

Jessica Duchen: Russell was always at top of my Liszt

The week in culture

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We've all been saddened this week by the death of Ken Russell, the film-maker everyone loved except, it seems, for the UK film industry. I first became aware of his work when I was a piano-obsessed teenager. Back then, though my parents were perfectly happy for me to go through piano exams galore and to listen to Liszt as long as it was played by Alfred Brendel, they would not – absolutely never, ever – let me see Lisztomania.

I don't know whether it was the giant phallus that upset them the most, or the song about the Aryan master race, or Wagner as a gun-wielding zombie, or perhaps that Russell dared to cast a pop star – Roger Daltrey – as Franz Liszt. "Art exists to rattle the senses and inflame the nerves," Russell once said. Boy, were they rattled.

When I finally saw it, somewhat later, this forbidden fruitcake of a movie dazzled from start to finish, mesmerising in its outrageousness. Historically accurate? Um, hardly, but that's not the point. It has a secret weapon: it makes sense. Its metaphors are rooted in the emotional truths of its subject. Wagner sank powerful fangs into Liszt's ideas (Liszt wrote the Tristan motif long before Wagner), hijacked his money and, ultimately, ran away with his married daughter, Cosima. Bingo: Wagner as vampire. Liszt exorcises him with a flame-throwing piano. Blimey ... nobody would make a film like that today.

Crucially, Russell's work could have existed at no other time. Lisztomania was from the mid-1970s, an era mainly remembered for political chaos, strikes galore, and so on. But compared to now, those days were free-spirited; a personal vision was not only allowable, but desirable – the more surreal, the better. Russell once said: "I've never played the game. I have my own game and I'm very happy playing that."

Yet his non-conformity involved absolute method, not madness. Why turn Roger Daltrey into Liszt? Russell explained the decision with typical level-headedness in an interview filmed for Lisztomania's DVD release a couple of years ago. He had worked with Daltrey on Tommy; he was a good actor, he looked a bit like Liszt and he could play the piano. Liszt was, effectively, one of music's first pop stars – choosing The Who's star to play him was logical.

Contrast Lisztomania with the BBC's current series, Symphony. Fronted by the reliable Simon Russell Beale, its episodes trace the development of classical music's grandest genre through the centuries. Terribly distinguished conductors and academics objectively discuss matters such as the revolutionary tendencies of Beethoven and Berlioz, and their music is nicely played on the proper period instruments.

It is all so decorous, so friendly, so awfully, awfully good. It won't upset anyone, except a handful of die-hard trolls who still think classical music should be no friendlier than the writings of Theodor Adorno, the literary equivalent of a Venus fly-trap.

We've become so terrified of taking risks that we're in danger of being hamstrung by timidity, going through life with a muzzle over our mouths and pens in case someone might choose to declare themselves "offended". We get intimidated – perniciously so.

Nobody can create great art without courage, and Russell had lakes of it. Liszt and Wagner, too, were never genteel artists; their art involved many human dilemmas, but it was never about being polite. That's why Lisztomania says more about the inner worlds of high romanticism than a month of prim, proper and sensible documentaries ever could. Only one of Russell's films, by the way, was funded from within the UK.

Beyond the sensationalism, he created moments of breathtaking filmic poetry. One of my favourites is his tender portrait of the composer Frederick Delius and his amanuensis Eric Fenby in Song of Summer. And think of Glenda Jackson as Gudrun, dressed in white, dancing to "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles": DH Lawrence might never have imagined that for Women In Love, yet it crystallises the evanescence of emotion, youth and beauty in the fleeting moment.

When I phoned Russell once for an interview, I caught him in the middle of a crisis. A jackdaw had built itself a home on top of his chimney and he was trying to move the nest without causing any harm to its avian inhabitants. That's the way I'll remember him: Russell, the great-hearted poet beneath.

Paradise restored in a wartime masterpiece

Don't you love it when classic films are restored and re-released on the big screen? There is one that, to me, takes the croissant.

Les Enfants du Paradis, Marcel Carné's 1945 masterpiece, is the latest movie to undergo the restoration process – courtesy of Pathé – and is on release in a variety of art house venues.

Speaking of the courage to create on a grand scale, it has absolutely everything. A three-hour epic in two parts, it is based on real-life characters from the 1820s-30s and it functions without gimmick, simply through brilliant acting, a fantastic story and sheer cinematic flair.

Arletty as Garance is a Mona Lisa of an anti-heroine, attracting the passions of four very different men. Our sympathies centre on Baptiste, the Pierrot-like mime actor, portrayed unforgettably by Jean-Louis Barrault.

Some say that Garance represents a semi-hidden wartime message about France: many desire to possess her, though nobody can own her but herself. If anything is more astonishing than this film, it is the fact that it was made at the height of the Second World War, while France was under German occupation. After the war Arletty was imprisoned for having had a liaison with a German officer. Later she famously commented: "My heart is French, but my ass is international." It was a saga worthy of a movie in itself. They don't make 'em like this any more. But thank goodness they can restore 'em. Don't miss it.

The relevance of operas past

Much excitement surrounded the world premiere last week of *Yes*, an opera by composer Errollyn Wallen and writer Bonnie Greer about the latter's appearance on Question Time alongside Nick Griffin of the British National Party. But despite some terrific music its ethos, a "docu-opera" with views on immigration, race and free speech, was problematic. Some reactions were a tad underwhelmed. You can't win. Opera is regarded as "elitist", so there's a perceived need to make the art form "relevant". Then, when someone does, people don't like it? The real problem is that the notion opera is not "relevant" is spurious. Composers have been writing relevant operas for centuries. There's little more relevant to its time – the 1780s – than Mozart's *Le Nozze Di Figaro*, concerning the struggle of two servants against a lecherous aristocrat – and it's still relevant now. It's not an extension of the news. It's fictional: a good story mirroring societal concerns through believable characters. Fiction's weird trick is that truths can be told because the goings-on are not meant to be real. One of the biggest operatic hits in London is Deborah Warner's production for ENO of *Eugene Onegin* – the Tchaikovsky masterpiece based on Pushkin, all about the crazy workings of human emotion. Relevant? Always was. Always will be.