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The Silent Touch

United Kingdom/Poland/Denmark 1992

Director: Krzysztof Zanussi

Certificate

15

Distributor

Mayfair Entertainment

Production Companies

Mark Forstater
Productions (London)/
Tor Film Group
(Warsaw)/Metronome
Productions (Lyngby)
With the participation
of British Screen/
The European
Co-production Fund
(UK)/The Danish Film
Institute/Sandrews
Film & Theatre AB/The
Swedish Film Institute

Executive Producer

Tor:

Ryszard Straszewski

Producer

Mark Forstater

Co-producers

Mads Egmont
Christensen
Krzysztof Zanussi

Associate Producers

Raymond Day
Michał Szczerbic

Production Co-ordinators

Jan Janik
Maggie Kosowicz

Production Manager

Vibeke Windelow

Location Managers

Grazyna Kozłowska
Karin Trolle

Casting

Tracey Seaward

Assistant Directors

Marek Brodzki
Magdalena Szwarcbart
Krzysztof Maj
Marianne Moritzen

Screenplay

Peter Morgan
Mark Wadlow

Story

Krzysztof Zanussi
Edward Zebrowski

Director of Photography

Jarosław Zamojda

Editor

Marek Denys

Production Designer

Ewa Braun

Music

Wojciech Kilar

Music Extracts

"Song" by Claude
Debussy, Paul Bourget,
performed by K.
Mierzejewska; "Bolero"
by Maurice Ravel;
"Klaszczmy W Dlonie"
by Mikołaj Gomolka;
"Sonata for 4 Hands",
"Sonata for Violins and
Piano" by Wolfgang
Amadeus Mozart;
"Progress II" by The
Team 'Armia'; "Japan"
by Tomasz 'Kciuk'
Jaworski; "Exodus"
by Wojciech Kilar
performed by WOSPRI
TV Orchestra, Katowice
and the Polish Radio
Choir of Krakow

Music Consultant

Malgorzata Jaworska

Costume Design

Dorota Roqueplo

Wardrobe

Monika Sajko

Make-up

Anna Adamek
Grazyna Dabrowska

Titles

Plume Partners

Sound Recordists

Wiesława Dembinska

Music

Michał Gola

Jacek Zietkowski

Dolby stereo

Sound Re-Recordist

Richard King

Body Consultant

Robert Lloyd

Adviser

Henning Ornbak

Cast

Max von Sydow

Henry Kesdi

Lothaire Bluteau

Stefan Bugajski

Sarah Miles

Helena Kesdi

Sofie Grabol

Annette Berg

Aleksander Bardini

Professor Jerzy Kern

Peter Hesse Overgaard

Joseph Kesdi

Lars Lunoe

Doctor

Slawomira Lozinska

Doctor's Wife

Trevor Cooper

Muller

Stanisław Brejdygant

Maier

Beata Tyszkiewicz

Gelda

Maja Plaszyńska

Baby Thomas

Peter Thurrell

Wiktor Zborowski

Krystyna Mierzejewska

Stanisław Holly

Catherine Thornborrow

Eugenia Herman

Interviewees

Piotr Wojtowicz

Wasia Maslennikov

Television Crew

Krystyna Chmielewski

Secretary

8,612 feet

96 minutes

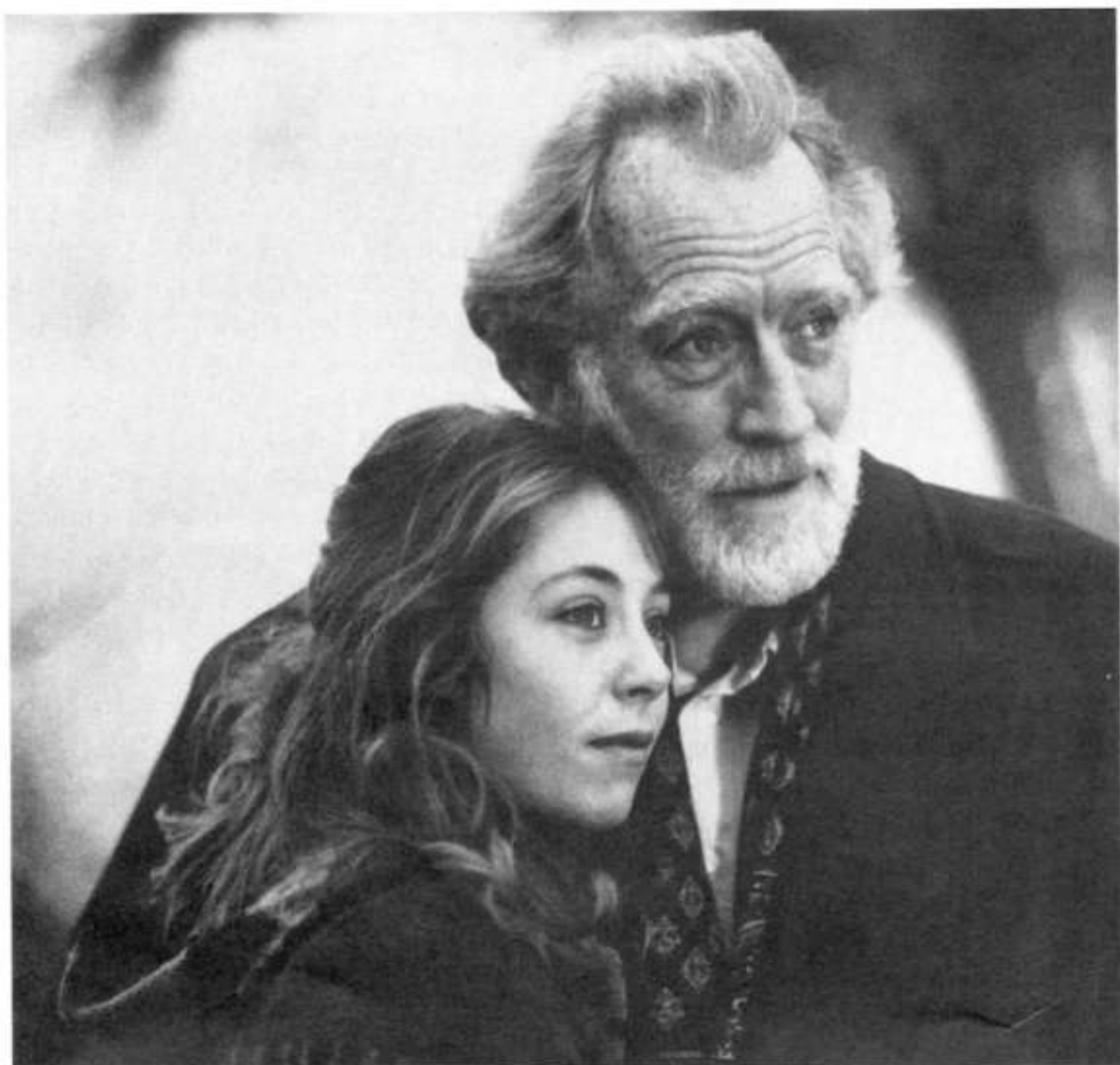
tance of Kesdi, who remains unconvinced that the silence that descended on Kesdi after the death of his first wife in the Holocaust can ever be broken. In their house set in its own woods, Helena Kesdi tries to interest the sick and reclusive Henry in an offer from his nephew Joseph to finance a relaunch of his career. Joseph and his associates are thrown out. Simultaneously Stefan arrives and is seen lurking in the woods. Henry grabs his gun, but Stefan manages to slip his letter to the sceptical Helena. Next day Stefan darts into the house, tells Henry that his bad back is caused by sleeping over a stream that runs beneath the house and counsels a change of bedroom. The furious Henry knifes him in the wrist and Stefan retreats to the woods.

The next night Henry moves his bedding to the other side of the house and his back pain eases. He invites Stefan for breakfast. Stefan plays him the refrain, which Henry recognises as a Jewish melody he once tried to use. He orders that Stefan be given the spare room. That night Stefan cures him of asthma by applying pressure to his temples. Henry insists that he is an angel. Henry throws himself into work and asks for a musical secretary. That night he goes to Helena's bed for the first time in years. Next morning, Stefan finds Henry a secretary in the young conservatoire student Annette Berg. Henry's doctor insists that the return to work may kill him. Annette arrives for work and Henry discusses music and flirts with her. Stefan arranges a date with Annette, which sends Henry into a rage. The date goes badly, Annette rejecting Stefan's advances. As Henry's music progresses, so does his feeling for Annette, and they begin an affair. As the music and the love affair become more intense, Stefan suffers excruciating pain in his wounded arm.

In a television interview on completion of the new work, Henry ascribes his new creativity to his guardian angel. Stefan's wound now bleeds regularly and at Henry's birthday party he collapses and is rushed to hospital. Rehearsals proceed, while the doctor warns Stefan that Henry's symptoms are unmistakable. Annette tells Helena that she is pregnant. Helena visits Stefan in hospital and orders him to leave as soon as he recovers. Henry conducts the gala premiere of his opus while Stefan and the doctor watch on TV relay. At the thunderous climax, Henry collapses and is taken to hospital, where Stefan is found to have recovered. A year later, Stefan, now teaching music in Cracow, gets a telephone call from Helena summoning him to visit the dying Henry. She and Annette are taking care of him and Annette's asthmatic baby son. Stefan tells Henry that he can no longer help him, and Henry, now reconciled to death, comforts him. Stefan picks up the asthmatic child and the boy's wheezing stops.

The Silent Touch is about art and inspiration, art and goodness, art and life. It combines lengthy dis- ►

In Cracow a young music student, Stefan Bugajski, hears in his sleep a haunting sequence of notes which he recognises as being by Henry Kesdi, a composer who has been silent for the last 40 years. Determined to help Kesdi complete the refrain, he embarks for Denmark, where Kesdi is now living with his wife Helena. He takes with him a letter from his teacher, Professor Kern, an old acquaint-



Get some sleep: Sofie Grabol, Max von Sydow

◀ cussion of these subjects with the creation of a new work by the composer Henry Kesdi. But films about music are notoriously difficult to bring off, as another central European director, István Szabó, demonstrated recently with *Meeting Venus*. And *The Silent Touch*, as a film about art, is neither original nor inspired. It is not just that the sub-Orffian oratorio performed at the climax (in fact, "Exodus" by Wojciech Kilar, whose music can be heard in Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula*) is, for all its thunder, unconvincing as the release of imprisoned genius. It is also that all the talk of the victory of art and goodness over silence and evil lacks substance – the perfunctory treatment of the theme of genocide is typical in this respect – just as the extravagant complaints Henry makes about modern music as a "pollution of silence", though occasionally amusing (it all reminds him of toenail clippings), are predictable and evasive.

This predictability extends to the characters – selfish, irascible artist Henry, long-suffering but loyal wife Helena, vital young muse Annette – and to the doggedly articulated plot, in which the intrusions into the household of both Stefan and Annette follow heavily signposted paths. The dialogue too, despite its regular returning to the subject of passion, seems etiolated and highmindedly old-fashioned. *The Silent Touch* is the first project to have benefited from the European Co-Production Fund and the script, originally a story by Zanussi and a Polish collaborator, then worked into a screenplay by Peter Morgan and Mark Wadlow, shows signs of the statelessness such projects risk.

In another respect, though, international co-operation has worked well. The initial scenes in Cracow with Stefan waking from nightmare like a pale, haunted Dostoevskian youth, and talking feverishly to his professor (Aleksander Bardini, the doctor in Kies-

lowski's *Decalogue 2*) and his later sojourn in the Danish woods are the most confident in the film, with an assured sense of place and behaviour. Central to the meaning of *The Silent Touch* is the enigma of the 'angel' Stefan and his mysterious effect on Henry. In the *Acts of the Apostles* St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is described as "full of grace and power," as doing "great wonders and signs among the people," for whom "his face was like the face of an angel." This Stefan bursts into Henry's household as astonishingly as Terence Stamp in Pasolini's *Teorema*, and Henry himself is initially bemused and resistant (both to art and to goodness), once even calling him Mephistopheles. What is the nature of their symbiosis? Stefan himself seems to have no life – no talent as a composer, no success with Annette – and yet he alone can restore Henry both physically and artistically. His wound, caused by Henry, bleeds like stigmata at the moments of Henry's greatest passion. And at the end, Henry, reconciled to art, life and death, is able to console him in return. Though this allegory of the power of goodness remains opaque and not entirely persuasive, nevertheless it is precisely its lack of explicitness that makes it the resonating core of the film.

As Henry, the petulant, tyrannical genius, Max von Sydow has little to do that he has not done many times before – except perhaps to smash so much crockery. But Sarah Miles, rarely seen these days, brings a taut conviction to the fading Helena. And Lothaire Bluteau displays the same startling intensity he showed in *Jesus of Montreal* and *Black Robe* in the central role of Stefan, by turns exuberant and anguished, confident and bewildered. Asked by the doctor why he was so determined that Henry should complete his opus, he says, "I just wanted to get some sleep."

Julian Gaffy