

## FILM REVIEW

# Musicians Who Find Winning Isn't All

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

One lesson to be drawn from "The Winners," a searching, melancholy Dutch documentary about the lives of four classical musicians who won the prestigious Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, is that victory is not a guaranteed ticket into the classical music pantheon. Politics, personal health, changing musical fashions and the mysterious vagaries of personality, not to mention sheer luck, can be as strong determining factors as raw talent in the trajectory of a career.

The movie's most compelling and saddest case history is the downward spiral of Philipp Hirschhorn, a gifted Russian musician who upon winning the 1967 violin competition was hailed by many as a new Paganini. Vintage film clips show the dashing handsome Hirschhorn (who died in 1996, shortly after his interviews were filmed) in his youthful glory, when he embodied the classical virtuoso as a fiery Byronic hero.

Interviewed nearly three decades later and shown old film clips of himself, Hirschhorn is bitterly scornful of his youthful naïveté, yet retains a spark of his old fervor as he recalls the "euphoria" of performing and compares that feeling to driving a racing car at high speed and taking LSD. After he emigrated to the West in 1973, his career never took off, and it was undermined by an unspecified illness. The film, directed by Paul Cohen, contrasts Hirschhorn's burnout with the more gradual ascent of Gidon Kremer, who came in third in 1967 but eventually became an international star.

The Russian pianist Yevgeny Mogilevsky, who won the same competition in 1964, found his career hindered by politics. Because the Communist Party bosses considered him unreliable, he couldn't take advantage of his victory and travel abroad until 1969, and he didn't make his American debut until 1991. Although he is just beginning to gain international recognition, the novelty value of Russian musicians in the post-



Film Forum

The violinist Philipp Hirschhorn, as a child prodigy, in "The Winners."

## THE WINNERS

Directed by Paul Cohen; written (in English, French, Russian and Flemish, with English subtitles) by Mr. Cohen and David van Tijn, based on an original idea by Mr. van Tijn; director of photography, Mr. Cohen; edited by Ian Overweg; produced by VPRO/BRTN; released by First Run Features. At the Film Forum, 209 Houston Street, South Village. Running time: 85 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Philipp Hirschhorn, Berl Senofsky, Yevgeny Mogilevsky, Mikhail Bezverkhnny, Gidon Kremer and Mischa Maisky.

Communist era is not what it used to be, and he may never attain the status he might have achieved 30 years ago had he been allowed to travel abroad.

Mikhail Bezverkhnny, a Russian violinist who won the 1976 competition, also never achieved the fame predicted for him, although he has established a comfortable career as founding member of the Shostakovich Piano Trio in Brussels. In the movie's most detailed musical sequence, he and his wife, Olga Bezverkhnaya, a pianist, are shown re-

hearing a transcription of the Rachmaninoff "Vocalise" for violin and piano. Mr. Bezverkhnny is outspoken in his disdain for a classical music world whose values he believes are determined by record companies that he says prefer "gray" musicians over quirky geniuses with strong personalities.

Finally there is Berl Senofsky, a Ukrainian-born American violinist who won the competition in 1955 and recorded for RCA in the early 1960's. Mr. Senofsky, who became an important teacher and a judge for the Queen Elisabeth Competition, is philosophical about his relative lack of success after his days as a Wunderkind.

When asked to show the medal he won four decades earlier, he rummages through a drawer and can't find it. Yes, he admits, he dreamed of fame and fortune, but "when making music you just don't think of these things — you think of more exalted things."

At the end of the movie, which opens today at the Film Forum, we're finally shown the medal, which he was eventually able to locate. It doesn't look like much.

# Cue the violin: 'Winners' has 4 poignant stories

By JAMI BERNARD

Daily News Movie Critic

★★★

THE WINNERS. A documentary by Paul Cohen and David van Tign. At Film Forum. Running time: 85 mins. In various languages with English subtitles. Unrated: Nothing objectionable for children.

**M**usical genius (like all genius) is a fascinating, elusive thing, hard to define and harder to commit to film. Audiences are entranced with the topic, as they've flocked to such recent movies as "Shine" and "Hilary and Jackie," in which the price of fame is as heavy as any gold medal ever won.

The best gold medal of them all is the one awarded yearly in Brussels at the Queen Elizabeth Competition. The honor is so coveted, it seems only natural that

such a win would insure a lifetime of tours, recordings and renown.

The fascinating Dutch documentary "The Winners" lets the air out of those tires a little at a time. It looks up four winners from the '50s and '60s — three violinists and a pianist — to see how far their lucky charm got them.

Talent, of course, can do only so much. The movie clearly shows that circumstance, politics, personality and self-esteem play just as strong a part in determining a musician's career path.

The most charismatic of the four, Philipp Hirschhorn, watched it all ebb away, partly because of physical illness. But his obvious depression and detachment probably had a lot to do with it.

The most evocative scene comes when Hirschhorn watches his younger, more vibrant self on tape; his expression fluctu-

ates among tenderness, jealousy, despair, joy and, finally, disinterest. Hirschhorn died shortly after participating in this movie.

Of the others, one became a gentle teacher even though his parents never encouraged him in his early days. Tellingly, he cannot find the medal that started his career no matter how he rummages through his drawers and on his desktop.

Another is a curmudgeon perfectionist who tortures his accompanist with repetition and demands.

The fourth subject has the talent but not enough fire in the belly to compete with other Soviet musicians who are no longer hamstrung by the Iron Curtain. He practices his violin in an unheated van because his neighbors "hate classical music."

"The Winners" captures the euphoria of musical achievement and the terror of the slide into obscurity.

## The Winners

Dir. Paul Cohen. 1998. N/R.  
85 mins. Documentary.

To win Brussels's Queen Elisabeth Competition is among the highest honors a concert violinist or pianist can receive; the award bears so much weight in the world of classical music that the young winner seems assured of international success. In *The Winners*, filmmakers Paul Cohen and David van Tijn interview four musicians who won the prize between 1955 and 1976 but who, for various reasons, did not achieve world stardom. The resulting documentary is both an intimate portrait of four remarkable personalities and an insightful exploration of the politics of classical music.

The film begins with jubilant images of some of the century's great musicians bowing before the Queen Elisabeth judges and being cheered by appreciative crowds. This public celebration offers a stark contrast to what we come to know of these musicians' lives—for example, that Mikhail Bezverkhny (1976 winner) practices violin in a gutted van because his neighbors complain about his music. Berl Senofsky (1955 winner) offers a succinct explanation of why he never lived up to his spectacular youthfulness promise: "Of course, I dreamed of money and fame," he comments. "But when you're making music...you think of much more exalted things. I was morally right, but business-wrong."

The film's richest interviews are with violinist Philipp Hirschhorn (1967 winner), who was terminally ill at the time of filming and who speaks of music, fame and career with bitterness, sadness and sometimes preternatural clarity. Footage of Hirschhorn playing in his youth shows him in near ecstasy, a profound contrast to his current cynicism. Nearly as engaging are interviews with cellist Mischa Maisky, who was childhood friends with Hirschhorn (and with violinist Gidon Kremer) and who discusses about music and his friends with a manic and engaging enthusiasm.

Anyone who has dreamed of playing on the concert stage will be fascinated by the film's portrayal of these musicians, and by its intelligent exploration of the arcana of building a career. The rest of us can simply marvel at fame's capricious ways. (Now playing; Film Forum)

—Emily Barton



ALL KEYED UP Yevgeny Moguilevsky.

THE NEW YORKER, JANUARY 25, 1999

**THE WINNERS**—From Holland, an extraordinarily poignant where-are-they-now documentary about four past winners of a prestigious international musical competition who went on to good but not first-rate careers. One Russian pianist fell afoul of Soviet authorities; another Russian, a violinist, played so close to perfection that it shattered his fragile nerves. The message of the film is that genius alone is not enough—often it's the near-geniuses, those able to function in the world, who are most successful. A little luck helps, too. Directed by Paul Cohen; written by Cohen and David van Tijn. In English, French, Russian, and Flemish.—S.K. (Film Forum; starting Jan. 20.)

## Movie Reviews

# 'Winners' strikes the right chord

**D**O you have to be crazy to be a musical virtuoso? The art-house hit "Hilary and Jackie" dramatizes the connection between artistic genius and madness, a subject given nonfiction treatment in "The Winners," a Dutch documentary tracking the careers of four musicians who did not live up to the promise of their early years.

Director Paul Cohen went in search of three violinists and a pianist, each of whom had once won the prestigious Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, Belgium, usually a certain stepping-stone to success. But for the four men profiled in "The Winners," their dazzling debuts proved the high point of their careers.

The film's pianist, Yevgeny Moguilevsky, was a surprise 1964 winner. The Soviets, who had expected a more politically malleable pet to win, were so outraged that they refused to send anyone to meet the young man on what should have been a triumphal return home. And the government frequently refused Moguilevsky, a surprisingly passive individual, permission to perform abroad — effectively breaking his career.

Violinist Mikhail Bezverkhnny, a 1976 Queen Elisabeth winner, is as wild-eyed as Moguilevsky is sedate. He emigrated from Russia in 1990 and currently teaches music in Brussels. Cohen shows Bezverkhnny tyrannizing his accompanist wife, and railing against record companies, who, in his view, refuse to make room for eccentrics such as himself.

The most interesting of the quartet is Philipp Hirschhorn (67), who was widely expected to be one of the great violinists of

the century. We see the Russia-born Hirschhorn at the competition in black-and-white footage, an intense, fiery countenance glowing like a white-hot ember.

In 1996, when he was interviewed (he has since died), Hirschhorn looks addled, a sparking nest of frazzled wires.

Why did Hirschhorn fail? It remains a mystery. Hirschhorn's oblique self-analysis doesn't clear things up. Cohen portrays him as an exceptionally fragile *wunderkind* whose hothouse emotional state allowed him to play with a rarely paralleled expressiveness, but which hobbled attempts to build a career and a life.

Yet, as in "Hilary and Jackie," the onset of a medical condition is unsatisfactorily downplayed as a motivation for self-destructive behavior.

All of the men are depicted as tragic cases, except one: Berl Senofsky ('56), a gentle violinist who teaches at a Baltimore conservatory. Senofsky is tragic only if you think he should have been Isaac Stern or Itzhak Perlman; he seems happy to have been modest little Berl Senofsky.

Astute, absorbing and at times quite moving, "The Winners" suggests that the road to fame and fortune in the classical-music world is fraught with psychological peril. It's an old story, but a cautionary tale no less compelling for its familiarity.



Rod Dreher

### THE WINNERS ★★★

Documentary co-written and directed by Paul Cohen. In English and in French, Russian and Flemish with English subtitles. Running time: 84 minutes. Unrated. At Film Forum, Houston Street, between Sixth Avenue and Varick Street.

*The Winners*

Directed by Paul Cohen

At Film Forum

Through February 2

**A** stark irony underpins the title of this Dutch-produced documentary about the often unbridgeable gap between the promise and fulfillment of prodigy. Cohen's subjects—two Russian violinists, an American violinist, and a Russian pianist—are past winners of Brussels's Queen Elizabeth Competition; a first-place prize is widely considered the most prestigious accolade in classical music but does not, apparently, guarantee a stellar career. All four of these champions went on to middling-at-best success, variously hampered by illness, depression, bad luck, sheer indifference, and, for the Russians, the vagaries of the Soviet regime. Soon after winning the 1964 competition (even though another member of the Soviet delegation had been "planned" for the prize), pianist Yevgeny Moguilevsky was officially branded "politically unreliable" and prohibited from leaving his country for 10 years despite invitations from orchestras around the world.

The disappointments met by the other men are less readily explicable. Violinist Philipp Hirshhorn, who won in 1967 and now exudes stultified self-contempt, simply collapsed under the weight of expectation once he'd emigrated to the West. He now likens his winning performance to artistic deceit: "It seems I did something tricky to convince the jury, like a successful lie." Scenes in which the bitter, slightly daffy Hirshhorn (who died in 1996) watches 30-year-old footage of his Queen Elizabeth win, scoffing at his broodingly handsome former self, are painful to watch.

The dark, melancholy air of *The Winners* unfortunately carries with it a distinct whiff of condescension toward its subjects. I'm not sure what Cohen is out to prove when his camera gawks at paunchy, elderly Berl Senofsky while he lumbers about his apartment, knocking over plants as he searches in vain for his Queen Elizabeth medal, or when it stares at Hirshhorn for long intervals between Cohen's questions. Cohen feels sorry for these men whose lives never matched their brilliance, but offers little insight into the slow leaking process by which their gifts went to waste. The simplicity and straightforwardness of his approach is too pseudo-objective for such a murky, elusive topic as genius and its betrayals. At times, Cohen comes off as little more than a pitying voyeur; his subjects have always deserved a better audience.

# THE WINNERS

(DOCU — DUTCH)

A VPRO/BRTN production. (International sales: NOS Sales, Hilversum.) Produced by Nellie Kamer.

Directed by Paul Cohen; Screenplay by Cohen, David van Tijn. Camera (color, 16mm), Cohen; editor, Ian Overweg; music, various; sound, Hugo Helmond, Menno Euwe. **Reviewed at Vancouver Film Festival, Oct. 1, 1997. Running time: 84 MIN.**

With: Philipp Hirschhorn, Berl Senofsky, Yevgeny Moguilevsky, Mikhail Bezverkhnny, Mischa Maisky and Gidon Kremer.

(French, Russian, Flemish and English dialogue)

**O**ne of the best docus about classical music ever made, and probably the *best* about the limits of virtuosity, "The Winners" scores by looking at what happened to four brilliant musicians who won a major European competition, and then, for complicated reasons, went on to less-than-stellar careers. The OK-looking pic needs a 35mm blowup (especially for the sake of its sound) to get major play on the specialized circuit, but specificity is exactly what makes it so valuable for the musically minded. On tape or film, it should be mandatory viewing for music students — especially ones with any competitiveness in their blood.

Belgium's Queen Elizabeth Competition, held in Brussels, has given incandescent young performers on piano and violin a solid start — especially Russians, such as David Oistrakh and Vladimir Ashkenazy, who previously were little known in the West. But what about first-prize ponies, asks documaker Paul Cohen, we've never heard from since? Helmer, whose last outing was "Part-Time God," focuses on temporary heroes of the 1950s and '60s — men who had all the earmarks of genius but subsequently failed to live up to their promise.

Most intriguing is Philipp Hirschhorn, a dazzling violinist whose 1967 victory seemed destined to make him a household name. Byronically handsome in white tie and tails, he's seen in TV footage from the early '70s, a time when some conductors and impresarios saw him as the new Paganini. It wasn't to be, of course. A combination of arrogance, self-contempt, and debilitating illness knocked him out of the race; he switched to teaching and then died in 1996, shortly after interviews were shot. Tart comments from top contemporaries, including cellist Mischa Maisky and violinist Gidon Kremer put his strange career in context.

A gentler tale is that of Berl Senofsky, a Russian-born fiddler who grew up in the States and entered the contest in 1956 "just to see where (he) was" in the realm of pros. Already over age 30 at the time, he didn't have the stomach for the tour grind and also reverted to teaching, which pic shows him doing beautifully at a Baltimore academy.

Yevgeny Moguilevsky, the sole pianist represented here, also got the cold shoulder from commissars, most-

ly because their own darling didn't win in 1964. He mounted a decent career anyway, but every attempt to break through abroad was thwarted.

Although elements of politics, bad timing and anti-Semitism rear their disruptive heads, pic mostly sticks to psychology of subjects to explain their unpredicted paths. Archival footage and stills, plus detailed side trips into questions of personality and technique reveal specifics about making music, complete with challenges and rewards that are notably elusive for most docus and biopics.

Outside of its own natural place in upper-level pedagogy, "The Winners" will make gripping fare for publicizing viewers in all language groups. Most poignant moment comes when the soon-to-be-late Hirschhorn stares ruefully at a photo taken just after he received the Queen Elizabeth medal. "That guy knows that there is no happy end," he sighs, "no grand finale."

bron: Variety, november 17 - 23, 1997

# FOR MY BABY

(DUTCH)

A Hungry Eye Pictures/VARA Television production, in association with Transatlantic Media Associates (Hungary). (International sales: Hungry Eye, Amsterdam.) Produced by Rene Seegers, Berry van Zwieten, Karel van Ossenbruggen. Co-producer, Laszlo Helle.

Directed by Rudolf van den Berg. Screenplay, Michael O'Loughlin, Van den Berg; screen story, Van den Berg. Camera (color), Gabor Szabo; editor, Kant Pan; music, Bob Zimmerman; production design, Lorand Javor; art direction, Tibor Lazar; costume design, Linda Bogers; sound (Dolby SR), Mark Holding, Paul Caar; assistant director, Gabor Gajdos; casting, Joyce Nettles. **Reviewed at Netherlands Film Festival (competing)/Holland Film Meeting, Utrecht, Sept. 28, 1997. Running time: 103 MIN.**

With: Alan Cumming, Juliet Aubrey, Frank Finlay, Elisabeth Spriggs, Serena Gordon, Hedi Temessy, Timothy Bateson, Clive Russell, Cyril Shaps, Michael Cronin. (English dialogue)

**T**he perils of English-language Europuddings are nowhere better illustrated than in "For My Baby." A neo-Gothic, Viennaset psychodrama, pic's director is Dutch, it was largely shot in Budapest and features a potentially strong British cast adopting a variety of bad accents. Resulting farra-go could find some play in indiscriminating non-Anglo territories but is likely to be laughed off the screen by native speakers.

Daniel (Scottish comedian Alan Cumming) is an egocentric standup comic whose sister, Hannah, died as a kid in a Nazi concentration camp. Halfway to Norman Bates hell, Daniel dresses up as her to please his half-dead hospitalized mom (Hungarian veteran Hedi Temessy) and is dumped by his long-suffering g.f. (Serena Gordon). Enter Lilian (Juliet Aubrey), a naive Texan who falls for the half-crazed Daniel while trying to work out the connection of her father, a former

# FILM FORUM



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documentaries  
about classical  
music ever made  
and probably the  
best about the limits  
of virtuosity."** —VARIETY

## *The Winners*

*What does it take to  
go from being a winner  
to being a star?*

BY PAUL COHEN

FIRST RUN  
FEATURES

MON-THURS 2:00, 4:00, 6:00, 8:00, 10:00 FRI-SUN 1:00, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, 10:10