

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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TO JOY 1950

Ingmar Bergman

OVERVIEW

Ingmar Bergman said that if he had his choice between sight and hearing he would choose hearing, the gateway to the most important experiences of his life, music. (*Music and Darkness*, 1948, was already a cinema indication of Bergman's supreme devotion to classical music. In *Krisis*, 1946, Bergman had witnessed to his fascination with American hot jazz, in the impromptu dance set up by Jack and Nelly, in a small provincial town.) *To Joy* (1950) unrolls under the banner of Friedrich Schiller's poem, 'To Joy,' composed in 1795 and powerfully lying at the heart of the 'Ode to Joy' portion of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The transcendent joy Beethoven celebrates, in the final chorus of that work, represents that zone beyond self-confidence, or even beyond mastery, to which the protagonist of Bergman's 'To Joy' aspires. The entire present film, in this sense, may be said to play out in terms of a quest intimate to the movie director himself. We need to know something about Bergman's personal life, to appreciate this situation.

STORY

Selfhood The story of *To Joy* is the story of everyone's search to find him/herself, and thus to enter that realm of joy which surrounds self-realization. The protagonist is a career violinist, performing in a major, but not the greatest, symphony orchestra, under a conductor who is severe and blunt. From the start, tragedy engulfs Stig, for he learns, while participating in a concert, that his wife and son have perished in a fire, the result of a freak explosion of a kerosene heating system. As in many Bergman films, tragedy is the spur to a flashback, in this case to the meeting moment when, seven years previously, Marta and Stig were chosen to play in the same orchestra, opening out careers for both of them. Stig pulls that moment intensely to him, in his desperation, and even at such a distance, in time, he lets us see how indecisive, undirected, and even weak he was, as a young man. (He was twenty five at the time of this first meeting with his wife to be.) The rest of the film concerns the progress of Marta and Stig, toward finding meaning in one another, and, especially in Stig's case, through the difficult challenge of coming to terms with what one is.

Romance A high moment in the gelling of the couple's marriage occurs during Marta's birthday party, which Stig's flashback pulls intensely to the fore. Jealous of Marta's attentions to another guy, Stig acts out in the course of a birthday party Marta lays stress on; Stig drinks himself unconscious and passes out. Upon coming to he realizes how unsuitably he has behaved; he pulls out the teddy-bear present, which he gives to his now beloved, and in a prolonged ninety two second shot their faces, lips, and loves approach one another. (Bergman takes great inspiration throughout his earlier film career, from the brilliant cinematographer, Gunnar Fischer; prolonged closeups with micro managed angle shifts are one of this pioneer's specialties.) Highs and lows punctuate the forward progressing of the couple's relationship. Marta, more forthcoming than her mate, nudges them into living together. Martha reveals that she is pregnant with Stig's child. Stig agrees to get married, despite the fact that he has a lot of personal confusion still to dispel. (A high point of *that*, we soon learn, is underconfidence in solo performance, which is just where he longs to excel; and in fact the test sample itself is not far in the offing, and Stig has to prove to himself, once more, that he is no great soloist). The birth of his first child, however, pops out of Stig's personal history and showers him with joy, just when he most need encouragement along the path he has taken.

Bitterness In this story, which is all about the personal effort at self-realization, we are moved through a panoramic set of flashbacks: and long after the birth of his child, three years prior to the death of Marta and child, he is still obsessed with forming a musical career which suits the level of his gifts. He is not making it easy for himself, balancing an affair with the orchestra manager's wife, and fouling up nascent

efforts to stabilize his marriage at home. Inevitably, matters come to a head. We know it, if there were any doubt, from another prolonged shot (one hundred and forty seconds), in which Marta bitterly assaults Stig for the affair, and he attacks her for having had affairs before they even met one another. At this point Stig beats up on Marta, in a nasty bedroom fight, and she moves out, with their two children. Three months later, Stig writes to Marta, declaring his undying love, and she welcomes him back into what appears to be a happy and balanced family unit. (An ominous side twist, very Bergman, points to the dreadful future; as the couple prepare to go on a visit with the children, to grandmother's house, they can be seen carrying what will be a fateful kerosene stove, for use in the nearby cottage where they will be staying.)

Guilt With the end of the flashbacks we return to a Stig overwhelmed by grief, but preparing for a rehearsal of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The conductor addresses the orchestra on the meaning of joy, for Beethoven, and starkly defines it off from happiness, so that the performers will know they are reaching into transcendent territory. Stig joins the harmony, his eyes and mind filling with tears of remembrance, as he reflects on the power of his life memory, and harmony-search, that have brought him to the present point, one of contrite humiliation.

THEMES

Guilt. The film opens on the terrible news that Stig's wife and child have been incinerated in a kerosene heater explosion. Stig is overwhelmed, at once, with a sense of guilt for the years—seven—during which he has failed fully to embrace the wonder of his wife and their love. The remainder of the film will be a memory-effort to work through the past, to assess his own guilt, and to understand what he has lost.

Harmony. The film takes its impulse from Schiller's Ode to Joy, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, both great musical works devoted to the ideal of transcendent peace, and surpassing joy. The cinematographer is a master of panning shots which depict the orchestra—especially the bass players—in presentational action, establishing a strong harmony together with their career work. The Stig we know is in constant search for an understanding of such harmony.

Love. Love, for Stig, is an *ignis fatuus* for which he is constantly in search. As a shy but ambitious person he harbors a passionate struggle for confidence, a struggle in the course of which he badly needs the support of a loving partner. Unfortunately, Stig often manages through his lack of confidence, and through certain rare losses of control, to make it very difficult for his partner to give him the support he needs.

Loss. The film as a whole is about loss—as well as about the peace available to us for support in our loss. Stig's series of flashbacks, around which the film is built, are—as memory can make possible—building blocks in which to house healing memorials of dreadful past events. Stig is the master of the flashback, facing but memorializing the traces of his own lost past.

CHARACTERS

Stig. Stig is an ambitious violinist, haunted by the dream of becoming a famous soloist. For many reasons, however, Stig lacks the self-confidence needed to achieve this ambition, though in the end, having lost his wife in a fire, he moves upward to a new stage of understanding, reaching for forgiveness, for the weakness with which hitherto he has led much of his life.

Marta. Marta, Stig's fellow violinist and life-partner, is in this film largely defined by her relation to Stig, whom on the whole she supports devotedly. (She leaves him only after he has beaten her, and then welcomes him back after a brief absence.) It is Marta who has the guts to suggest she and Stig should live together, and it is she who pushes (a bit) to see that their marriage occurs.

Conductor Sonderby. The conductor of the orchestra in which Stig and Marta play is a kind of severe father figure to Stig. It is he who tells Stig he may be a second-rate violinist, but consoles Stig with the assurance that most musicians are in fact second rate.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

STIG

Character Stig is a complex character, driven by ambition to be a great violin soloist, yet neither by temperament nor talent quite up to that achievement. When first we meet him—and he meets Marta—he is withdrawn, uneasy with society, though ambitious enough that he wants and needs social approval. Dealing with this dilemma is not easy, nor will Stig, even by the end of the film, have figured out how to excavate from his personal situation the joy that he wishes to find there. His wife's support is helpful to Stig, as is the hard-love advice of Sonderby, his orchestra conductor, whose advice is to come to terms with not being the greatest violinist in the world, with being a 'second rater.' This tough advice sinks deeply into Stig, who takes away from it the acceptance that joy—what Beethoven was driving for—'lies beyond pain and boundless despair. It's a joy beyond understanding.'

Illustrative moments

Artist We meet Stig as he wins his first professional orchestra job, as violinist. (Marta is chosen at the same time, for the same orchestra.) He is pleased, especially as he carries inside him the lofty hope of becoming a great professional soloist. When Marta tries to bond with Stig, on that occasion of their initial meeting, he is reluctant and withdrawn.

Awkward Marta's birthday party marks one of the new couple's first bonding rites, although Stig—ever shy—makes the relationship difficult. Stig is put off, at the party, by what he takes to be Marta's overt attentions to another guy. He is mistaken, however, and finds that out. Stig drinks too much, passes out, then comes to, to the realization that Marta is only trying to guarantee his own attraction to her.

Angry Soldiering along, under the burdens of career and romance insecurities, suffering a setback in his attempt to perform effectively as a soloist, Stig gives into a burst of conflict toward Marta. They quarrel in bed, then for the first and only time he lets himself go and slaps her, over and over again—so conclusively that she immediately takes the children and leaves the house.

Marta

Character Marta is for much of the film Stig's wife. The film opens with the event that brought these two career musicians together: the conductor of the symphony orchestra, in which they have been playing, chooses Marta and Stig as permanent orchestra members, two new members chosen at the same time. From that time on they are drawn together. At Marta's birthday party, Stig grows jealous of another guy's attention to Marta, then acts out foolishly; feeling stupid. Stig yields easily to Marta's nudging him toward marriage. Marta is a natural for this marriage, loves Stig faithfully, understands his problems with under confidence, and later, after Stig has berated her and beaten her up, and left the house, she takes him back again patiently, after a couple of months. The film concludes with the devastating death of Marta by fire, and Stig's painful struggle to go on, as he rehearses for a performance of Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy.'

Illustrative moments

Chosen. Marta, like Stig and at the same time as he, is chosen to be a permanent orchestra member under the severe guidance of conductor Sonderby. Marta is thus thrown together with Stig, and joined to him as the new performer on the block. Unlike Stig, Marta confidently accepts this new role, and from that time on exercises a commanding influence (and faithful love) over Stig.

Nudger. From the outset of their mutual employment, Marta is interested in Stig, and does her best, finally effectively, to win him over to marriage. The turning point, in her effort to win him over, occurs at her birthday party, and only becomes effective because his behavior, at his jealous acting out, puts him in a susceptible position.

Pregnant. Marta becomes pregnant with Stig's son. Both parents are delighted; and the downfall in the couple's marriage, which nonetheless remains essentially intact, occurs later, when Stig's under

confidence especially his realization that he will never be a great soloist, erodes his capacity to serve as a reliable partner to Marta.

Patient. After a terrible quarrel with her husband, Marta finds herself a victim of intense domestic abuse, and leaves Stig no choice except to leave her and their child. A couple of months later Marta receives from Stig a contrite letter, asking if he can return, and she graciously concedes, opening the family to her husband. Such kindness adds to the store of agonizing memories, which Stig must live with after the burning to death of his wife.