

# MUSIC IN DARKNESS 1948

Ingmar Bergman

## OVERVIEW

In this early film Bergman touches themes which will be familiar in his work—personal anguish, fidelity, deep loss—but without the potency of his mature work. The driving action of the film— coping with blindness, and living music as a world of its own, inside blindness—is swift moving, upbeat in resolution, and sufficiently melodramatic to hold the viewer. But the depth we find in *Port of Call*, released in the same year as *Music in Darkness*, is only superficially present. Both films terminate on upbeat conclusions, the couple finding true love, but while in *Port of Call* the upward struggle is harshly earned, moment by moment, the mountainous climb is effortlessly acted out by the protagonists of *Music in Darkness*. In neither film, however, has Bergman fed the audience such a fascinating or complex boy-girl finale, as he will do in *Summer with Monika* (1953), where the final ‘success’ of one protagonist matches the flip, learn-nothing stance of the other (Monika.)

## STORY

Bengt Vyldeke, an educated upper middle class young man, a soldier assigned to military exercises, becomes the accidental victim of a life-changing accident. While on artillery exercises, he notes an adorable fuzzy puppy, which has climbed up an embankment leading to one of the shooting range targets. Impelled to save the puppy, Bengt reaches out to hold it and at the same time puts himself in the line of fire. He loses his eyesight, a fact he perceives the next day in the clinic, when the astonishing horror of the situation strikes him. Subsequently he is taken to live with his aunt, and from there, with his adaptation to his new life and limitations, follows the story of Bengt’s creation of a new world for himself.

That new world begins to form with Bengt’s discovery of his aunt’s maid, Ingrid, a promising servant girl, who until this point has enjoyed few of the advantages of education or culture. On one level the story involves the growing interrelation of these two young people, as Bengt struggles to find himself in a difficult and unaccommodating world, and Ingrid slowly grows in her ambitions, enrolling as a university student, and extending her purviews so much that by film’s end she has left her home by train, out into the world alone with her now husband, Bengt. The Bengt she will have married has himself, by this time, gradually managed to accommodate himself to his new life, having worked for a while, with poor results, as a restaurant club musician, subsequently trained as an organist, and survived a variety of life-threatening mishaps attendant on his deeply unmastered new life in the dark.

**Blindness** Bengt wakes in the hospital to the realization of his blindness. He is being comforted, but little can be done to alleviate the internal shock. Bergman does little to take us inside Bengt’s mind, at this point, and transplants him to the rough hewn care of his aunt, whose healthy perspective is to hurry the young man into daily activities. We therefore soon see Bengt giving himself some solace with his piano, looking for a job, and making the first overtures toward his aunt’s maid Ingrid. Bergman does not mull over character introspection—he is directing a film, not writing a novel—but rather moves the initial scenes straight into action.

## Separation and Reunion

After the initial stages of courtship, with Ingrid, Bengt finds himself drifting away into his own world—a single room, poor work life as a night club musician—while Ingrid is gradually upgrading her skills and expectations—moving with university students, living with them in fact. Then one cloudy night Bengt, with his cane, is walking home despondently when he hears a voice he recognizes as that of Ingrid. He is right. She is talking with two fellow students, and Bengt goes up to introduce himself. Ingrid

makes it clear she wants to go off with her former lover, and she and Bengt find one another again that night.

**Overcoming the roadblocks** At his lowest point, Bengt loses his hope and confidence; the pastor, who ultimately agrees to read the banns for the marriage of Bengt and Ingrid, has brought up many objections against the wedding of the two lovers; Bengt learns that there is only one blind church organist in Sweden, hence little likelihood of a job. Crushed by these discouraging encounters, Bengt wanders out onto the railroad tracks, where he is nearly killed in a harrowing scene. It is Ingrid who rescues him and saves him from his despair.

## THEMES

**Fate.** From the initial chance, the accident with the puppy on the firing range, Bengt is thrown open to destiny. He is for a long time simply unable to shape his own life, because of his handicap, but even later in the film he is dependent on others—his aunt, the pastor, Ingrid—for all the shaping directions in the film.

**Music.** Bengt is supported by his music, in his blindness. His music gives him a place of refuge within, in which he can step away from the outside world which has now become difficult for him to deal with. Music also provides Bengt with a means of livelihood, when he needs it most.

**Loneliness.** From the time of his accident, naturally, Bengt has no idea what has hit him. He can be told what happened, but even that information cannot make much sense to him. He is cut off in a world of which he is the only inhabitant, at least until Ingrid arrives to join him.

**Love.** The love between Bengt and Ingrid is slow to develop. For a long time Bengt looks down on this servant girl, and on one occasion lets loose a pejorative remark, about her low class, which hurts her badly. In the end, though, she mellows him, his confidence grows, and her fascination with his development prevails; they fly away on their honeymoon.

## CHARACTERS

**Bengt** is a cultured young man who is rendered blind by a military accident, who must be cared for by others, who finds himself almost unemployable, though he is a skilled musician, and who is pulled back only slowly into a purposeful life, by the love of an ambitious and careful young woman.

**Ingrid** is the housemaid of Bengt's aunt. Ingrid, of the servant class, first treats Bengt with kid gloves, but with time she sees how great his need for her is. She gives him her love, which is the one thing in the world he needs most.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### BENGT

Bengt is a privileged and educated young man, who is blinded while participating in military exercises, and is forced to be sent to stay with his aunt. There he takes occasional refuge in his music—he is a talented piano player—and in the course of time, as he is getting better used to the logistics of navigation and social existence—he falls in love with his aunt's housemaid. The development of that love involves many advances and reverses, as Bengt struggles with issues of jealousy, under-confidence, and employment—he finally steers himself in the direction of work as a church organist. Slowly, however, his girlfriend Ingrid becomes his lover, as she learns to respect and admire his personal path, and he overcomes any sense that she, once his housemaid, is inferior to him. In the end, the banns having been read and approved by the couple's pastor, they strike out on their honeymoon, having begun to know each other, as Gosta and Berit managed to know one another, by the end of *Port of Call*.

## **Illustrative moments**

**Handicap.** When Bengt awakes to the reality of his wound, he is astonished. He moves his hand across his eyes to see if there is any sight, and suddenly finds that he is in a totally new situation. His problem is presented as 'psychological,' in terms of the new attitudes and perceptions forced on him, and not as a 'problem of physical pain.'

**Indiscreet.** Bengt has grown up with privileged attitudes toward 'servants' and the 'lower class' and indiscreetly speaks of Ingrid as inferior to him. This is only at the outset of their relation; she is deeply hurt, and the indiscretion nearly destroys their relation. Bengt has far to go before understanding the new world he is in.

**Proud.** Bengt not only carries upper class attitudes, but is rightfully proud of his musical gifts. He is reluctant to take a job as a restaurant-bar musician, and fusses when he is requested to wear a tux, like a waiter or maître d. While Bengt always retains a spoiled child trait, he learns to cope with these limitations society is placing on him.

**Desperate.** Moments arrive when Bengt grows desperate in the face of the obstacles his blindness places in his way. When desperate he is capable of stepping to the brink of suicide, as he does when he walks out onto the railroad tracks. Only luck and love save him then.

**Cardboard.** What keeps Bengt from being an emotionally appealing individual? Whether because of his 'nature,' or because his handicap has unbalanced him, he never reaches quite the full humanity of, say, Gosta in *Port of Call* or Harry in *Summer with Monika*. Bengt remains a little cardboard.