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Once again in rehearsal. Celibidache Rehearses Bruckner's Ninth by Jan Schmidt-Garre

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'Like fiction films, successful documentaries tell a good story, feature attractive characters, suspense and attitude.'¹ What story does Jan Schmidt-Garre tell on Celibidache and Bruckner?

The difference between a documentary and a fiction film is the preexistence of filmed reality. For a fictional film a particular reality is temporarily constructed by *mise-en-scène*, that is to say a set is created, actors are directed, lighting and 'cadrage' is designed by the cinematographer and, in the end, a scene is performed which has been deliberately conceived by a screenwriter. This constructed world exists only within the fictional film itself. In a documentary, however, the past reality and the filmed reality co-exist in a parallel way.² 'Neither a fictional invention nor a factual reproduction, documentary draws on and refers to historical reality while representing it from a distinct perspective.'³

As far as the combination of music and film is concerned, there are distinctive film genres in both fields of fictional and non-fictional types. The most prominent fictional type is the film musical, which emerged at the end of the era of silent movies mostly with lush adaptations of Broadway classics. More recently, there are fictional films which can be called 'biopics' such as Miloš Forman's *Amadeus*. A biopic is a motion picture, whether fictional or non-fictional, which is based on the life of a real, usually famous, person.⁴ In a biopic music is less a formal element of the film but more a matter of subject. Regarding non-fictional films a similar distinction exists. But there is also a broad field of music related documentaries which can roughly be divided into two subgenres, non-fictional biopics about certain personalities (famous conductors, soloists, bands or to a lesser degree orchestras) and documentaries about specific musical projects (for example, 'Rhythm Is It' featuring Simon Rattle and directed by Thomas Grube

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and Enrique Sánchez Lansch, 2004).⁵ Furthermore, there is the concert film which is a documentary film *sui generis* as it transforms a single continuous event (that is a live concert) into another medium.⁶

For classical music, the two non-fictional film genres are sometimes combined into a hybrid form, the in-rehearsal documentary. Combined with a live recording of a performance the in-rehearsal documentary shows the preparation of the filmed concert accompanied by interviews at least with the conductor and optionally with musicians or musicologists. From a dramaturgical point of view, the filmmaker has the chance of narrating the entire genesis of a live concert and can conclude with the actual live performance, thus bringing the entire story arc to a satisfactory end. Thereby the audience

¹ Michael Rabiger, *Dokumentarfilmregie* (Mülheim: Ed. Filmwerkstatt 2008), 15; translation by the author.

² Cf. Knut Hickethier, *Film- und Fernsehanalyse*, revised second edition (Stuttgart and Weimar: Metzler, 1996): 178.

³ Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, second edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010): 6-7.

⁴ Peter Lee-Wright, *The documentary handbook* (New York: Routledge, 2010): 335.

⁵ There is a specific music documentary genre called 'rockumentary' for the non-classical music world. See Lee-Wright, *The documentary handbook*, 257-9.

⁶ For a general categorisation of music documentaries see Michael Custodis, 'Die Musikdokumentation: Typologische Bemerkungen', in *Musik im Fernsehen*, ed. Peter Moormann (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag, 2010), 67-82.

may reflect the nature of the performed piece and the interpretation of the conductor already during the filmed rehearsal sequences and subsequently the actual performance. The audience may expect a similar approach with the one-hour documentary by the Celibidache expert Jan Schmidt-Garre. He studied conducting with the maestro and also directed the feature documentary 'Celibidache' in 1992. So there was a chance for a close reading and understanding. But how much more does the film give us than fragments? Does it tell anything more substantial? Schmidt-Garre states in the booklet: 'I was looking through the rolls of film I had not used [for his feature film] when, amongst the uncut material, I was fascinated to discover some footage of the old Celibidache.' The director was intrigued by the fact that while rehearsing the maestro's face would reflect every nuance of the music. Indeed, such a close look, a voyeuristic gaze is a domain of film and hardly possible in a real-life experience in a concert hall.

The late maestro was known for his demanding rehearsal work at which in the end might emerge great music. In Celibidache's opinion 'a rehearsal is not music' because in rehearsals music still has to be structured by thought. Obviously, it seems that Celibidache believed in great works of art rather than music as action, he was more interested in objects than in the fact of being creative himself. The composer, not the performer gives the music its nimbus, he seems to have thought. However, Schmidt-Garre's film documents Celibidache's creative process as an in-rehearsal documentary without showing the result. Or could the rehearsal, *horribile dictu*, and Celibidache actions, be the very 'result' after all?! Indeed, Celibidache was not fond of capturing his performances for CD releases or on video, as he believed that music had to be performed and experienced live, quasi in *statu nascendi*.

The film has of two storylines: The main part is a 20-year-old filmed rehearsal session in the Munich Philharmonic building. This footage is sparsely crosscut with Celibidache's statements, taken from two interview sessions. These interviews were conducted separately and are completely unconnected with the rehearsal footage. Additionally, there is a scene with the conductor visiting Bruckner's study at the St. Florian monastery in Austria.

Schmidt-Garre's approach is perhaps in some detail unusual or even experimental but, unfortunately, far from convincing. The director is obsessed by the detail, not the whole. This brings him into an open conflict with

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Celibidache's ethos. The film lacks greatness, a dramatic story arc, even a form of act structure, for the most part. It focuses on close shots on the maestro. Schmidt-Garre hardly ever shows the orchestra playing. But a rehearsal always means interaction between a conductor who has an idea of how to perform a score and the musicians whose imaginations might differ. This is part of the creative process of rehearsing, the fascinating process of negotiating art.⁷ But in refusing to cut between shots of the conductor and reaction shots of the musicians, Schmidt-Garre does not show the connection between the orchestra and its conductor. Or did he want to show that there is no connection at all?

In the interview sequences, Celibidache refers only to rehearsals in general, not to the one we see. As he states in the film, the human being is unable to interpret facts like it is a landscape or a musical score. But we may experience them. The concept of a kind of transcendent musical experience is his antithesis towards the more common idea of interpreting a score.

⁷ There are studies on this, based even on video recording of rehearsals; see Marjaana Virtanen, *Musical Works in the Making. Verbal and Gestural Negotiation in Rehearsals and Performances of Einojuhani Rautavaara's Piano Concerti* (Turku: University of Turku, 2007).

However, we only see Celibidache reading and teaching the score in rehearsal: At one point, he orders the cellos to sound 'a little Italian and not very German'. At another, he *pro forma* discusses the importance of *staccato* markings with the concertmaster and decides that they are not important: 'What's quintessential is Bruckner's eternal passion: broad. The dots are not important.' And finally, he instructs the first violins not to connect three notes. When the concertmaster dares to argue that this connection is written down in the violin part (and even comes to the conductor's stand to show the detail), Celibidache only has a quick look at the violin part and states (as translated in the English text on the DVD): 'the connection is not original! With Bruckner all three notes are separate.' The scene emphasizes the Celibidache's sense of his academic authority as the representative of the composer on earth.

The rehearsal scenes, though in a chronological order, seem to be almost randomly selected. At least it is hard to grasp the mosaic. (One can argue that there are parallels between the flux of Bruckner's score and Schmidt-Garre's mosaic, but such an opinion is hardly more than a subjective act of defense.) Most importantly, if Schmidt-Garre wanted to show how the musical experience reflects in the conductor's face (and this is obviously the case), we keep asking: 'why only the rehearsal instead of concluding the documentary with the entire performance of Bruckner's Ninth?'. This is especially pertinent for Celibidache, for whom rehearsal is *not* music but merely a process to structure a certain score to become music later. So a full concert film with the final performance would have given us the opportunity to experience the final outcome of the entire rehearsal process. This is not a question of length. Considering the length of the documentary and the length of a full performance of Bruckner's Ninth both programmes would fit on one DVD, even though as two separate films. Two DVD editions by Euroarts feature Celibidache in rehearsal and performance: Strauss, 'Till Eulenspiegel'; Rimsky-Korsakov, 'Sheherazade'; Radio-Sinfonieorchester Stuttgart des SWR (Euroarts 2060368, 104min.), and Dvorák, Symphony No. 9; Prokofiev, Symphony No. 1; Munich Philharmonic (Euroarts 2066558, 114 min.). What Schmidt-Garre's film makes visible is thus not experiencing 'music' but the attempt to match certain imaginations in the maestro's mind: confronting a written score, interacting

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with musicians, soloists and conductors, structuring the music in order to, finally – this should be essential – perform the music.

Documenting this process may feature a certain dramaturgy, even certain suspense as the film audience can experience the improvements and changes throughout the rehearsal. But finally, the whole must be made to move, and one should show the outcome. In narrative terms, only the performance can be the denouement of such a story, providing the viewer with a final resolution. Schmidt-Garre does none of this. Instead, the film ends halfway. Now the rehearsal excerpts are fragmented. The film shows no longer sequences of certain parts of the symphony that were rehearsed more often, demonstrating a work in progress. As Celibidache says in the film, rehearsing is an arduous process of repeatedly playing the same parts to finally achieve what the conductor wants. We do not actually see this. We do not even see or hear what might have emerged from this process in the end. Furthermore, Celibidache's interview statements do not tell us anything about the rehearsal we see or the piece we hear.

What remains? The film features rare rehearsal footage, and that is interesting material for Bruckner aficionados, Celibidache's fans or students of conducting techniques. The point of view is extremely profession-oriented. For the audience in general this film may be rather disappointing. On the other hand, the film visualizes aspects of musical experience at large, showing even the philosopher in Celibidache – using a lot of sophisticated French, instead of the professional German of the rehearsing

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conductor – and creating of musical art by demonstrating the imagined interaction of two true maestros: Bruckner and Celibidache. But Bruckner is just a vehicle in this film on Celibidache. The humble gesture of the interpreter rehearsing focuses on his and only his creativity. What a difference to Douglas Gordon's radical 'Feature Film' of 1999 in which nothing but the hands and face of the conductor James Conlon are in focus but in humble service of Bernhard Herrmann's 'Vertigo' score!