

## “THE LOUD AND THE GARISH DO NOT SUIT HIM” Critical notes on Willi Forst’s debut film *Leise flehen meine Lieder* (1933)

BY

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### Abstract

The purpose of this article is to conduct a critical examination of Willi Forst’s debut film as a director, *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, which was filmed in Vienna, Forst’s city of birth, in 1933. Forst has been generally included among the greatest figures in the history of German-language cinema during the interwar years, and Forst’s directorial debut with the musical film *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, which centered on a fictional episode in the life of Austrian composer Franz Schubert, followed a decade-long activity as an actor in both the theater and cinema. The film marked the beginning of Forst’s successful career as a film director, producer, and actor, which would develop in the years to follow between Vienna and Berlin. With the aim of enhancing comprehension of Forst’s oeuvre, the Austrian director’s filmdebut shall be put against the broader context of his body of work, drawing attention to some characteristics of Forst’s style that *Leise flehen meine Lieder* exemplified significantly.

**Keywords:** Willi Forst, Franz Schubert, Austrian cinema, Musical film

### Introduction

The Viennese-born film director Willi Forst has been largely included among the great names in the history of German-language cinema during the interwar period (Loacker, 2003; Bono, 2010). The following article will conduct a critical examination of Forst’s film *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, which marked Forst’s debut as a director. The film was shot in Vienna, Forst’s city of birth, in 1933, starring Hungarian operetta singer Marta Eggerth. Written by Austrian author Walter Reisch, who would later pursue his career in Hollywood, the film centered on a fictional episode in the life of Austrian composer Franz Schubert, who was played on the screen by renowned Austrian actor Hans Jaray. Forst’s directorial debut followed a decade-long activity as an actor in both the theater and cinema, during which Forst worked under the direction of some of the most relevant figures of German theater and cinema, such as Max Reinhardt, Gustav Hartung, and Erwin Piscator, and, with regard to film, Ewald A. Dupont, Karl Hartl and Gustav Ucicky. The Europe-wide fortune enjoyed by *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, of

which Forst also directed an English-language remake one year later, *The Unfinished Symphony*, sparked the beginning of Forst’s successful career as a film director, producer, writer, and actor, which progressed between Austria and Germany in the years that followed. In order to advance knowledge of Forst’s work, the current article intends to sketch an analysis of *Leise flehen meine Lieder*. By situating the film in the larger framework of Forst’s body of work, attention shall be drawn to certain aspects of Forst’s style that *Leise flehen meine Lieder* exemplified significantly.

### On the film’s origins

It is difficult to establish exactly when Forst’s wish “to finally, for once, not be directed, but to direct - that is, to direct films” (Regie-Debütant, 1933) began to take shape. “I believe there’s probably no film actor who doesn’t wish he could direct, for once. [...] At some point you just long to be productive instead of reproductive.” While working as an actor in the theater and cinema during the 1920s and early 1930s, as

Austrian scholar Ursula Stamberg has documented (Stamberg, 2003), Forst occasionally contributed to the staging of plays, though this remained a sporadic experience. It is also likely that Forst participated in the conception of the films in which he starred in the early 1930s. "I am not happy with a role in whose creation I have no part," he explained (Gesek, 1966, p. 61), and Austrian film historian Ludwig Gesek (1966, p. 61) corroborated Forst's statement: "[He] is interested not just in his role, but always in the entire film. [...] Forst does not only appear in films where he is hired as an actor; he participates beyond that, in their creation." Stars often collaborate in the making of films in which they appear, and since Reisch, with whom Forst was friendly, wrote the screenplays for many of them, the assumption that Forst contributed to their conception may be substantiated.

Forst's decision to transition to directing probably arose from his discontent with the stereotypical roles offered him as an actor. In the early 1930s, Forst usually played young lovers and bon vivant types. His participation in 1932 in Robert Siodmak's *Brennendes Geheimnis* might have represented an attempt to depart from the light genre. Here, Forst portrayed an unscrupulous philanderer who befriends a boy in order to gain intimacy with his mother. The film, based on the Stefan Zweig novel by the same title, has been generally considered one of Siodmak's best works of the early 1930s. For Hervé Dumont (1981, p. 77), it was "a masterpiece, [...] probably the most beautiful film from his German years." Later, Forst would emphasize that Siodmak's film marked a new direction for him, describing it as "a film that the audience [...] cannot just mindlessly enjoy. They must concentrate on what is happening." He declared, "The time of trivial films is over" (Stanzl, 1948, p. 41). His decision to also direct might have initially stemmed from a desire to promote his acting career. Originally, Forst was supposed to play the lead in *Leise flehen meine Lieder* but later decided against it, and *Leise flehen meine Lieder* would be a pivotal moment in Forst's career. Following his debut behind the camera, Forst temporarily discontinued acting. Apart from a few films in 1934 and 1935, he only reappeared on screen in 1939, as the lead in his film *Bel ami*.

The time and place of Forst's directing debut are noteworthy. A few months earlier, Adolf Hitler had

been named chancellor of the German Reich, and the Nazi regime's takeover of German cinema set off a dramatic wave of emigration. For many directors, actors, and technicians, Vienna was to represent a temporary station en route to Paris, London, or Hollywood. This was also true for some of those involved in *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, including lead actors Jaray and Eggerth, cinematographer Fritz Planer, screenwriter Reisch, and producers Arnold Pressburger and Gregor Rabinovitch. In the ensuing months, it would become hard for them to continue operating in Germany, and *Leise flehen meine Lieder* might have represented an attempt by the Rabinovitch-Pressburger team to relocate their operations to Austria in light of the new circumstances in Germany (Loacker, 2002). Their Berlin-based company, Cine-Allianz, had already produced two films in Vienna between 1931 and 1932.

Their agreement with Forst most likely extended beyond the production of *Leise flehen meine Lieder*. Between 1933 and 1934, Forst also starred in two Cine-Allianz films, *Ihre Durchlaucht, die Verkäuferin* and *So endet eine Liebe*. A deal was likely struck allowing Forst to direct in return for acting in some Cine-Allianz productions. Thus, the producers possibly intended to cover themselves against Forst's possible failure as a director. The choice of subject matter also shows a desire to minimize risks. On the one hand, Forst and Cine-Allianz were evidently counting on the enormous popularity of Schubert's figure with the audience. Since the late 19th century, numerous operettas and literary works had popularized the composer's life in German-language countries, and Schubert's *Lieder* were common property (Rainer, 2004; Janecka-Jary, 1994). On the other hand, Forst was orienting himself to the most successful genre of the early 1930s, namely the musical film, with which his name was firmly identified, in an apparent attempt to connect his directorial debut to his acting career.

### Forst's Style: The Art of the Nuance

An unmistakable style took shape in *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, demonstrating Forst's ability to assert himself in mainstream cinema, though without submitting to it. Forst's debut film showed evidently that he mastered the conventions of the genres he worked in while using them in a personal way. Forst's direction in *Leise*

*flehenmeine Lieder* appears nuanced and delicate, implying rather than explicitly stating things. “Not the flashy, the muted effects distinguish his films,” one critic remarked. “The loud and the garish do not suit him. Thus, he softens the lights, sets them in a minor key, so to speak, and either wraps the story in the nimbus of a glorious past or beds it in the rhythm of swaying music” (Gesek, 1948, p. 179). The film demonstrated a level of skill that elevated Forst’s work above the Austrian production of the time, and its popularity made *Leise flehenmeine Lieder* a point of reference, with Forst’s work contributing significantly to the development of Austrian cinema in the 1930s.

Probably, it is accurate to describe the narrative of *Leise flehenmeine Lieder* as partially “riddled with kitsch” and “artificial” (Grissemann, 1994b, p. 152). This assessment may actually apply to most of Forst’s films, which have frequently been dismissed by film historians for this reason. It is also true, as noted by Gesek (1948, pp. 184-185), that *Leise flehenmeine Lieder* included every element that would likely appeal to the audience: “Everything there is to like about Vienna is in there.” “There is Schubert’s music, the Philharmonic performs, the Sängerknaben sing, [...] the Vienna brand sticks big over the film.” Yet, Forst made an effort to elevate his film above the level of mainstream cinema. “My intent was to create a Viennese film in the best sense of the word,” Forst explained, “far from heady wines and laundry-maid romanticism” (Dachs, 1986, p. 46). The press acknowledged Forst’s effort, differentiating between the clichéd material and his direction, and appreciating Forst’s “determination to steer clear of kitsch” and his skill in telling the story “gently and most effectively, but without resorting to crude effects” (O.E.H., 1933). Forst’s restraint and sensitivity in sketching the burgeoning love between Schubert and the young countess, Karoline Esterházy, to whom he serves as music teacher, may offer an example. The two are sitting at a piano as the countess rehearses a scale, with Schubert accompanying her an octave lower. The camera shows only her hands as they move up and down the keys. Abruptly the countess alters course, and their hands come into contact. A single detail is enough to convey a mood. Forst works with a light touch and muted tones. An earlier scene makes this apparent, when Schubert is performing themes from

his Symphony in B Minor for the Viennese aristocracy, and the countess enters. From the top of the staircase, we witness her arrival. With haste, she climbs the stairs, casts a self-satisfied glance in a mirror, and walks inside the salon. In just a few strokes, the film has described her as a self-assured and vain young woman. Wordlessly the scene continues. The countess flirts with an officer, disregarding the music. While powdering her nose, she inquires in gestures about the young pianist, and the officer writes his name in powder on her little mirror. She shrugs her shoulders capriciously; the name means nothing to her, and she blows it away. One shot tells all. The camera stands behind her, showing only the open powder compact and her face reflected in the mirror. The flirtation continues; the officer whispers something to her that suddenly makes her laugh. Schubert stops playing, glares at the young countess, and walks away. But the woman’s laughter follows and paralyzes him. The composer will never be able to progress past the point in his symphony at which she interrupted him this evening.

Together with Forst’s “fluid direction, with a feeling for movement,” “for atmosphere” (Leise, 1933), film critics singled out his handling of the music favorably. “*Leise flehenmeine Lieder* made an impression because of its musical culture,” wrote film historian Jerzy Toeplitz (1992, p. 311); yet it is not just a matter of music. The way Forst built music into the narrative, weaving it into the images, is key. “The film is beautiful; it touches the heart and the imagination; it expresses unspeakable conditions of the soul; it is convincing and moving,” wrote Enrico Roma (1934) when Forst’s film opened in Italy, where it was given the title *Angeli senza paradiso*, in English “Angels without Paradise.” “Its images and song are integrated perfectly, perhaps for the first time, and the musical material is distributed throughout the narrative with equal spontaneity.” The story does not merely provide a pretense to string together musical and vocal numbers. Music has its reason to be, and rather than overlaying the narrative, it emerges from it. In *Leise flehenmeine Lieder*, Forst strove for balance and put music and narrative in mutual relation with one another, aiming at their interaction. The film pointed toward an approach that Forst would later perfect. As one critic noted (Katkosch, 1958), “[Forst] created

films of enchanting musicality. [...] Music and image formed such a profound unity that one might say Forst composed and made music in moving images.”

Diverse scenes exemplify this. Forst skillfully built the countess's flirtation with the officer into a crescendo, in keeping with passages from Schubert's symphony in B minor, lending the scene a particular dynamic that springs from the editing as well as the music, which binds the images together, sustaining the scene. Avoiding dialogue as though it were a silent movie, Forst lifted the music from the background, strengthening its eloquence so that it speaks in place of words. Elsewhere a song serves to convey a mood, to express a secret feeling. This is true of the *Lied* that gives the film its title. “Gently my songs entreat you all through the night,” runs the first stanza. When Schubert asks her to practice it during the lesson, the countess thinks she hears an echo of his affection for her in the song. She sings it passionately, returning his love – until, on the last page of the music, the countess finds a dedication to a Viennese girl, Emmi. Through the song, Karoline and Schubert can express their unspoken feelings, the love that their social differences render impossible. At the same time, the scene eschews banal dialogue, using the song to disclose its dramatic core – the sentimental entanglement of Schubert, the countess, and Emmi.

Simultaneously, Forst attempted to translate the feelings that the music arouses into images. A few couples are flirting in a simple inn in the Hungarian countryside as a little band plays gypsy music. The countess and Schubert meet here secretly. Abandoning the plainness of direction that defines *Leise flehen meine Lieder* in general, Forst places the spectator at the woman's side as she gives way to her emotions through dance. This takes place through both the images and the music. The scene begins with a close-up of a clarinet, indicating a country melody. The camera sweeps through the room; the music is melancholy. When the countess starts to dance, the tempo picks up. Now the scene dissolves into a series of brief shots: of the woman's face, two musicians playing bass, her legs, and the inn's clientele, grouped around her and clapping to the music. It climaxes in a dizzying, pirouette-like camera movement from the woman's perspective, which embraces the inn. As Spanish writer Ricardo Blasco (1953) noted, though

*Leise flehen meine Lieder* otherwise treads a traditional path, Forst's efforts to convey “an acoustic sensation plastically” are apparent here. In Forst's films, “the most important dance is always the one you do not see: that of the unleashed, highly accelerated camera eye” (Grissmann, 1994a, p. 2).

### Concluding remarks

Forst's debut film, *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, stands exemplarily for the Austrian director's oeuvre. After the international acclaim gained by *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, Forst would pursue his career as a film director with *Maskerade*, starring Austrian actress Paula Wessely. The film was shot in Vienna at the beginning of 1934, with the script again written by Reisch. When *Maskerade* was screened at the Venice Film Festival, in Italy, where Forst's film was awarded a prize for best screenplay, one critic (Gromo, 1934) wrote that the film “camouflages subject material that otherwise might have provided quite a bit of silliness and naiveté” if it were not for Forst's *mise-en-scène*. One year earlier, *Leise flehen meine Lieder* had significantly anticipated this characteristic of Forst's work, as this article has tried to show, and Forst's following films would offer further proof of it. “In itself, the story is no more than [...] cheap fiction, but the acting, the rhythm, and the scenes' construction [...] make it a compelling film” (Gesek, 1948, p. 185). This observation can easily be applied to Forst's work in general. Depending on one's perspective, this was either Forst's talent or an unsettling paradox that deeply marked the Austrian director's work. It already was evident in *Leise flehen meine Lieder*, with Forst's debut film providing a foretaste, of sorts, of what was to become Forst's distinctive style.

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