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Ingmar Bergman and his wife—"They live in, and with, music. . . ."

## INGMAR BERGMAN, THE LISTENER

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SR: Recordings

Ingmar Bergman, the Listener, by  
Oscar Hedlund

By OSCAR HEDLUND

**I**N the script of his film *The Silence*, Ingmar Bergman discloses a great love and passion that he most often only hints at:

On the desk are few sheets of paper completely covered with Ester's microscopic handwriting. Certain words are in block letters, however: HADJEK = soul, MAGROV = anxiety, fear, KRASCJ = joy. After this she had written: "We listened to Bach. A moment of peace. I felt no fear of dying. . . ."

This fragment of a sketch from Bergman's film-making says everything about a basic need always to be found with Bergman—namely, music. Music, often that of Johann Sebastian Bach, has an important role in his films. This fact shows clearly in *The Silence*. Here Ing-

The author of this article is music editor of *Rosteri Radio/TV*, official magazine of the Swedish Broadcasting Corporation.

mar Bergman has replaced the musical intimations and symbols of his earlier films with thick, passionate strokes of the brush. The word *Bach* appears intensely in the strange, incomprehensible language spoken by the people in the town of Timoka. Sturdy, confident harpsichord music suddenly shines forth through the silence of God and the solitude of the people. Ingmar Bergman's visions give us no consolation; this he assigns to the evangelist Johann Sebastian Bach. *The Silence* conveys the message that the music conveys to Ingmar Bergman: "We listened to Bach. A moment of peace. I felt no fear of dying. . . ."

I visited the home of Ingmar Bergman and his wife Kabi Laretei. They live in Djursholm, one of Stockholm's most exclusive suburbs. Bergman and his wife, however, judge their surroundings by other standards: light, air, silence. From their home a great meadow is visible; it seems to have detached itself from a pine forest. They live on a back

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road, and it is hard to find one's way there if one has not been given special directions.

We sat in the music room, enjoying silence and strawberries. Ingmar Bergman had come home after a hard day at Film City, where he was making a comedy in color. Tired after his day's work of filming, he was circling a little before landing. It must be wonderful to come home to a music room like this. The light from the meadow and the garden flowed around the legs of the grand piano and the cembalo and made the instruments appear weightless. The black grand piano seemed deferentially to stand on tiptoe.

Ingmar Bergman is often asked what has made him put his roots down so deeply in Sweden, what made him so Swedish in his artistic creativeness. His answer is that he does not really know but that probably it is the light of Sweden. He is sensitive to light, its composition and color. He discovered this abroad, in the experience of contrasts. In the Alps, he suffered grievously from the hard brilliance of the light. The light of southern France, he says, could bring him to madness: light there breaks its way in with brutal force. And darkness—not the overadvertised sable velvet, but a black sack—falls like a headsman's ax. The Mediterranean is so oddly blue; he has never been able to comprehend it.

**S**WEDISH light, however, is slow in its coming; the pendulum of nature swings solemnly from winter to summer, whose advent is a time of steadily heightening bliss. Light is a stage effect of nature. If the film and theatre are organs of light whose keys can be played, there is much that their players can learn.

Immediately above their music room is Ingmar Bergman's workroom. Käbi Laretei, a concert pianist at practice, and Ingmar Bergman working in the room above—how does the combination work? Very well, where the classics are concerned; badly, with modern music. This is probably so because the classical composers represent what one has grown accustomed to; Bach and Beethoven and Mozart can be screened off as a magical drop-curtain. But modern music affects Ingmar Bergman like a roof collapsing about his ears.

They live in and with music. The consequence is a virulent hypersensitivity to sound. Bergman cannot stand the noise of lawnmowers, vacuum cleaners, untuned pianos, and pilots of aircraft who bawl announcements over loudspeakers. Do aircraft companies deliberately use bad loudspeakers? Sound equipment on airplanes deforms the voices of pilots (in themselves undoubt-

edly human enough) into thunderous instruments of terror. Käbi has more patience, but she shrinks from badly soundproofed hotel rooms. A concert pianist can accustom herself to untuned pianos, however, for one cannot have everything one desires in this world.

Bergman begins to talk about the relationship of film and music. "My idea is that they are much the same," he says. "They are means of expression and communication that bypass man's reason and touch his emotional centers. The film isn't just a picture. Music isn't just a sound. Both of them work with rhythmic sequences, harmonies, colors, relations, forms. As a creator of films, I have learned an enormous amount from my dedication to music, which is a major part of my life. I see more and more clearly that the film as an art form is approaching a discovery of its essential self. It should communicate psychic states, not merely project pictures of external actions. Communication of this kind has always been the basic function of music."

"How do you perceive this connection between film and music? As something immediately palpable, I mean?"

"In the difficulty in finding music of the kind we call 'film music.' The term 'film music' is really absurd. It's a matter of logic—you just can't accompany music by music. So you have to insert the music into the film as a new dimension. Music reinforces a depicted mood. The pictured word describes it."

Ingmar Bergman's selections of film music have been complex processes of searching and rejection. For his *Through a Glass Darkly* he found the Saraband from Bach's Suite in D minor for violoncello solo. Why Bach? And why this saraband?

"Because I thought that only Bach and only that passage from Bach's music were *ethically* motivated. It was the contrast with the genuine accompaniment to the whole milieu: the sea, the cries of birds, the wind, a foghorn, etc. The sound of the foghorn was harder to capture than the music. For a long time I was searching for the exact note and precise shade of sound in that damned foghorn. We found a fantastic contraption after a nerve-racking trial audition of foghorns. The one you can hear in *Through a Glass Darkly* is as old as the hills, a most ingenious contrivance that regulates itself by means of real Chinese hair. Damp makes the hair contract and the thing roars of its own accord! Isn't it fantastic?"

"Bach. Well, Bach was to be one of the leitmotifs in my film trilogy: *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light*, *The Silence*. But I found that it wouldn't work. The same exquisite saraband was quite wrong in *Winter Light*. It was a

symbol of eternity, a pulsebeat of nature, in *Through a Glass Darkly*. In *Winter Light*, it was simply a sentimentality. There's no faith there, just the penetrating vision and a clean sweep with no response. Bach won't do there at all."

Ingmar Bergman uses Bach's music in *The Silence*. The silence of God is the leading motif of the film—God's negative imprint on the world. The fragile music of a cembalo is heard suddenly from a portable radio; the slow twenty-fifth movement from the Goldberg Variations. For an instant the world shimmers with light: emptiness and silence are thrust into the background. From the director's point of view, Bach has enormous power.

Igor Stravinsky speaks enthusiastically of Bergman's version of *The Rake's Progress*. In one of the opera's most sublime passages Bergman allows light to accompany sound. It is the scene at the madhouse. The madmen writhe in their private hells, without rhythm, torn from the context of human behavior. Then the cradle song comes—the poor wretches become still, their distorted outlines are smoothed out, the lunatics become human. This miracle of transformation takes place in music and a sculptural transmutation of light. Rightly chosen, music can have this function: to cause relief and to mirror patterns of behavior.

**I**NGMAR BERGMAN'S feeling for music is not "intellectual," not the enforced product of pedagogical processes. It has shaped itself out of a series of experiences. His musical contacts in childhood were brief. A pastor's son, Bergman went dutifully with his father and mother to concerts that made no enduring impression on him. A friend of the family, an elderly man who played the fiddle in his spare time, gave small performances in the Bergman household. They could cause a riot in the nursery. Young Ingmar was haunted by gloomy visions of the future and was afflicted by violent attacks of weeping. These violin sessions at nursery distance left bruises on his musical soul; even today he often finds violin music unendurable, though it no longer causes tears. He believes that there is a sensitive violin-nerve in his body. And not all violinists play like Isaac Stern, one of the few who have managed to achieve an *entente* with Ingmar Bergman's central nervous system.

A sound technician at Svensk Filmindustri—Bergman's company, where all his films are made—said once that Ingmar Bergman "hears so damn much." During the filming of *The Virgin Spring* he complained of bad sound quality. The technicians disagreed with him, saying with fatherly smiles that their trained ears were unable to pick up



anything unusual. Bergman was adamant, however, and discussion ended with an intermission, so that a special apparatus for micro-analyzing the sound track could be obtained. This disclosed distortion, but at such a low volume that a normal human ear was unable to detect it. Bergman may thus refer to the diaries of his own sound technicians if his remarkable sensitivity to sound is questioned.

"What can you tolerate? What is your favorite instrument—a little flute?"

"By all means, no. I'm in love with percussion. When I was a child the sound of drums could put me into an ecstasy. The passion's still there. The music in *Sawdust and Tinsel* was written by Karl-Birger Blomdahl, fantastic music for forty wind and brass instruments, and on top of it all an unheard-of collection of percussion instruments."

"Speaking of exclusive things—Bach, light, silence, the Swedish music professor Karl-Birger Blomdahl—what sort of sound will there be in your next film, the color comedy?"

"Yes, We Have No Bananas' . . ."

"Pardon?"

"I said, 'Yes, We Have No Bananas'. I will name the film *Not to Speak of All These Women*, and I had lots of fun making it. The music is gorgeous—a finely balanced, creamy slapstick in notes. I can hardly wait for the opening night, which I hope will start the Bergman Ballyhoo Era."

Ingmar Bergman became a gloomy Wagnerian at the age of ten. Unsuspecting, he went to *Tannhäuser* and was a fanatical devotee of Richard Wagner for many years afterward. He got himself a regular seat at the Stockholm Opera. Two years ago, when he was staging Igor Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress*, he returned to the seat of his erstwhile bliss and tried it again to see how it felt. The seat felt just as before. Richard Wagner, however, did not.

Ingmar Bergman's development in film and theatre has been described and analyzed by all the world's experts. The musical secondary theme—which is of course a main theme—is liable to be bypassed. Journalistic accounts of the Bergman phenomenon find that his capacity for *listening* has no dramatic value. It makes a more vivid impression, apparently, to stake on Bergman the Demon, Bergman the Magician, cracking the whip of his eloquence and squeezing the souls of actors until the essence of every last drop of dialogue has been expressed.

Listening. The dialogue of chamber music. Counterpoint and legato slurs of word-music. Strictness and form in the verbal score, the interpreter's tenseness and sensibility. These are merely a few key words that suggest truths and dis-

tinctive qualities in the world of Ingmar Bergman. Musicians idolize Bergman.

When the news of his marriage reached the red-rimmed eyes of editors of gossipy weeklies, their immediate reaction was to dispatch a battalion of story-writers with general orders from H.Q.: find Romance—the world-famous director and lady-killer deigns to wed the lovely concert pianist, the aristocratic-looking Käbi Laretei!

**T**HERE was much furor in Sweden during the combat of Ingmar Bergman with the press. Police had to protect the newlyweds. Journalists from abroad could be seen lurking in the garden of his house. He is big game for journalist snipers, who are hard as nails and not at all retiring. Bergman respects the work and ambitions of others. But he selects his interviewers in accordance with the principle that those who apply scorched-earth methods in interviewing will have their own earth scorched by Ingmar Bergman. His and his wife's private life has never been stage-lit. The press has been—and is—put on a starvation diet, likely to perish of sheer malnutrition through lack of Bergmaniana. It was perhaps this magnificent and yet always amiable unapproachability that kept alive a delirious popular interest in "what it's like to be married to Ingmar Bergman."

He reminds Käbi of what it was like in England the year they were married. She gives a slight smile.

I believe Sweden knows them well, nevertheless. We have television, of course. There, we have seen and met Ingmar Bergman in the film studio and Käbi Laretei in the music studio. Her musical programs, in which she talks of music and its people after the manner of Leonard Bernstein, are pearls of gay

matter-of-factness and instructive elegance. A TV series called *Ingmar Bergman Makes a Film* killed the claptrap about his alleged "fiendishness" and hypnotic séances. In it, we followed the birth of *Winter Light*, were graciously invited to step into the maestro's renowned workshop where, legend has it, the fires of his genius were stoked. There were many, I believe, who were astonished. The "demon" appeared to be nothing of the kind. His directing was made up largely of silence. He never shouts. He listens, like the first violin in a string quartet, like the conductor confronting his orchestra.

Commenting on his chief role, that of a listener, Bergman said, "My first task, of course, is to be the public. Actors feel intensely how I look at them and how I listen to them. It's the public that inspires them. I have to look and listen in a way that will make them bring everything out of themselves. If I slacken, they will, too."

"There has been so much writing and talk about caprice and prima donna temperament. But shouting is absurd; it's like mistreating and scratching your instruments. Do you think actors would be able to put up with me if I did such tricks? Anyway, I would have accepted one of the offers I've had and fled abroad, long ago. To Hollywood, for instance—that's a place where I could raise hell and play the prima donna."

One of Bergman's actors has observed, "He concludes pacts of mutual confidence. His perfect organization, which he sets out with a pedantic demand for exactitude, is a matter of external conditions. What is central is his knowledge of people and his capacity for making us feel sure of ourselves. I believe his foremost quality as a director

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Käbi Laretei (Mrs. Bergman)—"Her programs . . . are pearls of gay matter-of-factness."

—Tillhör Bildarkivet.



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is his capacity for *listening*." Ingmar Bergman's profession is that of a listener. And so is that of his wife the musician. They found immediate points of contact with each other in music. One wonders, without a clue, what it was she played for him during the first musical session.

"Octaves," recalls Ingmar Bergman. "Käbi played octaves from the bottom up and from top to bottom. They were extraordinarily provocative."

That, perhaps, is consistent with their musical life together. A row of sparkling top columns in a hard passage of practicing attracts him more than neat exhibition music does. Building, of course, always starts with the foundations, no matter how uninteresting they may be for the onlooker, who saves his admiration for the ornament. In their discussions about music one often hears the word "analysis." It is a necessary methodology for them, keeping music's outworks in their proper place, a moral principle in art.

Käbi Laretei means much for Ingmar Bergman's experience of music. And Ingmar Bergman means much for her experience of theater. But they have violently contrasting origins. Käbi Laretei came to Sweden from Estonia, a refugee driven from a sheltered existence to make a fresh start in alien surroundings. She is the daughter of a minister of state, brought up in a cultivated social environment. She received a substantial musical education, but not until her first years as a refugee did she begin to make headway in her career as a concert pianist. She was successful and became a big name in Sweden early in the 1950s.

Käbi Laretei's position as an artist has nothing to do with her being the wife of Ingmar Bergman. The two make a precise distinction between private life and professional life. What would it profit her to be the wife of Ingmar Bergman if she is to devote herself to music? It is her playing that matters, nothing but her playing. Music is a manifestation of sincerity and equity.

Their son, Daniel Sebastian, is two years old. He arrived in the middle of a sabbatical year that they intended to devote entirely to joint studies of Johann Sebastian Bach. Probably no composer in modern times has ever enjoyed such exclusive attention as this. But little Daniel Sebastian came as a modulation, and the Bach Year was postponed. Then the Royal Dramatic Theater came and asked Ingmar Bergman to become their leader. It was a dark threat to their Bach Year, but a brilliant dawn for newly awakened Swedish culture.

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