

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



Comedian Harmonists

Credits:

Director: Joseph Vilsmaier

Script: Klaus Richter

Screenplay: Jurgen Busher, Jurgen Egger, Klaus Richter

Music: Walter Jurman, Harold Kloser, Thomas Schobel

Cinematography: Joseph Vilsmaier

Cast: Ben Becker (*Robert Biberti*), Heino Ferch (*Roman Cycowski*), Ulrich Noethen (*Harry Frommerman*), Heinrich Schafmeister (*Erich A. Collin*), Max Tidof (*Ari Leschnikow*), Kai Wiesinger (*Erwin Bootz*), Meret Becker (*Erna Eggstein*), Katja Riemann (*Mary Cycowski*), Dana Vavrova (*Ursula Bootz*), Otto Sander (*Bruno Levy*), Günter Lamprecht (*Eric Charell*), Jürgen Schornagel (*Reichmusikdirektor*), Susi Nicoletti (*Frau Grünbaum*), Rolf Hoppe (*Gauleiter Streicher*)

Produced: Vienna, 1997

Running time: 156 minutes

Précis – Allen Krumm

Purportedly it was a militant feminist who declared that “the personal is political and the political is personal.” Tonight’s movie might well serve as a cinematic *amicus brief* for this credo. The young men of the original Comedian Harmonists experienced first hand the codependent embrace of the self and society and the sometimes antagonistic absolutes of the private and the public. Like all of us, the Harmonists were to varying degrees microcosms of the various macrocosms they inhabited (political, economic, cultural), and sadly for them, the feminist battle cry seemed as ineluctable as it is invertible.

The consequences of this intertwining of the personal and political were magnified and intensified for the Harmonists, since from the late twenties until the middle thirties of the last century they were one of the hottest groups in Germany and Europe. There was little in their respective backgrounds that would have foretold such an outcome, but however specific and disparate their origins were, the essential reason they coalesced as a group was their mutual passion for music and a shared belief in its universality.

Harry Frommerman was the son of a Berlin cantor who had originally emigrated to Germany from the Ukraine. **Roman Cycowski**, the son of a businessman, was born and raised near Lodz, Poland. **Eric Abraham Collin** was the privileged upper crust son of a renowned Berlin pediatrician. **Erwin Bootz** was born in Stettin, where his father ran a business selling musical instruments. **Robert Biberti**, also born in Berlin, was the son of the first bassist of the Berlin Linden Oper. **Ari Leschnikov** was born near Sofia, Bulgaria, the son of a postal official.

They were an utterly unlikely conglomeration of individual microcosms whose personal trajectories intersected in the entertainment macrocosm of **Weimar Berlin**. The two engines of the sextet were the quintessentially nebish Harry and the quintessentially teutonic Robert. Actually neither of them were either of these stereotypes, but time and circumstance sometimes

seemed almost to force such roles upon them. Harry and Robert, drawn together and torn apart, by temperament, by politics, by the woman they loved. And most of all by the music.

With the Harmonists it was in the end always about the music. Or at least it should have been. It was unique and timeless. Like the Beatles, the Harmonists were inspired by, among other things, music and **Gesangsstil** from America. Specifically they were inspired by a group called *The Revelers*. The Revelers were a white group from Louisiana who imitated black jazz styles. They also sang in wonderful unity, achieving that elusive quality of the group being more than the sum of its parts.

Harry and Robert and Ari and the rest of the Harmonists wanted to be like the Revelers...they wanted to make it, but in Berlin of the late twenties, overflowing with artistic talent and energy, making it was no easy task. Groping toward a Germanic version of the Revelers style, a vision that lurked for the most part somewhere in Harry Frommerman's fertile brain, they failed boldly, struggling with Harry's complicated arrangements, striving to achieve that *Gesamtklang* (collective sound) that the Revelers so effortlessly emitted. They practiced for months and were almost despairing when they had an **a capella epiphany** one night in a tavern. They had achieved the sound they were seeking and they knew it.

The Harmonists had their debut on September 1st, 1928. They were a great hit with both the press and the public. From then on their ascent was truly meteoric. The collective chemistry they exuded on stage was inimitable. Long before Beatlemania there was *Harmonist-Bessessenheit*. This affliction was random, striking comely young *Fräuleins* and eventually even a few rather uncomely *Gauleiters*. Like in-laws, fans are a package deal, so unfortunately it is possible to acquire *Über-Anhängers* one would rather not have.

They had made it, as individuals and above all as a group, and for over five years they rode the crest of a wave of popularity. But inevitably the ugly politics of the times began to overtake them. Within the macrocosm of the Harmonists were two microcosms. Three of the Harmonists were Jewish, three were not. This had certainly never mattered to the Harmonists or their fans,

but it mattered to the macrocosm of the Nazi state in Germany. And since it mattered politically, it began to matter personally.

In February of 1935, the Harmonists received a letter from the *Reichsmusikkammer* informing them that only the Aryan members of the group could continue to perform. This decree effectively ended the history of the Harmonists, although both halves of the original group continued to perform with new members under the same name, the Jewish group outside of Germany and the non-Jewish group within Germany.

Joseph Vilsmaier has wonderfully captured the lives and times of the Harmonists in his film, vividly conveying the excitement of the Harmonist performances, their "joy in singing", the intensity of their fans. The film deftly hovers between tragedy and comedy, and there is a surprising amount of humor in the well written script, considering the grim nature of the historical context. "You don't happen to have an Aryan grandmother?" "God will forgive me, it's his job." "There are two Jews in the group?" "Let me do the talking, I'm an Aryan." "Schade, sehr schade."

And in the record shop owned by the kindly Grünbaums, loyal Jewish Germans to the end, where **Erna**, the shared love of Harry and Robert, works, Vilsmaier provides a sharply focused microcosm of a Germany where the personal and the political and the passionate ultimately collide. That collision writ large ended the story of the original Harmonists, but it did not end their music. And that, in the final analysis, is what it seems to have been always about: the music; music that people loved, music that brought people together, music that is alive and well long after the demise of the politics that tried to destroy that music.

Biography

Joseph Vilsmaier was born in 1939 in Munich. He received his technical training at ARRI. In 1961 he began to work at *Bavaria Film* as a cameraman and later as director of photography. In 1988 Vilsmaier founded his own production company. Among his many notable films are *Stalingrad* (1992) and *Herbstmilch* (Autumn Milk, 1988). *Schlafes Bruder* (Brother of Sleep) was considered his breakthrough film, achieving critical praise in both America and Europe. He is married to the actress Dana Vavrova, who appears in many of his films, and has 3 daughters.

Filmography

Stronghold (2003), *Drei Engel für Dr. No* (Three Angels for Dr. No., 2001)

Leo und Clair (2001), *Marlene* (2000), *Comedian Harmonists* (1997)
Und Keiner weint mir nach (1996), *Schlafes Bruder* (Brother of Sleep, 1995)

Charlie & Louise (1993), *Stalingrad* (1992), *Rama Dama* (1990)

Herbstmilch (Autumn Milk, 1988)