

Berlin Film Festival, part 6

Art and poverty

Russia's Wonder Children, directed by Irene Langemann

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13 March 2000

Russia's Wonder Children deals with the Central Music School at the Moscow Conservatory, founded in 1932. The film's director explains that any highly gifted child able to study at the school is on his or her way to becoming part of the music elite.

With her documentary film Irene Langemann wants to make clear that Russia does not just consist of Mafia, is not merely a “realm of evil,” but that it also contains the highest levels of culture and has a long musical tradition. Many of the former pupils of the Central Music School are today leading world musical figures, such as the violinists Viktor Tretyakov and Vladimir Spivakov, the pianists Vladimir Ashkenazy, Vladimir Kraniev and Mikhail Pletnev, as well as the conductor Gennadi Rozhdestvensky.

At the same time the director raises the question—how has it been possible to achieve such a high artistic level in a country characterised by such difficult conditions, whether in Stalin's or Brezhnev's times, or indeed today?

The film shows that the conditions under which teachers and pupils presently work are catastrophic. The subsidies received from the state are completely inadequate. Someone explains to the film crew that if the school were not to receive extra support from private sources, “We would have been on the streets a long time ago.” A worker at the school states that it is only possible to maintain the extraordinary levels of teaching “because of the enthusiasts who work here.”

We witness eight-year-old Ira's entrance exam; it's clear that the piano on which she is playing is partly out of tune. The school building is thoroughly run-down, plaster crumbles from the walls, and the only indications that the building has something to do with

music are the pianos in some of the rooms and a few pictures of composers, including Peter Tchaikovsky, hanging on the dreary walls.

Despite the miserable conditions, the teachers are highly motivated and the film records the love and attention they expend on their protégés. Most of the children live and sleep at the school and some of them are personally put to bed by the teachers. We also observe how the pupils eat breakfast at the houses of their teachers as if this was a matter of course. The camera dwells on the gleaming eyes of the captivating Ira who describes music as “flowers dancing” as if caught by a breeze.

The training is demanding, there are very many tests along the way, and the rigorous selection of the children continues during their school years. We observe the worried faces of anxious mothers peering through a window as they observe their children. The readiness to sacrifice on the part of both parents and teachers in the interests of art is impressive. At the same time it becomes clear that in addition to a solid musical education, reaching the top of the music elite also offers the chance of escaping poverty and a substantial measure of individual freedom.

A piano teacher explains that such freedom—for example to travel around the world—was denied former pupils of the school under Stalinism. It therefore seems entirely plausible that parents and teachers will do everything they can to enable the next generation to achieve what they themselves were denied. Which of the children will make the grade lies outside of their powers. This will be decided by the necessities of the international music market.

Lena, a pupil who is 17 years old, will shortly take up

her music studies in Germany. She has been travelling the globe since she was nine. Before that she was touted as a Russian piano “wunderkind”. We see film footage of a concert she gave in the Vatican. Following her performance she is kissed on the brow by the Pope. Today Lena says: “I have now reached the age where no one takes any notice of me.” Despite her many concert trips, organised by a private agent, she lives together with her mother in wretched circumstances. She doesn't even have her own piano to practice on.

We marvel at the virtuosity of 10-year-old Mitja's rendition of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee*, and the musical maturity of Lena's interpretation of Chopin. Nevertheless the underlying message of the film remains unclear. To the extent that the director emphasises [see accompanying interview] the role of an indestructible “Russian soul,” her film runs the risk of arguing that it is possible to develop culture in Russia irrespective of the degeneration of social conditions—so long as there are enough idealists prepared to devote all their energy to the pursuit of art.

Is it really possible to achieve the summits of artistic creation independently of the social and political conditions that prevail? Is it accidental that the Soviet Union, originating in the struggle for a higher social principle than the marketplace and despite the monstrous bureaucracy, produced such high levels of musical virtuosity? It would seem very naive to assume that the self-sacrifice of a few guarantees the preservation of that virtuosity.

Wim Wenders' recent film *Buena Vista Social Club* tended in a similar direction. The film pulsed with the powerful and vital music of highly talented Cuban musicians, long forgotten and often living in dire poverty. Wenders contrasted their freshness and originality with the pessimism that seems to permeate present-day society. The film, however, gave no indication of the historical period that gave rise to their music, of the social experiences undergone by the musicians themselves since then or their own thoughts about Cuban society. Instead the artists appear to emerge from a sort of vacuum and Wenders' documentary ends up pointing to the imperturbable character of the Cuban soul.

In *Russia's Wonder Children* the altruism of the teachers under the most difficult conditions deserves the highest respect. Nevertheless, together with their

enthusiasm for art itself, their self-sacrifice also seems to express a profound personal insecurity and lack of orientation with regard to the current social situation—similar to the situation on a sinking ship. No one knows how to prevent the impending doom, the only recourse is to simply hold on with dignity and prepare for the worst.

The film leaves a lingering impression of the charisma and fascination of these child musicians who, surrounded by misery, have nevertheless experienced a discernible inner enrichment through music. In this respect the film points to a universality which extends beyond the border of Russia and beyond the mechanism of the capitalist market.



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