

Larry Weinstein's Ravel

More than a decade after Bo Derek's passion for "The Bolero" hit the big screen, and at a time when Charles Dutoit and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra have made numerous award-winning recordings of Ravel's *oeuvre*, it's difficult to imagine that his music was ever considered controversial. But the French were unprepared for his use of the jazz idiom in serious music and when he first staged *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, which included a fox-trot between a teapot and a teacup, Parisian audiences booed.

A portrait of any man through his music is a tall order, especially when the man is as enigmatic as Ravel appears to have been. The film is a collage of interviews with friends, excerpts from letters, and performances by some of the most brilliant musicians in the world, including Alicia de Larrocha, Collard Dumay, the Odeon Trio, and Victoria de Los Angeles, not to mention the Orford Quartet and the Montreal Symphony Orchestra.

Any documentary that revolves around music poses a problem for its makers simply because music is the most abstract art form and, without accompanying images, not filmic. Larry Weinstein avoids the most obvious pitfalls by frequently training the camera on the musicians at work. It is interesting to watch their concentration and sense of humour, their involvement with the music, but there are times

when the director's attempt to catch everyone in the orchestra, for instance, seems clumsy and distracting. An example of this is de Larrocha's performance of the *Presto*, from *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. Charles Dutoit's torso floats somewhere over her left shoulder, and Weinstein tries too hard to match the staccato of the piece with choppy editing from one section of the orchestra to another.

The film's most exciting moments are those which include dance or opera: the softly-lit, athletic couple dancing to *Daphnis and Chloe*, and *La Valse*, superbly choreographed by and featuring nine pairs of elegantly-clad dancers. But my favorite scenes were those from the opera, *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, where a grandfather clock, a teacup, and a teapot come to life to the exquisite horror of a little boy who's been rude to his mother. Staged specifically for the film, these visual passages provided a well-needed break from the purely "musical" focus of much of *Ravel*.

For the film cannot, and does not, pretend to be so much a film about Ravel as a film about his music. As one friend gives the interviewer a tour of the composer's house, she says that he was not one to show his feelings. And another friend muses that "It's quite possible that artists or musicians have the ability to express themselves in art because they can't express themselves in life."

What we do discover about Ravel is this: he never married, and friends claim that he was not known to have had any romantic attachments to women or men. He loved children and liked to go out with friends to watch them dance. He

liked to take long night-walks, and to please his mother by buying her clothes and trinkets when he could afford them. During WWI, he was rejected by the army and made his contribution by driving cars and trucks.

Ravel's work only began to earn him international acclaim in 1927, when he took a whirlwind tour of North America. The United States, the land where jazz was born, welcomed him with open arms. This is particularly poignant given that only five years later, after a car accident, Ravel was to lose his ability to compose and spent the next five years waiting for "music or death," as one friend puts it. Weinstein chooses to end the film with the haunting *Adagio Assai*, again from *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, as if in respect for those sad, useless years before his death.

Larry Weinstein won a well-deserved Alberta-Quebec Prize for Television for this documentary. As enigmatic as Ravel's private self was, Weinstein has paid a great tribute to this innovative, provocative composer with an elegant, beautiful film.

Naomi Guttman •

RAVEL p. Niv Fichman, Larry Weinstein, Julia Sereny d. Larry Weinstein et. Ewa Jaworska, Bruce Lange, Anthony Sloan d.o.p. Leonard Gilday, c.s.c. sl. John Martin int. Charles Dutoit, the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, Alicia de Larrocha, Victoria de los Angeles, Jean-Philippe Collard, Augustin Dumay, Toronto Dance Theatre, Odette Beaupre. A Rhombus Media production in association with the CBC, the SRC, Bravo Cable Network, Danmarks Radio, Nederlandse Omroep Stichting, Norsk Rikskringkasting, Oy Yleisradio, Sveriges Television, Television Espanola and TVOntario with the participation of Telefilm Canada and the OFCD. 105 minutes, col. 16mm.

Alain Chartrand's Des Amis Pour La Vie

Des Amis Pour La Vie's thought-provoking script, was directed, acted and photographed by a group of skilled and artful individuals, but the film is heavily clothed in the lead trousers of commercial television.

Written by Diane Cailhier and directed by Alain Chartrand, *Des Amis*... is a story of six elderly friends who decide to live in a communal fashion so as to ward off the loneliness, bitterness, and indignity that old-age threatens. They quickly become imbued in loving nostalgia for their friendships, and just as quickly, they become the target of an anonymous letter writer who aims to break their pleasant arrangement apart.

After they receive a few letters, unrest sets in as the six friends search in their minds for identity of the person who is sending these enigmatic messages. As the story unfolds, we learn that Françoise, the widow who owns the house where they all live, is, in fact, not a widow. Her husband, Charles, suffered a stroke and being partially paralyzed and unable to talk, he has been living for the past several years in a hospital, wanting his friends to believe he was dead for fear of their pity. Charles is now confronted with the fear of losing his wife to the new living arrangement with those whom he feared, and thus the letters.

All this intrigue remains a secret that Françoise tries to keep, but Alex, one of the six, reveals the secret by following her to the hospital one day. Alex confronts Françoise, and, through their discussion, that which was the impetus for the communal arrangement shines through as the solution to this painful situation. Support and love, which Charles needs and yet has rejected, are the answers. The end of the film has Alex bringing Charles home to live amidst communal affection.

Des Amis... is an admirable film because, in a dramatic context, it discusses very real problems that are faced by our elderly. This subject, in the television and film world of smooth, unblemished, and uneducated heroes and heroines, is refreshing. What the film proposes in terms of lifestyle - communal old-age rather than institutional old-age - is interesting, though it is a product of the author's imagination. Cailhier introduced the film at the *Rendez-vous du Cinéma Québécois* by admitting that she knew of no such living arrangement amongst the aged, but believed it to be a plausible lifestyle, especially for those communally oriented former long-hairs from the '60s. By offering this suggestion, the filmmakers

The Toronto Dance Theatre in *Ravel*.

