kicked around awhile in the broadcast journalism business. I couldn't say I had become anything like an authority on the subject. Apart from a few years of piano instruction, I was self-taught in the ways of musicology and historiography; I knew little of Schumann beyond my own listening and reading; and I was inexperienced in the ways of broadcast technology. What I did have going for me was a deep-seated conviction that I had *recognized* something in the music and in the man that "spoke" to me in special ways and compelled me to convey that sense to others. Much later I encountered these words by the French philo-linguist, Roland Barthes, in his 1979 essay, "Loving Schumann": "Schumann is truly the musician of solitary intimacy, of the amorous and imprisoned soul that *speaks to*

*itself*, hence the abundance of *parlando* in his work.”

The radio project began as a series of four programs, mostly music, with some tentative commentary from yours truly, broadcast on KXTR-FM in Kansas City, Missouri in the spring of 1983. It was pretty standard stuff, really; but then, two years later, an extraordinary coincidence saw the appearance of two new biographies of Robert and Clara Schumann. Impulsively, I reached for pen and paper, and in a matter of days I was in touch with both authors, respectively, Dr. Peter Ostwald, a practicing psychiatrist from San Francisco, and Dr. Nancy B. Reich, a musicologist from upstate New York. I soon visited both of them, and I must say that those encounters radically changed the course not only of the radio project but of my growing sense of the composer. Both gave unselfishly of their time and expertise. Both introduced me to other scholars in the field. And both opened many doors to me that otherwise might have remained closed.

The fruits of the hours of taped interviews with Ostwald and Reich convinced me that many other biographers, musicians, and critics should also have their say. Key to the conceptual evolution of the series was Jacques Barzun, the eminent humanist and educator. I found him in his offices at Scribner’s publishers in New York City. With his advice and encouragement, I began to hammer out the prevailing metaphor of the series, the quintessential image of the Romantic duality—a man on horseback. This image unites the guiding intelligence of the brain (the rider) yoked to the primary creative impulse of the primordial instinct (the horse). It has proven to be an effective aural motif throughout the series.

I was subsequently emboldened to track down more humanists and music historians to help me develop a greater awareness of the Romantic contexts surrounding Schumann. Albert Boime of UCLA (whose work on 19<sup>th</sup> century French painting I had greatly admired) received me at his Los Angeles home, and together we tracked countless paintings, poems, novels, and music from the period, from Gericault to Berlioz. Robert Winter of UCLA, Leon Plantinga of Yale, Hugh Macdonald of Washington University in St. Louis, Alan Walker of McMaster’s University in Ontario, Canada, Rufus Hallmark of the Aaron Copland School of Music, Roger F. Cook of the University of Missouri-Columbia, and Paul Boller and David Ferris of Texas Christian University all contributed many hours of discussion and interviews that have proven to be crucial to the concepts discussed in the series.

Because I was in a position to produce classical music programming for Kansas City radio, because I began to write frequently for music journals like *Ovation* and *Musical America*, and because my television work kept me frequently on the road, I was able to locate and access many musicians, both here and abroad. Armed with cameras and tape recorders and letters of introduction, I haunted concerts, recitals, master classes, and music festivals all over the world. None of these talks was conducted in the pristine confines of a recording studio. Rather, they transpired in dressing rooms, hotel lobbies, private homes, and rehearsal stages. For example, Vladimir Ashkenazy had just finished a Schumann recital in Duesseldorf when I found him in his dressing room, clad in little more than a towel. Elly Ameling was in the midst of a master class in Kansas City when

she walked offstage right into the range of my microphone. Peter Frankl was between trains in New York City's Grand Central. Leslie Howard was home in London writing scholarly notes for his monumental Liszt recording project. And Eugene Istomin was hosting a reception for Shura Cherkassky and Paul Badura-Skoda at his Washington, D.C. apartment after concluding the William Kapell Piano Competition.

A complete list of these interviews is too extensive to enumerate here, but some of the names deserve particular mention because they not only shared in common a passionate enthusiasm for Schumann, but because they became more than passing acquaintances. Rudolf Firkusny and his wife received me several times in their New York apartment and in their quarters at the Bard Music Festivals. He was always ready to talk about not only Schumann, but his beloved mentors, Leos Janacek and Bohuslav Martinu (Firkusny later contributed to my 1993 collection *Dvorak in America*). From the keyboard of his New York apartment, and later during several visits to Kansas City, Charles Rosen discoursed on his newly-released set of Nonesuch recordings, in which he unearthed and performed the original manuscripts of Schumann's piano pieces. Eric Sams, the British specialist on the Romantic Lied, provided me with one of the longest and most inspiring interviews of this series. He, too, became a longtime correspondent and adviser. Another stalwart friend to the series was Eugene Istomin. He and his wife, Marta, always welcomed me to their New York and Washington, D.C. apartments, and it was my pleasure to be their special guest at the First William Kapell Piano Competition in 1989.

The city of Duesseldorf, Germany was a treasure trove of information. Across the street from the Schumann-Haus on Bilker-Strasse, where Brahms first came to visit in the autumn of 1853, are the charming, picturesque headquarters of the Robert-Schumann-Gesellschaft. Moreover, in tradition-rich Leipzig I found that a short stroll from Bach's Thomas Church led to the fabled Café-Baum, where in the mid-1830s Schumann and his cronies hatched the *Neue Zeitschrift fuer Musik* in the mid-1830s (a "SchumannEcke" in the restored structure honors their memory). Elsewhere is the newly-restored structure that was the home of newlyweds Clara and Robert in 1840. Nearby, in Schumann's birthplace of Zwickau, I toured the Geburtshaus and talked with the Director, Dr. Gerd Nauhaus. A walk along the River Mulde, across the meadows, and through the Marketplace past the Schumann statue, evokes vivid impressions of the composer, as does a visit to the asylum at Endenich-Bonn, where Schumann spent his last two years, and to the nearby cemetery where Clara and Robert are buried.

Back to the recording studio in Kansas City, the Schumann radio series subsequently went through several transformations over the last seven years. When I found Mark and Elizabeth Robbins, two fine Equity actors long associated with the Missouri Repertory Theater, I knew I had found the perfect "voices" for Robert and Clara. Their theatrical training enabled me to devise the dramatizations featured in the series. The fact that in real life they are husband and wife doubtless fed into the sympathy with which they played their roles. Recording engineer Larry Johnson and producer Royal Scanlon of the RSRT Digital Masterworks studios in Overland Park, Kansas were crucial to the final stages of the series and brought it into the digital age.



Over a period of more than twenty years, *The World of Robert Schumann* has gone from a few programs with narration and music to a 15-hour series featuring dramatizations, interviews, critical commentary, and hundreds of musical excerpts. I began this project many years ago with the conviction that I had things to say about Robert Schumann. Now, much older, if not wiser, I have had my say. But, more importantly, I have learned to *listen* to what others are saying.

**JW: Well, as usual you've been busier than any three other people I know. Hope the Schumann CD series and the composer biopic book both get the exposure they deserve. And the appreciation.**

### **Endnotes**

1. Quoted in George F. Custen, *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1992), p. 50.