Music is international: the film *Comedian Harmonists*

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Director Joseph Vilsmaier's film *Comedian Harmonists* won a total of five prizes at the Deutscher Filmpreis 1998 and has been running with great success for the past few months in German cinemas. Based on historical fact, the film starts with the founding of a vocal group which quickly became world famous in the 1930s. Little has been known up to the present day about the history of the ensemble. Vilsmaier offers the movie-going audience an exciting film which is well worth seeing and which pays proper attention to the sextet's music.

The story begins in 1927 Berlin. Life in the Weimar Republic is marked by mass unemployment. A long line of people, who have answered an unemployed actor's newspaper advertisement to audition, extends from the street right up to the fifth floor. The musically self-taught Harry Frommermann has written a few arrangements for five vocalists in the style of the American Revelers, whose music he knows from gramophone recordings. He is enthusiastic about the original jazzy sound and wants to found a similar group in Germany.

Many of those in poverty think only of immediate survival. It is therefore very difficult to find appropriate singers for such an ambitious project. Harry Frommermann meets Robert Biberti, the son of an opera singer, who, although not trained, has a good voice. Ari Leschnikoff, a gifted Bulgarian tenor, can no longer afford his singing lessons in Germany and struggles along as a singing waiter in a student restaurant. Roman Cycowski, born in Poland, actually wants to perform at the grand opera and Erich Collin has just passed his exam at the conservatory. They all sing in the chorus of the Friedrichstraße's Großes Schauspielhaus. The pianist Erwin Bootz completes the ensemble.

Then begin the hard, daily rehearsals, which go on for months. It is still uncertain for all of them whether this effort will ever pay off in the end. The very first audition at an agency is a total flop and the question is posed: give up or carry on?

This is where the director devises a wonderfully comic scene. The vocalists are sitting depressed in a pub, and Bootz is tinkering on the piano trying to establish why the Duke Ellington number misfired. He tries out a different tempo. One by one the singers look up from their beer glasses, and are almost reluctantly brought into play until finally the music really grips them. In the course of this, Frommermann and the bass Biberti put up an improvised battle imitating the trumpet and trombone with their mouths.

The decision has been made—one simply can't turn one's back on such music!

The next audition is a success; they are hired for a few intermediate numbers in the Charell-Revue. Then follow the first recordings and tours throughout Europe and a trip to the United States, until the Hitler government abruptly ends their concert activities and bans the group in 1935.

Immediately after their first success, the agent proposes to the five musicians a new name: Comedian Harmonists. He declares: "It has to sound international!"

During this period, the world changes dramatically. Unlike their parents and grandparents, for a large part of the youth in the cities of the 20s it was a matter of course to understand music and culture as an increasingly international development. After all, modern agencies could phone round the entire world to bring artists to Berlin, and at the same time they sent artists to the four corners of the earth. The record and film industries expanded tremendously; sound films and radio began their triumphal march around the world. Airplanes and zeppelins moved the continents closer together. In their way the youth reflected this development and turned towards music, which corresponded to this internationalism. Their liberal-minded attitude towards life was expressed in jazz. They saw themselves as cosmopolitans and danced "hot" from Chicago to Berlin, from Shanghai to Moscow.

Under these new conditions traditional moral and religious concepts in the film also undergo a change. Bootz, for example, lives with a Jewish girl who emigrated from Poland. Roman's German fiancée converts to the Jewish faith, whilst Harry admits at his mother's grave that he stopped going to the synagogue a long time ago. The Jew Collin categorically declares: "I can be what I want," and at the same time playfully imitates the horrified reaction of his parents as he presents his future bride—a French girl from the red light district.

Nearly incidentally and almost unnoticed, the film comes out in several places against the crude simplification of Daniel Goldhagen (the author of Hitler's Willing Executioners) that the majority of the Germans were anti-Semites. The Comedian Harmonists still sang to sold-out concerts despite the fact that it had become known that there were a few Jews amongst the singers. How many were Jews? Even the members of group did not know for a long time, simply because nobody was really interested.

Another scene in the film shows the complete astonishment of many Jews at the anti-Semitic smear campaigns. A Jewish businessman is speechless in front of the swastikas scrawled on his shop window, while his wife declares in tears to passers-by how patriotic her husband has always been, and that both their sons had fallen for the German emperor during the last war. Erna, the young German student who works part-time in the shop, helps them clean up the damage.

Later on, the film shows that it was through the brutal repression of every progressive and humanitarian thought that the worst instincts were first mobilised under Nazi rule. Bootz files for divorce from his Jewish wife for career reasons, whilst a rivalry between Robert Biberti and Harry Frommermann, who love the same girl, also subliminally takes on a new character. For a time Erna chooses Biberti who is not a Jew.

The delightfully arranged music of the Comedian Harmonists embodies precisely the sensuous "joie de vivre" which was a thorn in the Nazis' flesh. It parodies the antiquated emotionalism of operettas from the nineteenth century. The vocalists appear in a variety of costumes and have entire operetta overtures in their repertoire, imitating the orchestral instruments with baffling authenticity merely by using their voices. They "hot up" German hits by integrating famous ragtime syncopation into the

melodies, and sing jazz songs like “Night And Day”, “Whispering” or “Tea For Two”. In titles like “Puppenhochzeit” (”Doll’s wedding”) or “Maskenball im Gänsestall” (”Fancy-dress ball in the goose coop”) they make fun of the older generation’s philistine morals and Biedermeier-style settings. (Biedermeier was a cultural movement from the first half of the nineteenth century specialising in petty-bourgeois idylls.) And, apart from first tenor Ari Leschnikoff, who still has difficulties understanding the subtleties of the German language, everyone in the hall knows the meaning of the lyrics: “Veronika, der Spargel wächst” (”Veronica, the asparagus is growing”).

The fascists recognised a danger in the increasingly open and international character of culture at that time. Therefore they despised the “international Jews”, the Communists, the bourgeois Enlightenment, and took up the fight against so-called foreign infiltration and “cultural Bolshevism”. Their aim to develop, above all, the “national” and “independent” found sympathetic ears, even amongst social layers who rejected the Nazis’ methods but were, at the same time, nationalist. Even such an international and famous composer as Richard Strauss was influenced, and in a 1936 letter disparaged jazz as the “music of cannibals”. The Reichsmusikkammer (empire’s chamber music), newly founded in 1933, took extensive measures to protect German culture. Since many artists and musical groups had taken up English names, one of the measures introduced, for example, forbade the “use of foreign assumed names”. Another campaign had as a motto: “German bands in German pubs”.

When the Comedian Harmonists receive a summons in 1934, the purges have been under way for a long time. Only those who are members of the established musicians’ association may still perform in public. Jews are basically not welcome. The violinist and chairman of the “Reichskartell der deutschen Musikerschaft” (Empire’s Cartel of the Guild of German musicians), Gustav Havemann, had already written to Goebbels in May 1933, the month the notorious book burning took place: “With this measure we are hitting all elements, foreigners and illicit workers.” The group, owing to its great popularity and to the intervention of a very high-ranking patron in the apparatus of the state, is allowed to carry on singing for the time being. The civil servant in the film does, however, urge them to remove pieces of music and lyrics from Jewish composers and songwriters from their repertoire. At the end of the scene, he takes out a record of the Comedian Harmonists and asks for an autograph for his nephew. He carefully dries the ink so that the precious signature does not get smudged.

The Nazis took great pains to produce German dance music out of thin air and establish it as a national alternative to the modern dances from overseas. The youth were unable to acquire a taste for “Deutschländers” (the name of a dance the Nazis created out of various German folk dances) and carried on dancing hot jazz.

The Comedian Harmonists recorded a few German folk songs at that time. But in their concerts they regularly sing “Der Onkel Bumba aus Kolumba tanzt nur Rumba” (”Uncle Bumba from Columba dances only the rumba”), and liven things up with a mixture of fun and South American colour.

The Nazis were fundamentally bigoted, narrow-minded petty bourgeois with both feet tightly anchored in a cultural backwater. Their efforts to behave like civilised, educated people, and even “men of the world”, were insufficient to cover up their backwardness and they were unable to gain the sympathy of a large part of the population. In one of the film’s scenes the singers meet Julius Streicher, the publisher of Stürmer (a major Nazi newspaper). With the applause of the audience at the last concert still resounding in their ears, they are standing in front of him. They have already guessed that he is the one who has protected them having their performances banned up to this point.

The high-ranking Nazi reveals himself to be an admirer of their art and expresses a wish. He wants to hear something very special—none of the songs for which the group is celebrated around the world. He wishes to hear a simple German song: “In einem kühlen Grunde” (”On refreshing ground”), with the sentimental lyrics of Joseph von Eichendorff. The group performed the song a short time ago. But now Harry, in the face of this crushing atmosphere of cultural stench and mindless ignorance, feels like “throwing up” in the full sense of the word, and rushes out of the banquet room into the toilet.

A short while later the group is invited to America. Redemption at last. They play concerts to enthusiastic sailors on a cruiser. The concert is broadcast to all the ships in the flotilla, and soon half of the US Navy is humming the English version of the hit “Das ist die Liebe der Matrosen” (”That is the sailors’ love”).

After that the director returns once again to his central theme. Following a performance, the musicians argue about Harry Frommemann’s suggestion that it would be better for them to stay in the US. This would be the best possibility for the Jewish members of the group to escape from danger. He argues that they could, after all, perform anywhere in the world, but the others are against it. Roman says that, although he is of the Jewish faith, he belongs in Germany all the same. Like many other Polish Jews, he emigrated to Germany because of its more tolerant attitude towards the Jews. Whilst in Poland, just after the founding of the Polish state, anti-Semitism was increasing. His parents had made him familiar with the great bourgeois humanists of Germany early on, and he loved their civilised and liberal-minded spirit. Other considerations pull the non-Jew Robert Biberti back home. He does not want to leave his frail mother alone. In the end the musicians decide to return to Germany.

Back home, the Comedian Harmonists are banned for good. The film shows one of the last performances in Munich. The audience say farewell to the musicians with a standing ovation. Thirty years after the event Robert Biberti related the end of this concert: “As we bent forward, it was still as silent as the grave, but then—I still get goose pimples when I think about it—two thousand people suddenly rose up from their seats and an inconceivable hurricane of enthusiasm broke out. We stood there, completely flabbergasted. Many pushed their way to the stage and expressed their sympathy in chanted slogans, harsh words as well, even swear words against the Nazi regime could be heard” (Comedian Harmonists—Ein Vokalensemble erobert die Welt, Berlin, 1993, p. 68).

At the end of the film, the three Jewish vocalists and their wives get on the train to Vienna. Erna also comes with them; in the end she did choose Harry despite his Jewish background. In one of the most moving moments, Harry announces at the final concert the last song, saying it had once meant something to at least two people in the hall. As the musicians sing “Irgendwo auf der Welt gibt’s ein kleines Bißchen Glück” (”Somewhere on earth there is a little bit of happiness”), the camera focuses on Erna who is burying her face covered in tears in her hands.

The film does not show the rest of the group’s story. The Jewish members will form a new ensemble in exile and—at first with their old name Comedian Harmonists, and later as “Comedy Harmonists”—they will achieve worldwide success. The high point for the new group takes place in Australia. Then the Second World War poisons the international climate and increasing nationalism internationally makes further tours impossible in 1941. At about the same time, the ensemble made up of those musicians who remained in Germany collapses for good.

The film sets one thinking about a few current developments.

Some time ago, the French minister of cultural affairs passed a law making the use of Anglo-Saxon foreign words in the media and in advertising a punishable offence. For example, the word “walkman”—which has entered everyday language in many countries—should not be used but must be replaced by a new French creation. A further regulation, in force since the beginning of 1996, obliges radio stations to fill at least 40 percent of their broadcasting time

with French music.

There are similar considerations in Germany. This same year, the German rock and pop music association (Deutscher Rock- und Popmusikverband) demanded, in a “declaration to the minister-presidents and broadcasting houses of the regions”, the fixing of a quota of 40 percent for “native musicians”. This declaration was signed, amongst others, by musicians including Udo Lindenberg, Peter Maffay, Udo Jürgens, Konstantin Wecker, Die fantastischen Vier and the Greens’ spokesman for cultural affairs at the time, Ali Schmidt.

Eight years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, such endeavours arouse unpleasant memories. For a long time, the official policy of the GDR in cultural affairs also frowned upon and oppressed foreign pop music and introduced quotas.

Vilsmaier’s film points in the opposite direction. Its message goes: music is international!