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Norman Lebrecht on shifting sound worlds

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Martha's Bloody Daughter creates a masterpiece of intimacy and restraint

August 29, 2013 by [Norman Lebrecht](#) 4 Comments

The film opens with Martha Argerich, in a hospital doorway, watching her daughter Stephanie give birth to a baby.

Stephanie has been filming her mother for most of her life, a form of cinema verite that crosses most lines of a loving relationship and yet remains consensual as both struggle to define the nature of their bond and the enigma of each other. Bloody Daughter is the title of their 94-minute co-biodoc, directed by Stephanie Argerich, starring her mother.

There are other parties to this conversation – Martha's two elder daughters by prior relationships and Stephanie's father, Stephen Kovacevich, a pianist every bit as obsessive as Martha but better at concealing it.

Who, we are kept wondering, is Martha Argerich? And why, pianism aside, does she compel our attention. She is presented feet first – the largest, most expressive, most wounded feet you will ever see on film – a pair of feet that are never in repose, perhaps always on the run. Stephanie traces her flight path from Buenos Aires to Brussels and Geneva, flitting back and forth from English to French but seldom using her mother tongue, Spanish. Somewhere in the film Martha says that what is seen is not her. Perhaps it is, perhaps it isn't.



Her manager, seen ironing her frock, says only when she plays is she ever happy. Her then adds, tellingly, one qualifying word: 'after'. We see Martha backstage, at the peephole, swearing she won't go on. Then she does, bows deeply and looks enraptured, as if this alone is where she belongs.

Her connection with each daughter is quite different from either of the others. Near the end, she sits with the three of them on a picnic blanket, letting them paint her toenails. No artist has ever been captured on film in such unadorned intimacy.

Stephanie refrains, as a rule, from asking direct questions. Clues to being Martha emerge elliptically. This is the supreme artifice of the film-maker's art, to let the viewer be the first to know. There is a glint of Jewish ancestry, a hint of two years when Martha gave up piano, a narrative fragment of a kidnapping.

Bloody Daughter, which I have just caught in a festival showing in Warsaw, is a riveting essay on what passes, and what must not pass, between mother and daughter. Acutely painful and funny, it cries out to be seen on the festival scene, in arts cinemas – and on arts TV.

If BBC4 won't buy it, we should demand to know why.

NORMAN LEBRECHT



Author, novelist, broadcaster, cultural commentator. Follow him on FB: [Facebook](#) and on Twitter: [@NLebrecht](#)

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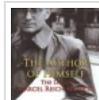
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Peter Metrinko says:

[August 29, 2013 at 10:30 pm](#)



Coincidence: when I was slated to hear Argerich play one of the late Beethoven sonatas at Constitution Hall in Washington DC decades ago, I bought a recording of the piece to get to know it before the concert. It happened to be by Kovacevich, though still under his former name Bishop. I thought she played it more expressively than he did.

REPLY

Tom Harris says:

[August 30, 2013 at 9:44 pm](#)



That must have been a wonderful experience! May I ask which sonata? It seems that she didn't play many of them (though I have heard op.10 no.3, the Waldstein, and op.101). I would love to know which one you heard and what you thought.

REPLY

Una says:

[August 30, 2013 at 11:49 am](#)



Maybe she did. But Stephen Bishop-Kovacevich was a fine pianist, and just a different interpretation. A bit like comparing cats and dogs 😊 Glad you enjoyed it. I think Martha Argerich is wonderful as well.

REPLY

Kyle Nash-Baker says:

[August 30, 2013 at 12:51 pm](#)



Yes I completely agree, being English myself I really really really hope to see this documentary on British TV! Sky arts or BBC 4 whatever...

REPLY

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