

The Harmonists

For the filmgoer looking for something off beat (or maybe better said, *on* the beat), a new motion picture, *The Harmonists*, tells the fascinating story of a German sextet of *a capella* singers who took their country and Europe by storm in the late 1920's and early 1930's, but whose success ran smack up against Hitler's Germany.

The Harmonists is based on the true story of The Comedian Harmonists, a much-loved sextet famed for their pop music sensibility, for their lively stage presence, but, most indelibly, for their exalted level of close-harmony singing. Formed in Berlin in 1927, the group, formed of three Jews and three gentiles, became a musical phenomenon in Germany for several years before they were broken up in 1934 by the Nazi race laws, which banned the Jewish members from the group. Though the individual Harmonists tried, in various ways, to sustain their singing careers, the breakup of the group was its death knell. Only the original group intact offered the perfect balance of each performer's talents.

The Comedian Harmonists were never that well-known in the United States, although (as the film shows) they did make one sojourn to New York City in the early 1930's. They were, however, much influenced by American jazz and pop music, at least one of their number being a fervent admirer of the America black *a capella* group, The Revellers. They also borrowed their (somewhat puzzling) moniker from English, feeling it offered an exotic tinge. They performed constantly and widely, but--surprisingly--no film of them has survived--perhaps destroyed by nervous Nazis. But their considerable recording library survives, and fine use of it is made in the film (while the acting ensemble lip-syncs). Their quality and influence has been acknowledged by major contemporary groups, such as the King's Singers.

The Harmonists tells the story of the group from its inception, when poor drama student Harry Frommermann (Ulrich Noethen) gets an idea for a singing group and holds auditions in his shabby flat. His first hire is the supremely confident baritone Robert Biberti (Ben Becker), who soon enlists a couple of his friends, Pole Roman Cycowski (Heino Ferch), and bon vivant Eric Collin (Heinrich Schafmeister) into the group. In time, Bulgarian tenor Ari Leschnikoff (Max Tidof) and young pianist Erwin Bootz (Kai Weiesinger) join the team of six.

After the endless rehearsals and usual false starts, a breakthrough comes when the group meshes for the first time in a local bar, wordlessly imitating the instrumentation for Duke Ellington's "Creole Love Call." A big audition ensues, and they are off. This first part of the film, sprinkled with the sundry love lives of the principals, is reminiscent of the Fifties Hollywood band biographies such as *The Glenn Miller Story* and *The Benny Goodman Story*, punctuated by the superb quality of the Harmonists' sound. The second half of the film traces, in muted rather than melodramatic fashion, the group's demise under steady Nazi pressure. Its dramatic denouement comes in a tear-filled concert finale in Munich in March 1934, where their music is triumphant but their hopes are broken.

The surprise of the film is how coolly it treats this second, political dimension. There is no blatant foreshadowing of a future dilemma for the group; there is no strong

sense of the characters being Jewish or not (although, especially, in the case of Harry, his identity is obvious). It just sort of happens--perhaps much as it did to the Comedian Harmonists in real life--when an outside world intruded and ruined their lives when all they wanted to do was get on with their music.

The Harmonists, made by director Joseph Vilsmaier (known here for *Stalingrad* and *Brother of Sleep*), is not flawless. An extended sequence of the sextet in New York, for example, seems clumsy and ill-shaped compared to earlier material, and a crying jag by one of the boy's girlfriend goes on way too long... But overall, the story is an intriguing one and specially graced by the Harmonists soundtrack. The peak of that track, to this viewer-listener, is that pivotal rendition of "Creole Love Call," at the center of the movie. All done by the original voices mimicking orchestral sounds, the piece is a thrilling tour-de-force, made the more so by the actors showing how music can unite people--even disparate people--like few other enterprises.

(April 1999)