

The Chess Player

Le Joueur d'Echecs

La Société des Film Historiques 1926

directed by Raymond Bernard



Cast

Boleslas Vorowski: Pierre Blanchard
Baron von Kempelen: Charles Dullin
Sophie Novinska: Edith Jehanne
Catherine II: Marcelle Charles-Dullin
Major Nicolaieff: Camille Bert
Wanda: Jacky Monnier
Prince Serge Oblomoff: Pierre Batcheff



Directed by Raymond Bernard
Scenario: Raymond Bernard
and Jean-José Frappa
From a novel by Henri Dupuy-Mazuel
Photography: Joseph-Louis Mundviller & Marc Buja
Art direction: Jean Perrier
Costume design: Eugène Lourié



A tinted print
Duration: 134 minutes plus interval
Projection speed: variable
Aperture: full

**Original Score by
Henri Rabaud
(40 players)**



THE CHESS PLAYER

The Chess Player proved that for sheer opulence and epic spirit the French film industry was easily a match for Hollywood. Based on Henri Dupuy-Mazuel's novel, it is set in Vilnius in 1776, a place of clandestine plotting against Russian rule. A young nobleman, Boleslas, leads the Polish patriots against the Russians but is wounded in battle. He is rescued by his guardian, Baron von Kempelen, and nursed by the Baron's ward, Sophie. For the safety of Boleslas the three must escape. The Baron uses his mechanical wizardry to outwit the Russian oppressors. The bizarre story was actually based on fact. Baron von Kempelen, a Viennese court engineer was famous for his collection of automata. His masterpiece, the Chess Player, was created in 1769, and became a sensation for beating all opponents – including Catherine the Great. It was subsequently revealed as a hoax – it concealed a human player.

From old Vilnius to the Polish plains, to the courts of Warsaw and St. Petersburg, this was a complex and expensive production to achieve. It was one of the most expensive of the decade, costing 6 million francs and taking a year to make. Thirty-five sets were designed by Jean Perrier and constructed at the Joinville studios outside Paris. Most impressive were the facade and courtyard of the Winter Palace. The battle sequences were shot on location in the forest of Fontainebleau and the snow scenes at St. Moritz. The company went to Lomza in Poland to film the cavalry charge for which the military authorities loaned 1,500 cavalrymen. Stunningly edited and rousing accompanied by Rabaud's score, the cavalry charge got a standing ovation from the first-night audience at the Marivaux Theatre. The press raved: 'contains scenes that will revolutionise film technique' (Cinéa, January 1927); 'Raymond Bernard has created a film that surpasses all films and Henri Rabaud's score is indispensable to the film's success' (le Soir).

Rabaud was conductor of the Paris Opéra, Opéra Comique and Boston Symphony Orchestra as well as being the director of the Paris Conservatoire from 1920–1941. His score is full of rich harmony mirroring the film's sense of subterfuge and impending doom. The eighteenth century background called for some classical pastiche which he scored for a piano to be played in the style of a harpsichord. He uses the Polish hymn of independence like a chorale for the battle scenes. Rabaud integrates each style to create a score that not only evokes the mood of the film but synchronises perfectly with it. The climactic scene when the Baron's automaton army come to life shows this to perfection. It sometimes seems that the film was written to the music rather than the music to the film.

Unavailable for many years, the film was restored from original nitrate material, enabling a tinted print to be made that does full justice to the film's atmospheric images.