We Want the Light (review)

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We Want the Light, by acclaimed documentary filmmaker, Christopher Nupen, explores the complex relationship that Jewish musicians and German composers have shared for the last two hundred and fifty years. Drawing from a rich menu of interviews with prominent musicians, scholars, critics, and Holocaust survivors, Nupen presents an intriguing investigation of music’s power and meaning. We Want the Light originated as an hour-long 2003 special for the BBC. The 2009 two-DVD set begins with that BBC special, a well-crafted documentary which falls into three parts: 1) German history and Jewish assimilation; 2) Richard Wagner’s influence; and 3) the fallout from Hitler’s adoption of Wagner. Nupen tells this story through interviews, musical performances, and primary source readings. Underscoring it all are extended excerpts from various composers ranging from Bach to Brahms to Franz Waxman. Nupen covers a lot of historical ground and manages to find the right balance of scholarly context, musical reflection, and colorful (often heartbreaking) anecdotes from the survivors. The images throughout We Want the Light are mainly of the interviewees, but Nupen also incorporates excellent live performance footage, most of which effectively focuses our attention on the music rather than the technique or personality of the performer(s). Also included is a rare clip from a concert in Rishon Le’Zion, Israel in which the Israel Symphony attempts to perform Wagner’s Siegfried Idyll over the protests of an angry listener shaking a rattle. Nupen concludes the first DVD by presenting the entire documentary soundtrack again but without interviews or narration; the images here are drawn almost completely from live performances. As Nupen notes in the DVD introduction, the documentary repeatedly emphasizes music’s ability to communicate more vividly than words. The separate music track, recorded in Dolby Digital 5.1, is intended to encourage viewers to return to the music itself and reflect on the context We Want the Light has just described. On the second DVD, Nupen presents extended clips from the eighteen interviews he conducted for the documentary. Included is a stunning performance by Evgeny Kissin, whose interview did not make the final cut, but whose playing of the slow movement from Brahms Piano Sonata in F minor, Op. 5 powerfully captures Nupen’s overarching point that music, though abstract and imprecise, has the ability to cut deep into our emotional being.

This is Nupen’s tenth documentary, all now available on DVD. His earlier projects focused on performers (Segovia, Kissin, Perlman, du Pré, Milstein, Ashkenazy), or composers (Schubert and Sibelius), so We Want the Light cuts a new path, and in doing so confirms Nupen’s mastery of the classical music documentary. The sound quality and image clarity are excellent. The DVD menus are thorough, clearly organized, and easily navigated. We Want the Light is intended for general audiences, but will also be of great use to specialists in Wagner, the Holocaust, German history, political music, and even documentary film production.

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