

FILMS AND FILMING



Russell's films on composers deal with subjects very neurotic and with personal disorders. If they were not neurotic, Russell feels, they would not have written their music. Their obsession endows them with a different kind of vision.

MAKING a biographical film 100 minutes long is quite a tough proposition. Especially when it's on the life of a stormy, hypochondriacal music composer like Gustav Mahler. In *Mahler*, shown recently at the Festival of Films International in Bombay, director Ken Russell has achieved a high degree of perfection. You find yourself engrossed in the tempests Mahler encounters and sympathizing with his neuroses. When the 100 minutes are over, Mahler emerges as a powerful character, not just a paragraph on the back cover of a record.

Russell filmed most of *Mahler* in the Lakes District of England. He has made most of his films there. He finds the place imbued with a strange mystery. There is a lot of this mystique apparent in the languid, lyric-heavy sequences that abound in *Mahler*.

Ken Russell is a strange man at the best of times. When asked what he does when he isn't directing, he replied: "Sit on a mountainside and look at the sun. Yes, and go blind in the eyes."

Russell has had his flops. But then he makes movies mostly on music-makers, and interpreting a composer's images through a camera can often distort the totality of the subject.

An earlier film directed by Russell, *The Music Lovers*, was about Tchaikovsky, and here, Russell feels the composer's Ninth Symphony was his best — "because it is a distillation of his entire experience in 45 minutes, the culmination of his life, a tortured life." Russell loves symphonies, and to him, they are almost like "inner space science fiction music", a "trip in the mind."

Russell's critics very often tear up his films. One Columbia executive is reported to have told him after sitting through the film he made last year, *Tommy*, that the film was great, except for two mistakes. "There are two yawns in the picture. People in the film actually yawn, and nobody yawns in a Columbia picture!"

Tommy was a "religious" sort of film, a pilgrim's progress. (Incidentally, one of the first straight documentaries Russell made was about Lourdes.) *Tommy* analyses the exploitation of religious ideals, and is above all about a teenage pop idol, trapped in his own nightmarish world of unrequited love. Roger Daltrey plays Tommy, and the funny thing is, critics have noticed that in the film, a brown-eyed boy grows up to be blue-eyed Daltrey! The Who (mainly Peter Townshend) provide the

KEN RUSSELL

Making films on music makers



TOP: Russell behind the camera.
ABOVE: A scene from 'Mahler'.

music, Eric Clapton and Elton John sing in it, and there is even a fleeting shot of the director working a hand-held camera while Elton sings. Altogether, *Tommy* "sends" a lot of people.

The press has always been fairly hostile to Ken Russell. His latest film, *Lisztomania*, is about composer Franz Liszt. Everyone dislikes this film. Patrick McGilligan said in his review: "*Lisztomania* is Russell at his utmost, pandering to his own overblown image, vulgar, bombastic, pretentious, gaudy, flamboyant, religious, raunchy, exciting, satiric, symbolic, meaningless, absorbing, exhilarating, trite, dull." McGilligan obviously ran out of adjectives after the eighteenth one!

Mahler, however, can be counted among Russell's masterpieces. He has evidently put in a lot of research before beginning work on the film. And

Russell, above all, loves classical music. He has listened to Mahler's symphonies for more than two decades. The film, therefore, appears to be just an extension of his intense infatuation with music.

Most of *Mahler* takes place on a train. During a journey with his wife, Alma, Mahler recalls the events of his life. The flashbacks, the frenetic uncertainty of the present, are all blended subtly. Brought up in a large Jewish family, Mahler is always in love with music. He aspires to be a composer, and his father agrees to pay for his music lessons. Russell conveys Mahler's delicateness too — his father is a hard man, not averse to beating up his wife now and then. So Mahler takes refuge in his own little shell. This penchant for solitude, perhaps, proves responsible for his later musical genius.

What strikes the viewer

most in *Mahler* is the obvious condensation of facts. For example, Mahler's wife was supposed to be very friendly with six different men. She nearly ran off with one of them. The film isn't about her 'affairs', but they are an important part of it. So Russell translates Mahler's doubts about Alma's fidelity by condensing the lovers, would-be lovers and admirers into one figure, a soldier, representing the military theme that runs through Mahler's compositions at that time — brutal, tough, martial music.

Mahler, however, finds he

sell endows the film with a chilly supernaturalism in such shots.

Mahler is also intensely affectionate. About to break up with his wife, he hears her say, "Oh, I'm nothing to you." And he replies, "You remember the second subject of the first movement of the Sixth Symphony?" She says "Yes, I copied it out for you, remember?" And he says "Well, that's you." After this sequence, the viewer discovers emotions he didn't know he possessed.

The peculiar thing is that Russell's films on composers have subjects very neurotic and with personal disorders. If they didn't have any neuroses, he feels, they would never have written their music. Their obsessions endow them with a different kind of vision.

Mahler has the composer's Sixth Symphony recurring throughout the film. This is again noteworthy, because critics have acclaimed this as Mahler's best work, almost autobiographical in content.

Ken Russell therefore transforms Mahler into his own celluloid symphony. The music in the background, Mahler's crisis-ridden life, and above all, Russell's total identification with the depth of his subject—these render the film memorable.

Russell takes all the criticism that his films generate in his stride. All his films are essentially symbolic. He loves going on fantasy trips. Noise and gimmickry delight him. His wife, costume designer Shirley Russell, always reads his scripts before he begins the film. Normally, Russell reports, she says "Rubbish" to the first script, "Um, getting better" to the second script, and "Huh, it's alright" to the third one. And so Russell uses the third script.

"I never see films if I can possibly help it. . . I've seen enough — whereas I haven't read enough books and looked at enough sunsets," Russell said in a recent interview (he periodically descends on New York to grant a week of interviews to the press). "All the films that have impressed me were flamboyant — Eisenstein's films, early Griffith, Fritz Lang's early expressionist films, *Citizen Kane*. What I like about visual things is that before you get time for the defences to go up, it's hit the brain. . . there's no time for any sort of wall."

Chaitanya Kalbag