



The Image Emerges from the Music

From Prof. Joachim Herz's introduction at the film screening at the Passage cinema in Leipzig on September 19, 2010.

[...] The opera *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) does not tell a saga, nor is its substance a saga; rather, it talks about people who tell a saga and who experience the hero of this saga suddenly appearing among them. What next? What would happen if the Flying Dutchman, whom everybody knows from the saga, appeared among the citizens of the little town and asked for accommodation from Daland, the rich ship-owner? This opera lives from the contradiction between bourgeois reality and the irruption of something remote, adventurous, unusual, from the contradiction between constricted, mercantile interests and the welling up of a great desire that urgently seeks expression. The content of entire scenes is about the absolute lack of understanding [that these two sides have for one another]. [...]

DEFA contacted me and wanted me to make a music film. I suggested *The Flying Dutchman*—not as the filmed recording of a staged performance, but rather as a feature film with music, for which we would choose the composer best suited to contribute the music: Richard Wagner. It was the first complete screen adaptation of a Wagner opera ever. For this film version, I suggested that Senta creates the Dutchman in her dreams, in keeping with our central concept. [...]

The director, set designer and director of photography worked out an optical screenplay. The set designer sketched a little picture for each camera angle. The film people, who supported me a lot as a newcomer, suggested the following optical solution: two alternating aspect ratios, one for reality and the other for fantasy. This was new for the film industry—a worldwide novelty made in the GDR. For the transfer from one format to the other, each time we had to request a special camera from Prague. (I hope that you can see this alternating aspect ratio well enough, because we will be seeing the film on DVD.) The 4-track magnetic sound mix was also a technological first: ghostly voices from behind the audience. Today's movie theaters don't have the necessary equipment for this any more. I even had to stop the premiere in one of Berlin's state-of-the-art cinemas because the apparatus failed. [...]

If we were to adapt *The Flying Dutchman* today, we would film it at the original location: the bay of Sandvigen in Norway, where Richard Wagner's ship—fleeing creditors—had to make a forced landing during a storm. Why didn't we do this? Norway was a NATO country. If an East German citizen wanted to enter the country, he needed special travel documents, which could be obtained in West Berlin and would identify him or her as a "presumptive German." It was hopeless to think that we could get these papers for such a large group as our crew, especially considering that—due to weather conditions—we would have needed to make multiple entries and exits during an extended period of time. [...] That's why we used the Baltic sea or lakes near Berlin to stand in for the Atlantic Ocean. Except at the very beginning of the film, where our editor sneaked in footage of real Atlantic waves that she had gotten somewhere. The High Tatra mountains [along the Slovak-Polish border] stood in for the mountains of Norway. [...] In our cast, we had carrier pigeons, cormorants, real migratory birds, etc. In creating the impression of fog, we used up DEFA's entire annual allotment of fog in one day. Then, when we started filming, the wind changed direction and all of the fog was gone! [...]

The opening of the film demonstrates our concept of "music theater." The music emerges from the character's inner world and the images emerge from the music—not the other way around.

At the end, Senta walks into the land of utopia with the portrait of the Dutchman. What becomes of her there—whether she becomes the first woman to get a captain's license, whether she takes over the kindergarten of the [GDR's] Neptune shipyard—we do not know. [...]