

HERSCHEL AND THE MUSIC OF THE STARS

(HERSCHEL UND
DIE MUSIK DER
STERNE)

*(1985) Written and directed
by Percy Adlon.*

He is the son of a handicraftsman and scarcely knows more than three words of English... and yet he is the most famous composer of his time: Joseph Haydn in London. In 1792, Haydn sets off to visit the "Wonder of Slough," a home-made reflecting telescope almost as tall as a church steeple and built by the astronomer Sir William Herschel, the discoverer of Uranus. The visit turns into a terrifying, confusing, but ultimately deeply moving experience: Haydn's traditional world collides head-on with the cosmic experiences of Sir William. Late at night, Haydn peers into the universe; five years later he composes *The Creation*.

Screenplay by Percy Adlon. Cinematography by Raimund Maxsein.

Production Design by Eduardo Paolozzi. Music by Joseph Haydn, played by the Philharmonia

Hungarica and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Antal Dorati, Lucia Popp, soprano. With Josef Meinrad, Rolf Illig, Karin Anselm, Edgar Selge. 2" video, German with English subtitles, 97 min.

Of music, dance and more

Herschel and Music of the Stars

(Herschel und die Musik der Sterne). West Germany, 1985. In German with English subtitles. Written and directed by Percy Adlon.

What would a San Francisco Film Festival be without an American premiere from Percy Adlon? In this new opus, the protean German writer-director, whose now considerable American reputation mushroomed after festival exposure here, deals with conjectural history of the most delightful sort.

While in England receiving an honorary degree from Oxford in 1792, composer Franz Joseph Haydn visits famed astronomer Friedrich Wilhelm Herschel, with the purpose of seeing the scientist's new telescope.

At first, these two geniuses of the Age of Reason seem philosophically incompatible, but the visit soon evolves into a gentle debate between music and science, with both characters finding less separating them than they might have thought.

The result of the visit, Adlon infers, was the composition of the oratorio, "The Creation." In between discussions, Haydn launches a tentative courtship of Herschel's introspective sister, Caroline.

The great Austrian actor, Josef Meinrad, plays Haydn with a sly mixture of poetry and practicality, and Rolf Illig is a thoroughly credible Herschel. Adlon made "Herschel" for Bavarian TV (the festival will show it via video enlargement). The technique, leaning heavily on color effects, miniature models of the solar system and split-screen devices, dazzles with its beauty and potential.

— Allan Ulrich



HERSCHEL & die MUSIK der Sterne Eduard Paolozzi 1985

Composer Haydn meets astronomer Herschel in 'Herschel and the Music of the Stars'

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Contrary to the evidence presented by most filmed biographies, composers are pretty ordinary people, usually indistinguishable from you and me. Obviously, they can rustle up good tunes now and then and forge them together with impressive ingenuity. But, you might easily pass them by if you met them on the streets.

So, although Percy Adlon's 1985 film, *Herschel und die Musik der Sterne* (*Herschel and the Music of the Stars*), shown last week at the local branch of the Goethe Institute as part of the current Adlon retrospective offered by the Institute and the UCLA Film and Television Archive, was admittedly based on a fictional meeting between the great German astronomer and the composer Haydn during the latter's visit to England in 1792, its portrayal of a heavenly inhabiting imprisoned (as they all are) within a human body was so convincing and imaginative that it should be required viewing for all interested in the nature of creativity and the likely face of genius.

Adlon himself introduced the film, explaining that it was shot entirely in a Munich television studio, "like MTV," the resulting set cleverly enhanced by snippets of filmed collage and cut-outs to satisfy the need for visual stimulation. Josef Meinrad as Haydn, Rolf Illig as Herschel, Karin Anselm as Herschel's sister Caroline and Edgard Selge as Herschel's brother, with their clever make-up and elegant, deliberate acting styles, are like lithographs of the actual historical figures come to life, while Adlon's unpredictable script provided some juicy intellectual content. "We're only free if our music is appreciated," Haydn wistfully prophesies and the time frame is forcefully established, the film's perspective widening to include the ongoing French Revolution and the accompanying social transformation in which composers like Beethoven were soon to prosper.

Meinrad's masterful Haydn is a man whose strength of character, middle-class appreciation for money, somewhat antiquated manners and simple tastes ("I am a nobody who has become a somebody") are the outward aspects of a composer of ultra-professional skill and profound resources. Illig's Herschel is more conventionally an eccentric "genius," with his antique glasses, mechanic's cloths, and blustering manners. Of course, Adlon's purpose was to set these superficial traits and the repressed universe of emotions they camouflaged at loggerheads with Haydn's vertiginous reaction to seeing deep into the starry night with Herschel's forty-foot telescope. In triggering Haydn's mind to conceptualizing his famous oratorio *The Creation*, Adlon abandoned preconceived notions of what genius and creativity actually consist.

It was very much a twentieth century, Einsteinian conclusion. For, like the stars and other planetary bodies, the human quartet and their mental processes revolved around each other in seemingly constant but actually relative motion. Was their creativity their perception of motion or their capturing it concretely (Haydn in his music, Herschel in his star catalogs)? The movie ends with Haydn going to bed with Caroline, but that scarcely solves the riddle, and they both return to their independent ways the next day.

After the movie, like a true record collector, Adlon recommended the complete set of Haydn symphonies recorded by Antal Dorati and the Philharmonia Hungarica (and reissued recently on London compact discs). I have not heard the Dorati set lately, but can recommend other, more recent recordings conducted by Nikolaus Harnoncourt (Teldec), Adam Fischer (Nimbus), Roy Goodman (Nimbus and Hyperion), Trevor Pinnock (Archiv), Sigiswald Kuijken (Virgin), and Frans Brueggen (Philips).