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Liszt and Mahler in the postmodern filmic visions of Ken Russell

ABSTRACT: The British film and television director Ken Russell is esteemed principally for creating filmic biographies of composers of classical music. In the 70s, he shot his most original films on musical subjects: fictionalised, highly individual composer biographies of Mahler (*Mahler*) and Liszt (*Lisztomania*), which are the subject of the article. Neither of the films is in the least a realistic documentary biography, since Russell's principal intention was to place historical biographical facts in cultural contexts that were different from the times in which Mahler and Liszt lived and worked. This gave rise to a characteristically postmodern collision of different narrative and expressive categories. Russell's pictures remain quite specific commercial works, exceptional tragifarces, in which the depiction of serious problems is at once accompanied by their subjection to grotesque deformation and the demonstration of their absurdities or denaturalisation. The approach proposed by this British director, in which serious issues are accompanied by elements of triteness, is a hallmark of his style. The director's musical interests are reflected by the fundamental role of music in the structure of his cinematographic works. The choice of musical works also denotes a kind of aesthetic choice on the director's part, especially when the composers' biography comes into play.

KEYWORDS: Ken Russell, Gustav Mahler, Franz Liszt, film, postmodern

1. Ken Russell – outline biography

The British film and television director Ken Russell, who died on 27 November 2011 (b. 1927), is esteemed principally for creating filmic biographies of composers of classical music. Indeed, musical subjects played a dominant role in his creative output, as he also directed film versions of operas (Gounod's *Faust*, Boito's *Mefistofele* and others) and musicals[1].

Russell's first films on musical subjects, made from the 1960s onwards, were documentary composer biopics, produced mainly for the British educational television series *Monitor*, *Omnibus* and *Sunday Night*.[2] Yet from the beginning of the

[1] See also: *The Internet Movie Datebase*, accessed December 10, 2011: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0001692.

[2] *Gordon Jacob* (1959); *A House in Bayswater: Prokofiev* (1961); *Elgar* (1962); *Béla Bartók* (1964); *The Debussy Film* (1965); *Frederick Delius* (1968); *The Planets* (the music of Gustav Holst, 1983); *Vaughn Williams: A Symphonic Portrait* (1984); *The Strange Affliction of Anton*

70s Russell began to combine the biographical aspect with a highly original and bold way of understanding the place and role of the music of particular composers. A breakthrough work in this respect proved to be *Dance of the Seven Veils* (1970), in which Richard Strauss was depicted as a Nazi, and his music was used, among other things, for a scene in which Nazi soldiers torture a Jew they have captured. The film caused a scandal, and the composer's heirs withdrew the right for Strauss's music to be used in the film.[3]

The peak of Russell's career came during the 1970s and 80s, when his best known films were made. In the 70s, Russell also shot his most original films on musical subjects: fictionalised, highly individual composer biographies of Tchaikovsky, Mahler and Liszt, as well as the musical film *Tommy* (1975), his characteristic response to the rock opera genre that was popular at that time. In both *Tommy* and the Liszt film, the lead was played by Roger Daltrey, lead singer with the rock band The Who, highly rated during the 70s.

Russell's films owe their exceptional originality and uniquely visionary character to many factors: his controversial treatment of biographical categories, flouting or deliberate distorting of historical facts, introduction into the narrative of elements taken from various styles, times and cultures, mixing of the realms of high and popular culture, and also focussing on subjects considered culturally taboo. All these features of Russell's style also helped form his reputation as a filmmaker representative of the postmodern trend. At the same time, however, the highly individual poetics of Russell's films were the reason for the criticism and censorship they were given, as well as the relatively limited reception, not befitting the high artistic and cognitive qualities of these works.

2. *Mahler* – action and subject matter

The action of the film devoted to the life and work of Mahler is played out during the ailing composer's train journey with his wife Alma from the USA back to Vienna. The inconveniences of the journey afford the director an opportunity to review their marital relations. Every so often, the mysterious Max appears. He

Bruckner (1990); *Andrew Lloyd Webber: The Premiere Collection Encore* (1992); *The Secret Life of Arnold Bax* (1992); *The Mystery of Dr Martinu* (1993); *Elgar: Fantasy of a Composer on a Bicycle* (2002). Russells' television films are described in: Paul Sutton, "Ken Russell at the BBC, 1959–1970", in: *Ken Russell: Re-viewing England's Last Mannerist*, ed. Kevin M. Flanagan (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 3-23.

[3] The Nazi context in this film resulted from historical facts: Strauss was the first chair of the Third Reich's Chamber of Music and responsible for musical life in Germany. See Teresa Brodniewicz, "Za i przeciw hitleryzmowi – muzyka w Trzeciej Rzeszy" [For and Against Hitlerism – Music in the Third Reich], in: *Muzyka i totalitaryzm*, ed. Maciej Jabłoński et al. (Poznań: Ars Nova, 1996), 23.

personifies all Alma's (previous and doubtless subsequent) lovers and partners[4]. Mahler wants Alma to choose between him and Max[5].

At one station along the way, a journalist (introducing himself as Hugo Wolf[6]) enters Mahler's compartment and interviews the composer about his music, his reasons for giving up his work in New York, and his religious beliefs. Later there also appears a doctor, who examines the composer and convinces him that he must go to hospital at once. Along the route, Max leaves the train, and on arriving in Vienna Mahler dismisses the doctor, stating that regardless of the circumstances he will live with Alma forever.

Over the course of the journey, the composer has flashbacks of important and crucial events from his life and artistic work. First there is an episode from a holiday with Alma in Maiernigg, during which he composes. Later there is a longer scene where he returns to his childhood and family home, when he grows aware of his musical interests and his desire to become a composer. The next phase in these reflections is linked to the metaphysical domain: Mahler talks with his daughters about angels and the soul's immortality, then has a macabre vision of his own funeral, which he observes while sealed in the coffin alive.

One important strand in these recollections deals with his Jewish origins and his conversion to Catholicism, forced upon him by professional considerations (the wish to be appointed director of the Vienna Opera). A traumatic, though fictional, encounter with Emperor Franz Joseph and a visionary scene with Cosima Wagner form the central part of the film. Equally crucial are questions linked to the suicide of his brother Otto, and also with the death of Mahler's daughter Maria from scarlatina.

3. *Lisztomania* – action and subject matter

The titular Lisztomania is a term coined by Heinrich Heine for the reception of the virtuosic performances given by Liszt during the first half of the nineteenth century, which mainly thrilled the female section of audiences and

[4] Alma Mahler (née Schindler, 1870-1964) had many romances with prominent creative artists, including the composer Alexander Zemlinsky and the painters Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka. After Mahler's death, she married the architect Walther Gropius, and then the poet Franz Werfel. See: Peter Franklin, "Mahler(-Werfel) Alma Maria", in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. 15 (London: Macmillan, 2002), 601-602.

[5] Cast of *Mahler*: Robert Powell (Mahler), Georgina Hale (Alma Mahler), Richard Morant (Max), Lee Montague (Bernhard Mahler), Miriam Karlin (Aunt Rosa), David Collings (Hugo Wolf), Rosalie Crutchley (Marie Mahler), Antonia Elllis (Cosima Wagner).

[6] This was made up by the director; the composer Hugo Wolf – strongly influenced by Mahler's music – was in a lunatic asylum from 1898, where he died in 1903. Mahler's journey from the USA to Vienna took place in 1911. See: Eric Sams, Sousan Youens, "Wolf Hugo", in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 27, 472.

provoked unprecedented frenzied reactions[7]. This historical fact prompted Russell to look at Liszt's biography from the perspective of his numerous romances and liaisons with women. Yet the issue of fundamental importance for the film's narration results from a comparison of the person and work of Liszt with those of Richard Wagner. In this comparison, strongly linked to nationalist ideology (mainly German, but also Hungarian), Wagner is presented as the personification of ontological evil, whilst his music would lead to the denaturalisation of reality and the rise of fascism. The figure and oeuvre of Liszt, meanwhile, are charged with redeeming the world and restoring the dominance of love.[8]

The body of the film comprises loosely connected scenes resulting from Liszt's biography, and also from a fictitious rivalry between Liszt and Wagner. The two composers first clash during a piano recital, when Liszt is improvising on the opera *Rienzi*, weaving a banal little waltz into Wagner's exalted music.[9] This moves Wagner to leave the hall ostentatiously and leads to further perturbation.

The film's second tableau portrays the domestic life of Liszt with Marie d'Agoult and their three children. This scene deals with the composer's difficulties with preserving the right proportions between his pianistic career and his personal life, and it also sheds light on the complex relationship between Liszt and his daughter Cosima. The lengthy episode that follows is set in the St Petersburg salon of Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, who is depicted as a sexually dissolute, demonic dominatrix. Carolyne takes on Mephistophelean traits, suggesting to Liszt that he will become a great composer if he places himself entirely in her power.

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[7] During the 1840s, Heine wrote publicistic pieces on the musical life of Paris. On 25 April 1844, he wrote the column "Musikalische Saison von 1844, Erster Bericht", in which he first introduced the notion of Lisztomania. This text was published in the collection *Lutezia*. See Heinrich Heine, *Vermischte Schriften*, vol. 3 *Lutezia. Zweiter Teil* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Kampe, 1854), 271-289. "So dachte ich, so erklärte ich mir die Lisztomanie, und ich nahm sie für ein Merkmal des politisch und freien Zustandes jenseits des Rheines. Aber ich habe mich doch geirrt, und das merkte ich vorige Woche im italienischen Opernhaus, wo Liszt sein erstes Concert gab [...]. Und dennoch, wie gewaltig, wie erschütternd wirkte schon seine bloße Erscheinung! Wie ungestüm war der Beifall, der ihm entgegenklatschte! Auch Bouquets wurden ihm zu Füßen geworfen! Es war ein erhabener Anblick, wie der Triumphator mit Seelenruhe die Blumensträuße auf sich regnen ließ [...]. Sonderbar! dachte ich, diese Pariser, die den Napoleon gesehen, der eine Schlacht nach der anderen liefern mußte, um ihre Aufmerksamkeit zu fesseln, diese jubeln jetzt unserm Franz Liszt! Und welcher Jubel! Eine wahre Verrücktheit, wie sie unerhöht in den Annalen der Furore" (Ibid., 279-281). See also: Alan Walker, *Franz Liszt: The Virtuoso Years (1811-1847)*, (New York-London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 371-372.

[8] Cast of *Lisztomania*: Roger Daltrey (Franz Liszt), Paul Nicholas (Richard Wagner), Sara Kestelman (Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein), Ringo Starr (The Pope), Rike Wakeman (Thor), Fiona Lewis (Marie d'Agoult), Veronica Quilligan (Cosima Wagner), Andre Reilly (Hans von Bülow), Imogen Claire (George Sand).

[9] A work by Liszt is used in this excerpt: *Phantasiestück über Motive aus Rienzi "Santo Spirito cavaliere" von Richard Wagner* (1859).

Once they have signed a pact, there ensues a period of bliss for Liszt with Carolyne in Weimar.[10] The pope refuses to consent to their union, but anoints Liszt as the greatest Catholic composer and sets before him the goal of defeating Wagner – the prince of darkness, whose music is on the blacklist of forbidden works. This decision was motivated mainly by Wagner's experiments leading to the creation of a Superman. The final confrontation between the two composers occurs when Liszt defeats and kills Wagner by the power of his music. Cosima, who practises voodoo on her own father, wreaks revenge on him and kills him by means of magic.

The earthly reality, however, is terrorised by the Superman that Wagner created: Golem-Siegfried-Frankenstein-Hitler. Liszt, residing in heaven, devoted to performing his music with the women of his life (including Cosima), is appointed by God as the saviour of mankind. With the women beside him, Liszt boards a fantastical vehicle and sets off for Earth, killing the monster and returning to heaven with a song on his lips.[11]

4. Historical faithfulness and poetic licence

Historical figures are depicted in both Russell's films, and the canvas of events is constructed by the real-life fortunes of the two composers. The director clearly seeks to place Liszt and Mahler in the context of other people with whom they were in contact or had closer relationships. He is particularly fond of bringing in people from the musical world or figures directly associated with each of the composers: in *Lisztomania*, a group of eminent musicians from Liszt's day appear – Wagner, Rossini, Berlioz and Schumann – as do women who played a crucial role in the life of the titular character: Marie d'Agoult, Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein, George Sand [Aurore Dudevant] and Liszt's daughter Cosima. In the narration of *Mahler*, meanwhile, Russell concentrates more on the composer's personal life, introducing the most important figures from his family circle: Alma, and his children, parents and siblings.

However, neither of the films discussed here is in the least a realistic documentary biography, since Russell presents a highly individual look at the two characters, not always based on fact. His principal intention was to place historical biographical facts in cultural contexts that were different from the times in which

[10] Liszt intended to wed Princess Carolyne von Sayn-Wittgenstein and even composed a symphonic poem for the occasion: *Festklänge*. In 1860, the princess even obtained the consent of Pope Pius IX to divorce her husband, but later she withdrew from the planned marriage to Liszt. See: Alan Walker, Maria Eckhardt, Rena Charnin Mueller, "Liszt Franz", in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 14, 777.

[11] A precise analysis of the scenes in this film is contained in the article by Ross Care, "Ken Russell: *Lisztomania*", *Film Quarterly* 31 (1978/3), 55–61, accessed December 10, 2011: http://www.iainfisher.com/russell/ken-russell-article-lisztomania.html.

Mahler and Liszt lived and worked. This gave rise to a characteristically postmodern collision of different narrative and expressive categories.

Russell's main perspective is marked by a mixture of high and popular culture and a juxtaposing of images and types of narration referring to different aesthetic orders. One deliberate device is allusion to the communication principles of mass culture and to celebrity types of behaviour. The character of Liszt, in particular, is shaped in a way that is characteristic of the creation of pop stars: the suggestive scene of the recital during which Liszt behaves like a born showman brings a nineteenth-century manner of behaviour among salon idols into the domain of twentieth-century mass communication. This intention also informed the casting of Daltrey in the lead role: his musical expression and stage presence perfectly embody common notions regarding celebrities from the 1970s.

One element shared by both films is the perspective on twentieth-century European history, with the experience of German nationalism and fascism to the fore. In Russell's take, the timeless significance of the two composers results from the specific relations of their fortunes and their music to the further history and culture of Germany. Anti-Semitic attacks on Mahler in Austria presaged the expanding machine of Nazi insanity, regardless of the fact that the composer died long before Hitler came to power. In Liszt's music, meanwhile, the director sees a sort of ideological universality, a lack of embroilment in German nationalist issues. Russell suggests quite pointedly what public opinion sometimes appears to forget, namely that nineteenth-century Romantic love for one's nation gave rise to twentieth-century nationalism and totalitarianism. Thus a kind of counterweight to the dominance of the Germanic sphere is introduced by the Hungarian strand traced in *Lisztomania*, addressed in the context of the uprising in Hungary in 1848. This is also linked to Liszt's origins, and it is foregrounded through Hungarian national dress and the music of the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*.

Paradoxically, the central aesthetic issue of both films is the value and significance of the music of another composer: Wagner. Or perhaps it is more that the music and figure of Wagner are presented as a kind of mirror, into which the music aesthetics of Liszt and Mahler peer. In both films, Wagner's aesthetic outlook is coupled with fascist ideology. Becoming a national icon, the composer of *Der Ring* in a sense showed the works of other German composers their place. Russell draws from this assumption a fundamental premise for defining the music of Liszt and Mahler.

From this perspective, Mahler became a victim of the Wagner cult and the escalation of the Aryan idea. And though during his lifetime the Wagner-Mahler opposition was not as acute as Russell's film depicts it, Mahler's works were on the Third Reich's blacklist, and in the *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* the figure and oeuvre of Mahler were the subject of an exceptionally barbed attack from Nazi propaganda.[12] One may assume that Russell readily presents this aspect of

[12] *The Lexikon*, sponsored by the NSDAP, covered musicians of Jewish and semi-Jewish origins. Its aim was to disseminate information on non-Aryan artists, so as to make it impossible

the reception of Mahler's music in his picture, not without reason referring many times to the question of the composer's Jewish origins.

Russell deliberately distorts the relationship between Liszt and Wagner: Liszt becomes here an antagonist of Wagner, and the music of the composer of the *Faust Symphony* takes on the dimension of art that redeems the world, liberating it from the terror and destruction that result from the Wagnerian segregational madness. In *Lisztomania*, further confrontations between Liszt and Wagner form the axis of the entire narrative, propelling the film's drama: from Wagner's initial envy, stemming from Liszt's incomparable social, society and artistic position, through Wagner's scandalous liaison with Cosima, to Liszt's battle with Wagner – the vampire and mad inventor – and the ultimate settling of scores by the revenant Liszt with the incarnation of the Wagnerian Superman.

5. Function of the music

Russell's musical interests are reflected by the fundamental role of music in the structure of his cinematographic works. One might say that the music in these films always has a diegetic function, and so it is thematicised in the fictional action. The choice of musical works also denotes a kind of aesthetic choice on the director's part, especially when the composers' biography comes into play.

The approach adopted by Russell in these films in respect to the oeuvre of Liszt and Mahler seems different in each case. Whilst in *Mahler* he generally employs lengthier excerpts from original compositions by Mahler and Wagner, in *Lisztomania* he more often turns to electronic versions of works by Liszt and Wagner, and also introduces new works in the progressive rock style, composed by Rick Wakeman, a member of the rock group Yes.

The excerpts from Mahler's works refer to and illustrate the subject matter of the film. When Mahler tells Alma about the sources of his creative inspiration, which are generally linked to the sphere of nature, he has her listen to the sounds around her. In this scene, we hear excerpts from the Third Symphony, the movements of which – as we know from the testimony of Mahler's friends – he treated as tales of specific domains of being.[13] The parts of the film referring to the composer's emotional relationship with his wife, in turn, are illustrated with excerpts from the

for their works to be performed. Herbert Gerigk, Theophil Stengel, *Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* (Berlin: Verlag B. Hahnefeld, 1941), 168-171. See also: Jan Stęszewski, "*Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* z perspektywy współczesnej i polskiej" [*Lexikon der Juden in der Musik* from Contemporary and Polish Perspectives], in: *Muzyka i totalitaryzm*, 47-59.

[13] The movements of the Third Symphony had individual titles: 1. *Pan Awakes, Summer Marches In*; 2. *What the Flowers in the Meadow Tell Me*; 3. *What the Animals in the Forest Tell Me*; 4. *What Man Tells Me*; 5. *What the Angels Tell Me*; 6. *What Love Tells Me*. Mahler decided not to publish those titles, but they were passed on by Alma Mahler and Bruno Walter. See Gustav Mahler, *Im eigenen Wort – Im Worte der Freunde* (Zürich: Arche, 1958), 25-26.

Sixth Symphony, dedicated to her, in the same way that Russell uses fragments from the *Kindertotenlieder* in the scene of the death of Mahler's daughter.

Russell is also keen to use music from the funeral marches in Mahler's symphonies, which culminate in a natural way in the scene of the composer's own macabre funeral. The march from the Fifth Symphony begins with a solo trumpet part, which is reflected in the cinematographic layer. The violent expressive contrasts present in this march and in the funeral march from the First Symphony that is combined with it result from the juxtaposition of the march with excerpts from Jewish dance music and the sound of a military band. This musical mix also acquires a visual representation: a ballet dancer from the demi-monde dances on Mahler's coffin to the rhythm of Jewish music, whilst a military band crosses the path of the funeral cortège. Such a masterly blending of music and image bears testimony to Russell's extraordinary imagination and to his splendid knowledge of Mahler's music, with all its interpretational contexts.

In *Lisztomania*, excerpts from works by Liszt and Wagner presented in electronic arrangement or in the form of vocal compositions furnished with a new text function as thematic leitmotifs referring to the basic ideas of the film. The popular melody of one of the *Liebesträume* is used as a musical *idée fixe*, repeated many times in various guises and arrangements. It is linked to the idea of love (Liszt sings, for example, the words 'O love, sweet love'), which guides the composer's life and enables humanity to be redeemed in the closing sequence of the film. Also frequently quoted is the opening of the heroic Piano Concerto in E flat major, treated here as expressing the power and meaning of Liszt's music. Not by accident did this work contribute substantially to Liszt's celebrity and the phenomenon of Lisztomania.

The significance of other musical quotations is linked to particular parts of the film: visions of death are illustrated with the composition 'Funérailles', whilst in the climactic scene of confrontation between Liszt and Wagner their battle is underscored by the music: in the case of Wagner, excerpts from the tetralogy *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (mainly the 'Ritt der Walküren'); in the case of Liszt, the *Danse macabre*. The music that appears over the course of the film also helps to clarify the place and circumstances of the action, as in the invoking of the coronation scene from Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* in the scene set at Princess Carolyne's court in St Petersburg.

The musical excerpts chosen by Russell are familiar to a wide audience, and so they splendidly fulfil communicative functions in the film. Of course, the preference for these most popular works, arranged many times (such as Liszt's 'Liebestraum', the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony and Wagner's 'Ritt der Walküren') further links Russell's works with popular culture, thought that does not mean that a pop culture connoisseur will not note the director's refined treatment of those works of classical music in specific notional contexts. Indeed, a familiarity with those musical works and their original cultural and expressive content would seem to significantly enhance and broaden the reception of these cinematographic works.

Although the use of music generally seems to accord with the principle of biographical film – although the actual filmic visions that are coupled with the music remain unrealistic – one can point to a couple of scenes in which the director goes beyond such solutions and turns to intertextual associations. One good example of such an approach is the scene in which we hear the Adagietto from the Fifth Symphony while seeing Mahler look through the train window at a boy standing on the platform. It is difficult not to notice the delicate allusion to Luchino Visconti's slightly earlier film *Death in Venice* (1971), which represents a sort of cultural trope linked to this Mahler work.

The intertextual character of Russell's films is manifest also in the references to scenes from Wagner's music dramas, and in this area a familiarity with Wagner's works seems necessary for a proper reading of the message of the filmic images. This is particularly marked in both films in the context of strands linked to Nazism. In *Lisztomania*, the Superman created by Wagner repeats gestures familiar from *Der Ring*: like Alberich in *Das Rheingold*, the Superman also uses deceit to steal a treasure. And the Superman's mission of extermination begins to the mantric recitation of the meaningless words 'Weia, Waga, Weiala, Weia', uttered by the Rhinemaidens at the beginning of the first part of the Tetralogy.

Similarly in *Mahler*, there are several references not only to Wagner's music, but also to specific scenes from his music dramas. In the scene of Mahler's conversion to Catholicism, a crucial prop – as in Wagner's drama *Siegfried* – is a sword, which the titular hero is to use to slay a dragon. The fact that Mahler returns from the cave with a trophy in the shape not of a dragon but of a pig's head seems ironic and contextually understandable. And in the scene in which Alma decides to abandon her own compositional work[14] to look after her husband, we hear phrases from 'Isolde's love-death' from the closing scene of the music drama *Tristan und Isolde*. The context of this musical and dramatic reference seems comprehensible only if the viewer associates this music's original place in the structure of Wagner's drama.

6. Artistic value

The narrative structure of both these films results from the juxtaposing of scenes that refer to significant episodes from the composers' – factual or fictional – biographies. One clearly discerns the framework of the narrative, which the director marks out differently for each of the works: in *Mahler*, it comprises the composer's retrospective visions during his final journey, acting as a reckoning with life; in *Lisztomania*, it refers to the increasingly important role of Liszt's compositional work, exceeding even the worldly dimension.

[14] Alma Mahler composed a number of songs to words by Romantic and modernist German poets: Novalis, Otto Julius Bierbaum, Richard Dehmel.

One crucial element of Russell's directorial style is the combining of the real and the visionary, the splicing of various modes of artistic creation. In his aspiration to conveying an extraordinary message, the director even has recourse to elements of kitsch, displayed in the garish, provocative interiors, costumes, make-up and hairstyles. The prominent role of kitsch is manifest in the context of crucial moral problems, and in these outstanding composers' biographies that aesthetic serves to take the gilt off their figures and show their attitude to life in terms of banal, typical worldly aspirations. Russell is a master of the deliberate use of aesthetic clichés, qualities that have been over-exploited and deprived – in their literal use – of their power of aesthetic action. However, lending those qualities the role of ironic quotation and treating them in a non-autonomous way leads to interesting artistic results. The idea of balancing on the aesthetic edge, risky associations and the combining of elements belonging to different levels of culture contribute to the expressive wealth of Russell's films and determine their originality and uniqueness.

Another characteristic feature of these works is their addressing of social taboos. Indeed, controversial ethical issues seem to form a fundamental strand of this director's films. His approach to the biographies of Liszt and Mahler is linked to the highlighting of moral categories, the addressing of which might seem provocative. But for Russell, such allusions are a way of transferring a historical perspective to a contemporary context, allowing him to look at the two composers in an original, though controversial, way.

Fascism, Nazi symbolism and Hitlerism – combined with the inseparable Jewish question – form the most evident set of problems translated into the principal themes of the two films. The second crucial area comprises questions of eroticism and sexuality, treated in an exaggerated way and often linked to perversion. Russell is not averse to presenting sadomasochistic behaviour, as in the scene of Mahler's conversion to Catholicism, in which Cosima Wagner, made up as a Lolita from the Hitler Youth, makes lewd gestures. The director does not hesitate to link SM-type behaviour with the evoking of complexes and fears connected with eroticism, as in the scene of the composer's nightmare in *Lisztomania*, in which a group of women led by Carolyne castrate Liszt. Finally, the third area of taboo in these films is that of death and its portrayal: the exterminations carried out by the Superman in *Lisztomania* derive from virtual games, and the scene of Mahler's funeral is inspired by people's eternal fears of being buried alive.

Problem areas of this type link Russell's film art with a psychoanalytic perspective and allow for a deeper reading of these films' message. The ideological strands, the axiological profile, the addressing of ethical and moral questions and the transcendental references place Russell's films within the realm of weighty philosophical questions and determine their considerable social resonance. The composers' biographies give the director a pretext for posing questions about ideology in art, the artist's mission, the boundaries of artistic freedom and the instrumental treatment of creative work. But at the same time those questions,

through Russell's characteristic manner of ironising, ridiculing and – one would like to say – 'desecration of the sacred', are not posed seriously and do not dominate the films. Russell's pictures remain quite specific commercial works, exceptional tragifarces, in which the depiction of serious problems is at once accompanied by their subjection to grotesque deformation and the demonstration of their absurdities or denaturalisation. The approach proposed by this British director, in which serious issues are accompanied by elements of triteness, is a hallmark of his style.