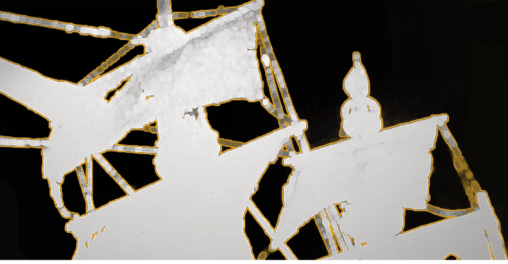




Making a Film Opera: Recollections of Peter Ulbrich, Cinematic Advisor for *The Flying Dutchman*



*Peter Ulbrich was asked by film historian Ralf Schenk to write down his recollections of the production of *The Flying Dutchman*. These are excerpts from a more comprehensive text, which Ulrich prepared exclusively for the DVD release of the film in 2013. Ulbrich lives in Loupian, France.*

In April and May 1963, as the pace of making the film was picking up, Joachim Herz was working on a production at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. The recording of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, under the direction of Rolf Reuter, was scheduled for June. We wanted to develop the optical script based on the finished music recording in July and August.

Set designer Harald Horn and I went to Moscow for a couple of weeks to meet with Joachim Herz, who shared his ideas with us. The central concept was to tell the story in two layers: Senta's real world and her fantasy world. We discussed how to present these two worlds and decided to use two different aspect ratio formats; the real world would be represented in "normal" format and her fantasy world in CinemaScope. Back then, we also thought about using other possible film techniques, such as tinting. Erich Gusko, the director of cinematography, experimented with some techniques, but then gave up as some of them had unpredictable problems. With Herz's concept as a starting point, we very soon had a general corollary for the soundtrack: real world scenes were to mainly have single-track sound, and fantasy scenes would have multi-track sound. The important, essential contribution of Joachim Herz' directorial concept was not only the decision to tell the story in two layers, but also his openness to the cinematic technique of cross cutting, which allowed him to manipulate the temporal progression of the plot.

The recording sessions took place at the Bethanien Church in Leipzig in May 1963 and lasted for several weeks. It's hard to express how exacting and extensive the recordings were. A document by Joachim Herz on "Directions on Sound Mix and Optical Script Based on the Music Recording" still exists. It gives a detailed idea of the enormous precision and exorbitant dimensions of the work done on the film's soundtrack.

The DEFA Studio was very skilled in 4-track magnetic sound mixing. Years earlier the Studio took international developments in recording technology into account, and was aware of the need to transition from one-track combined optical sound channels to the international trend of multi-channel mixed magnetic sound. Nobody was talking about Dolby or Stereo yet at that point, but there was a need for multi-channel sound. In the early 1960s, the Studio had also set up two studios—one for recording (the music atelier) and one for mixing (the mixing studio, later DEFA 70)—in keeping with trends in the GDR record industry (the Eterna record label), which had already been producing records in stereo for some time. With the help of his top-notch staff, Mr. Lambert, the DEFA Studio sound director, met all expectations.

We worked on the optical script in Babelsberg from mid-July to mid-August 1963. The DEFA Studio had set up an entire sound studio for us at their guesthouse with brilliant playback technology. Based on the script, playback and numerous notes and sketches, we worked through every single scene and camera shot. On hand we had models of the scenery and sketches and plans for all shooting locations. This work resulted not only in definitive location mappings, with marked positions for actors and sequences of movements; it also (and especially) resulted in sketches by the set designer for each single shot, which showed every important feature of the camera view in as much detail as anyone could possibly want. The resulting optical script, with over 300 such sketches, allowed us to consistently monitor all optical effects, and gave us the exact *métrage* of sequences and complexes in relation to the piano score.

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Generally speaking, I could never get over how generous and patient the Studio remained the whole time. Speaking of which, the film was screened at the DEFA Studio on June 13, 1964. Joachim Herz, Walter Felsenstein and Wagner's grandchildren were all there, but unfortunately I could not be. Herz told me about it with the greatest satisfaction. Then came the press screening at Berlin's International cinema. The catastrophe started right in the first few minutes. First one sound channel broke down, then the second one. Then one started yowling and then both together; then the bass broke down, followed by the treble. Everything we had experienced in the sound studio was gone, completely gone. Joachim Herz called Rolf Reuter [music director, conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra] and me out to the foyer. We decided: put an immediate end to it. Joachim Herz went out in front of the press and tried to explain what had happened, though he wasn't responsible for it. It didn't help much. All he got in return was resentment.

After Herz had experienced a technically perfect, but sparsely attended premiere at Treptow Park's "Gérard Philipe" cinema, and another technically exquisite showing at the Capitol—the technically cutting-edge movie theater of the Leipzig International Documentary Film Festival—he was reassured for a while. But when it became known that the Studio had prepared single-channel prints for the mass release of the film, his trust in the East German film industry was lost forever. He did not blame the DEFA Studio. But he later told me on the phone that he would never work at the Studio again, "because it doesn't make any sense to work there if the product you create isn't made available to audiences in the form in which it was produced." And he never changed his mind.