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Music Hath Charms to Soothe the Savage Critics

BY ANDREW SARRIS

Ingmar Bergman's screen production of Mozart's "THE MAGIC FLUTE" has caught some critics with their categories down. Opera on film? It simply can't be done. On this aesthetic prescription the purists of opera and film stand united. And if the highbrow injunctions are not intimidating enough, there are always the lowbrow gibes about the Carmen weighing more than the bull. Only a few years back in Hal Prince's "Something for Everyone" two mountains of flesh labeled and costumed as Tristan and Isolde lumbered toward each other on an operatic stage. Some years before that intentionally grotesque encounter no less a screen personage than Sophia Loren impersonated Aida with the aid of a dubbed operatic voice, but that bit of cinematic legerdemain was rejected out of hand by the self-appointed intermedia inspectors, which means no Liv Ullmann as the Queen of the Night. Hence, Bergman was compelled to audition professional singers with an eye to the photogeneity of their faces and figures. But we must remember that Bergman is a resourceful theatre director as well as a film director, and that therefore his version of "The Magic Flute" is not designed exclusively for the camera. Quite the contrary. Bergman's camera flaunts the rusty mechanisms of stagecraft as if to alienate the movie audience from the easy illusionism of cinema. More disconcerting still is his au-

'In both movies and operas, plot is a peg for music be it aural (opera) or visual (cinema). But the critic, using words, is more at home with meaning than melody.'



Three ladies beguile Tamino in "The Magic Flute."

dience within an audience, a curiously selected montage of UNESCO stereotypes of Mankind in a supposedly Swedish setting. It is not clear whether Bergman is suggesting that Mozart's melodiousness is accessible to people

everywhere or, rather, that this production may make it so. In either case, the use of Mozart's overwhelming overture as a musical adjunct to a relatively vapid visual symphony of faces strikes me as Bergman's least justifiable

tactic of adaptation. Once the opera begins, Bergman's audience becomes less obtrusive. (I can't make up my mind about the recurring shots of Bergman's daughter in pensive profile. When I saw the film I didn't know that she was Bergman's daughter, and I was vaguely irritated with her as a "type" to be edified and educated. But the spectacle of Bergman's daughter observing the spectacle of another daughter—Pamma—in the process of submitting to the benign authority of her father—Sarastro—is a different matter entirely, particularly when Bergman himself is responsible for changing the mere mentor of the original libretto into a father with a savagely Strindbergian attitude toward his estranged wife.)

At this point we must face the fact that different art forms serve different constituencies, and that the so-called Renaissance audience exists only in the imaginations of the most optimistic critics. It is possible even that moviegoers and operagoers have different metabolisms, and, more certainly, a different balance between the eye and the ear. For whom then is Bergman's treatment of "The Magic Flute" intended, and for whom can it be recommended? I would say that it is intended primarily for people who either don't know "The Magic Flute" at all or who don't know it as well as they should. And the word "know" in this context connotes musical rather than dramatic familiarity

with the opera. Ultimately, the medium with which Bergman is competing is not so much the opera stage as the hi-fi record player. Thus, we have a mishmash of media to consider. Opera itself is already the bastardized offspring of music and drama, and drama is always in second place. Thus, over the years, opera has remained the journalistic province of the music critic rather than the drama critic. And it follows that it has always been considered more important for an opera to sound good than to play well. Better for Carmen to look like a cow than to sing like a duck. Also, the librettist invariably was subordinated to the composer, much as the screenwriter has been subordinated to the director in the cinema. After all, it is to Mozart's genius that Bergman pays tribute, and not to that of Schikaneder (librettist of record) and/or Gieseke (uncredited collaborator). Indeed, what is particularly ironic about the current contretemps from the point of view of the purists is the singular impurity of cinema and opera as art forms. In this respect, the libretto of "The Magic Flute" is a classical mess, beginning, as it does, as if it were "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and ending as "Parsifal." What starts out as a young man's chivalric rescue of an innocent maiden from a wicked sorcerer eventually loses its way in a maze of Masonic mysticism. To make matters more confusing, the wicked sorcerer is

(Continued on next page)

'DISTANT THUNDER'

Satyajit Ray goes back in time to a '40s famine in Bengal to show how a Brahmin (Soumitra Chatterji) and his wife (Babita) bear up under the strain. They bear up remarkably well until they are engulfed by history. There are marvelously affectionate glimpses of Indian Community life, and, occasionally a bit too much metaphorical montage. A passionate hymn to marital devotion.

Art, GR 3-7014

Beekman, RE 7-2622

'DOG DAY AFTERNOON'

Director Sidney Lumet, scenarist Frank Pierson, and star Al Pacino cross the thin line between compassion and complicity in their antic account of a Brooklyn bank robbery in 1972. Good performances by Pacino, Chris Sarandon, John Cazale, and Gary Springer cannot quite compensate for a marked insensitivity to the moral issues involved.

Cinema I, PL 3-6022

'HEARTS OF THE WEST'

Howard Zieff charming evocation of the making of Poverty Row westerns in the Hollywood of the '30s from a script by Rob Thompson has structural flaws, but gets by on a pretty good cast headed by Jeff Bridges, Andy Griffith, Alan Arkin. Blythe Danner, and Anthony Holland in a bit.

Greenwich, WA2-3350

'HESTER STREET'

Joan Micklin Silver's first feature film starts slowly with careful documentation of the Lower East Side ghetto in 1896, but picks up dramatic steam with the entrance of Carol Kane's unworried Old World wife who must cope with the betrayal of her assimilationist husband (Steven Keats). Mel Howard, Dorrie Kavanaugh, and Doris Roberts provide sturdy support in this semi-feminist saga.

Plaza, EL 5-3320

VOICE CHOICES

SUGGESTED VIEWINGS FROM OUR CRITICS



Burns and Matthau shine at Music Hall

'THE MAGIC FLUTE'

Those of us who know the Mozart-Schikaneder opera backwards and forwards and sideways may quibble over the Swedish libretto (from the original German), the musicianship, and the lack of star heavyweight singers. The cinematic purists among us may bemoan the fact that Bergman employs the screen as a medium rather than as an art form. The Straubians (who believe that less is more) may find Bergman's treatment of Mozart too vulgar and familiar. The Ken Russell converts (who believe that more is the most) may find Bergman's direction sluggish and faint-hearted after "Liztomania." The rest of us will be enchanted by Bergman's sensuous submission to Mozart's majesty. A marvelous introduction to the opera.

Coronet, EL 5-1663

'ONE FLEW OVER THE CUCKOO'S NEST'

Milos Forman and Jack Nicholson have done a relatively good job on Ken Kesey's '60s classic of Pacific Coast paranoia. The acting of Nicholson as the liberating loony, Louise Fletcher as the evil nurse in the loony bin, and William Redfield as the most calculating of the loonies leaves nothing to be desired. Forman even adds some political metaphors of his own. But a basic problem remains: How far can we go in sentimentalizing insanity as a lyrical state of grace? Not to be missed, but not to be swallowed whole either.

Sutton, PL 9-1411

Paramount, 247-5070

'RANCHO DE LUXE'

Frank Perry and Thomas McGuane have collaborated on an odd, off-beat, uneven entertainment that pokes fun at its own absurdist pretensions. Jeff Bridges, Sam Waterston, Elizabeth Ashley, and Slim Pickens head an appealing cast on today's raunchy range out west. Not a world-beater, mind you, but the kind of pleasant movie that needs to survive if there is to be any real future in filmmaking. As it is, the studio has virtually dumped the movie into oblivion.

D. W. Griffith Theater, 799-4630.

'THE SUNSHINE BOYS'

One of Neil Simon's most despairing plays is given some breathing space by the comic tenacity and vitality of Walter Matthau and George Burns as two ultraprofessional comics who will retain their timing and acidity well past senility. Herbert Ross has directed with snap and efficiency, and Richard Benjamin is excellent in a thankless role. It may be also the last year you'll be able to see the Christmas Show at the Radio City Music Hall. George Burns complained in a Voice interview about 60 Rockettes putting vaudeville out of business. There are now only 36 Rockettes.

Radio City Music Hall, 757-3100.

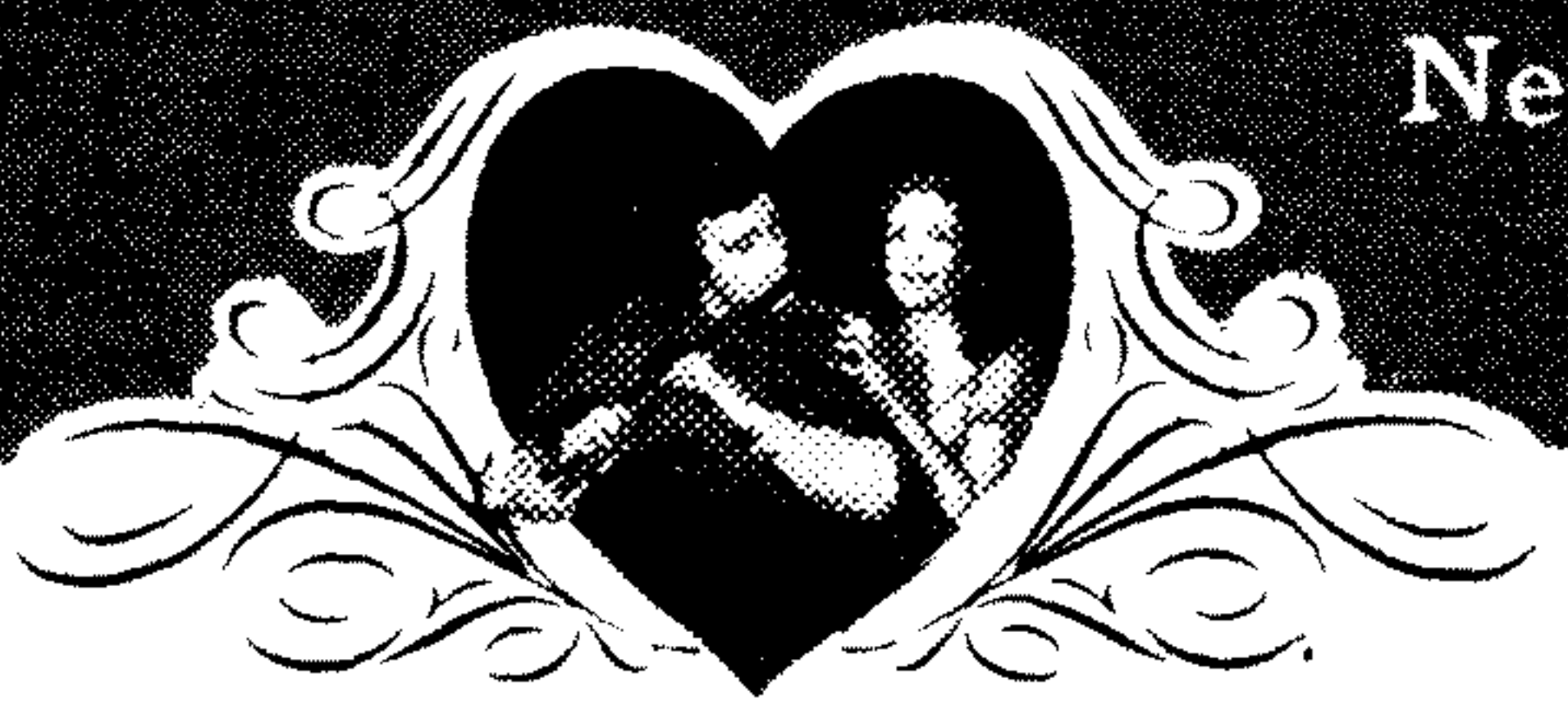


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—Vincent Canby,
New York Times



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<p>WED. NOV. 26 SHOOT THE PIANO PLAYER François Truffaut's homage to the American gangster film. With Charles Aznavour as a man who can find solace only in the rinky tink of his piano playing. (1960) 3:30 5:30 8:45</p> <p>JULES AND JIM Truffaut's lyric and romantic masterpiece. A touching saga of two friends and the fascinating woman they both love. With Jeanne Moreau, Oskar Werner and Henri Serre. (1961) 3:30 5:30 8:45</p>	<p>Jules and Jim</p>	<p>THU. NOV. 27 REBECCA Perhaps Alfred Hitchcock's most famous film, based on the novel by Daphne Du Maurier. With Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine. (1940) 1:30 5:35 9:40</p> <p>JANE EYRE Orson Welles and Joan Fontaine perform brilliantly in Charlotte Brontë's story of impossible love. Directed by Robert Stevenson. (1944) 3:50 7:55</p>		
<p>FRI. NOV. 28 THE BICYCLE THIEF The tremendous emotional impact of Vittorio de Sica's classic about a poor laborer whose bicycle is stolen, internationalized the popularity of the Italian neo-realist style of filmmaking. (1949) 2:00 5:25 9:00 12:25</p> <p>THE GARDEN OF THE FINZI-CONTINIS The lush sun-drenched garden filled with glowing youth is contrasted with the political climate in de Sica's evocative film on Mussolini's persecution of the Jews. (1971) 3:35 7:05 10:40</p>	<p>SAT. NOV. 29 DR. STRANGELOVE Stanley Kubrick's black satire on the A bomb and the Pentagon, with Peter Sellers doing turns around George C. Scott and other governmental loonies. (1964) 1:30 5:00 8:40 12:15</p> <p>SLAUGHTER-HOUSE FIVE Based on Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s surreal novel about time-tripping. George Roy Hill's faithful adaptation is a shattering indictment of war and its aftermath. (1972) 3:10 6:45 10:25</p>	<p>SUN. NOV. 30 FUNNY FACE Fred Astaire, Audrey Hepburn and Kay Thompson sing and dance to the music of George and Ira Gershwin in Stanley Donen's colorful evocation of "haute couture." (1957) 1:15 4:50 8:20</p> <p>YOU'LL NEVER GET RICH The elegant Mr. Astaire and the curvaceous Miss Hayworth are again teamed in this delicious Cole Porter musical. With Robert Benchley. (1941) 3:10 6:45 10:10</p>	<p>MON. DEC. 1 CLAIRE'S KNEE The fifth of director Eric Rohmer's six moral tales is a highly sensual evocation of a man and the relationships he develops with a lovely young girl. (1971) 2:30 6:10 9:50</p> <p>CHLOE IN THE AFTERNOON The last of Rohmer's moral tales concerns the sexual wanderings of a happily married man. Zouzou is the alluring Chloe who almost seduces Bernard Verley from his work-a-day existence. (1972) 4:25 8:05</p>	<p>TUES. DEC. 2 THE SEVEN SAMURAI In the greatest of all "Samurai" films, Kurosawa's mercenaries defend a village's food supply. The original full length version with all its remarkable imagery. (1954) 2:00 5:20 8:45</p>

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transformed into a wise saint, but his Moorish henchman remains wicked to the bitter end. Meanwhile, the Queen of the Night changes from a bereaved mother into a murderous harpy, but the three ladies and the three boy genii in her retinue seem morally disconnected from her malignancy. Most puzzling of all is the fact that the magic flute given Tamino and the magic bells given Papageno by the Queen of the Night in Act I operate for good rather than evil in Act II. Most opera historians have concluded that Mozart and his colleagues made up the plot of "The Magic

ly pertinent in operas and movies. In both forms the plot is very often a mere peg for the music, be it aural (opera) or visual (cinema). But the critics, writing of necessity in words, words, words, is more at home with meanings and messages than with melodies and harmonies. Fortunately for opera, the jargon of music has been admitted to popular journalism, but unfortunately for cinema, the jargon of mise-en-scene engages editors at its own peril. That is why if a contemporary playwright walked into Joe Papp's office with a script of "The Magic Flute," he would be thrown out on his ear whereas a contemporary movie producer is seriously contemplating a remake of "Notorious" as if

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Flute" as they went along, adding a popular note here, and a personal touch there. The odd prominence of the folk figure Papageno in an otherwise upper-caste saga can be attributed to his being played by the librettist Schikaneder. When one traces all the pop and showbiz influences on the original opera, it becomes apparent that Mozart's genius, like Shakespeare's did not fit neatly into the holy, elitist temple of high art, but, rather, sought out the crowd as if to counterbalance the life-and-death power of the coterie.

For his part, Bergman has provincialized "The Magic Flute" by rendering it in the Swedish language, and making the costumes and settings wintry Swedish rather than summery Egyptian as they were in the original opera. Tamino is no longer Oriental, and Monostatos only mock Moorish in the old expressionist manner of Jan-nings's Othello. Bergman's Papageno is more a feathered everyman than an out-and-out birdman, but Bergman has moved Papageno's ecstatic mating duet with Papagena back from the climax so as to give Tamino and Pamina their logical preeminence in the plot. Much has been written about the influence of "The Magic Flute" on "Smiles of a Summer Night," and it might be argued that the sensual servants played by Ake Fridell and Harriet Andersson are the equivalents of Papageno and Papagena, and that therefore it seems inconsistent for Bergman to downgrade Papageno after he has chosen to end "Smiles of a Summer Night" with Fridell and Andersson. But it is possible for the Fridell character to be interpreted also as a combination of Papageno and a compassionate Sarastro. Of course, Bergman refers directly to "The Magic Flute" in "The Hour of a Wolf" with a sinister puppet-master's explanation of Mozart's unearthly power of musical incantation with the three syllables of Pa-mi-na. Love and Death. Are these not Bergman's chosen themes as well as Mozart's? As well as Woody Allen's. Hence, the greatest themes, and the most banal. The issue is whether the artist can transcend the banality of his themes with a personal style, and it is an issue that is particular-

the McGuffin plot to end McGuffin plots were the source of the original film's merits.

I am not proposing here any facile equation between music and mise-en-scene, or between Mozart and any filmmaker, past or present. In some contexts, music is analogous to mise-en-scene, and, in some contexts, completely alien. In cinema, music of any stature tends to become incidental or programmatic. There has been a tendency since the '20s to think of movie music in terms of the rhythms of montage, and in no other way. On the whole, however, visual phrases in the movies tend to be shorter than musical phrases. I find myself quickly bored by the click-clack synchronization of music and image on screen. I think it is more interesting for music on the movie soundtrack to drift into mood and transfiguration in the manner of Pasolini's invocation of Bach in "Accattone." Bergman has always been very conscious of the barriers between the media. He has used music sparingly, relying for his moods more on dynamically expressive framing and composition, perhaps too much so on occasion. Mozart relaxes Bergman somewhat in "The Magic Flute." Images tend to drift with the music; conventional cuts slash into the canvas in order to clarify the plot. Robert Craft does a devastating pan of Bergman's "The Magic Flute" in The New York Review of Books from the point of view of a Mozart specialist with access to all the European productions of the opera. Craft also denounces the excessive use of close-ups in Bergman's staging, a rather peculiar criticism in the context of Bergman's total career of claustrophobic framing. Craft seems unaware of the enormous pressure on filmmakers since about 1910 to avoid the eighth-row center camera set-up in the recording of theatrical spectacles. As it is, Bergman has been blamed by film purists for erring too much on the side of middle-range stasis in "The Magic Flute." In contrast to Craft's condemnation is Leighton Kerner's accolade in the Village Voice of November 17. Significantly, Craft never mentions Bergman's deliciously imaginative casting and setting of the

boy genii whereas Kerner talks of little else. (By the same token, Kerner never discusses the overture montage which Craft described derisively and at great length.) This startling conflict in the reactions of two respected musicologists suggests to me a media dialectic at work on the moral and social implications of Bergman's appreciation of Mozart. In a sense, Bergman has domesticated Mozart by substituting a family view for a world view, and, by so doing, has taken the anti-feminine sting out of Mozart's Masonic rituals. As a filmmaker, Bergman has never been particularly comfortable out of his own time and place. He has little genuine feeling for period, and thus it was to be expected that he would not try to invade Mozart's century. What is most heroic about Bergman's adaptation, however, is his suppression of his own neurotic skepticism within earshot of Mozart's exquisite sweetness. Bergman has returned to the summery sweetness of his "Summer Interlude" period with the pink, gleaming flesh of the boy genii singing down to Papageno, a moment of such pure, joyous sensuality as to make all the porn palaces along Third Avenue shrivel up in envy. It was at this precise moment, I felt, that Bergman illuminated Mozart's "The Magic Flute" with his (Bergman's) own magic lantern.

