Two French films from the 30's

CLUB DE FEMMES (Self Films, 1937) Written and directed by Jacques Dowal; Camera: Marc Posseard; Music by Marius François Gaillard; With English titles; 9 reels.

With Danielle Darrieux, Josette Day, Betty Stockfield, Valentine Tessier, Georgette, Else Argal, Junie Astor, Martine Honeymoon, Marion Delbo, Eve Francis, Kiss Kounrine, Raymond Gaal.

"Club de Femmes" is exactly the kind of above-average French programmer that we used to go to in our youth, sitting in trembling anticipation of the next "adult" shock, and rationalising it all away by telling ourselves that the French cinema was really grown up and knew how to call a spade a spade. And in those days of the mid and late thirties when Hollywood had withdrawn into its own Never-Never-Land, it wasn't an unreasonable assumption to make. For all its sex, "Club de Femmes" isn't a cheap exploitation film; nor on the other hand does it have the importance or poetry of a similar and contemporary film such as Carne's "Hotel du Nord". It is a good, and certainly very entertaining, commercial product of the day, and to attempt to find more than that in it would be a mistake. Yet despite Virginia Woolf et al, this kind of "Grand Hotel" mixture of young love (the kind where the first night together automatically produces a baby!), white slavery, lustbats and what have you, still packs quite a punch. Despite a misleading opening which suggests a kind of Margaret Rutherford comedy, it soon gets down to serious business and manages to be both charming and effectively dramatic. Some of the dramatics do get a bit high-blown -- surely there must be other solutions to unhappy love affairs than exile to a lemon colony? - but the performances manage to cut it all over convincingly. Danielle Darrieux, youthful, lovely and graceful, is utterly charming in the lead, and that British warhorse Betty Stockfield - the Eddie Constantine of her day, employed far more in French films than British - is as reliable as ever. The print is the most complete that we've ever seen; in fact there appears to be only one censur cut (a bare bosom closeup) and they've even left in a single frame of that to satisfy our two or three voyeurs! Comparison with "The Chaisse Girls" is perhaps not inappropriate, except that this film is shot in focus, the girls are worth looking at, and one doesn't need to be prodded awake every fifth reel.

"UN GRAND AMOUR DE BEETHOVEN" (1936) Written, produced and directed by Michel Boizot; Dialogue: Steven Passeur; Music: Louis Mason; Camera: Marc Posseard, Robert Le Feuvre; English titles; 8 reels.


Not too long ago we ran Gance's silent "La Roue", and with it - unannounced, and as a transient item, a Warner pot-boiler called "Central Park". By a curious coincidence, both films dealt with a veteran of many years' service (a railroad man in one; a police man in the other) going blind. Gance being what he is, and Warner programmers being what they were, it took as long for Gance's hero to go blind as it did for Warners to wrap up several little romantic and melodramatic sub-plots! Gance often seemed obsessed with the visual possibilities of mental and/or physical affliction, and so it is not surprising that, having chosen Beethoven for a subject, he devotes the bulk of the film to Beethoven's deafness!

Of all the composers whose lives have formed the basis for movie biographies - Schumann, Schubert, Tchaikowsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, Strauss, Victor Herbert, Handel (not even to get into the moderns - Rodgers and Hart, Kern, Porter, Gershwin) - Beethoven has always been the most difficult. His life was thoughtlessly void of cinematic possibilities (other than for the deafness seized on with such relish by Gance) and his music so heavy and ponderous that one could never blame his audiences for drifting away to Rossini, as happens in this film. (Even the Huff, which plays no favorites, has never used more than a few matches from "Begmont" in musical scoring for silent films!) Gance poses himself a further obstacle by starting with Beethoven's happiest days behind him, and proceeding to dwell on his unhappiness and general misery until death came at the age of 57.
Yet with all these drawbacks, "Beethoven" is probably Gance's best sound film - and it fares much better in this rich and toned print, with original French dialogue, than the much shorter version generally shown in this country with a narration that somehow manages to turn the whole thing into a rather dull musical history lesson, from which only Gance's occasional virtuoso sequences emerge with lustre undiminished.

Not being an authority on Beethoven, I am sure that gigantic liberties have been taken, yet cannot put my finger on any of them - other than that the whole plotline has too much of the "Grand Tragedy" of "Camille". Yet most of the pitfalls are avoided; Beethoven's music, since it is clearly such a key factor, is brought in simply and without subtlety. The "inspirational" composing scenes undoubtedly exercise a great deal of dramatic license, but they do so creatively and effectively, which is all that matters; none of it is coy or cute, although admittedly at one point when Beethoven is working on a symphony, and his bride-to-be pointedly remarks that she'll stay with him until he finishes it, we know exactly what symphony it is! But there are none of the gaucheries of that other Beethoven film where a character picks up a single sheet of musical notes and exclaims "But it isn't finished", or the absurd name-dropping of "Song of My Heart", where Tchaikowsky is urged "why don't you work harder, like Rimski and Mussorgski?".

Visually the film is incredibly handsome. There are rich glass shots, some ingenious miniatures, much fluid camerawork, flawless lighting, and at least three tour-de-force sequences which always make up for some of the inevitable tedium of Gance: his first realisation of impending deafness, his regained confidence during a raging storm (when he determines to out-thunder nature with his music), this latter being a beautifully edited sequence, and a final montage on his death bed - leading into a kind of Val Lewton close with a cryptic quote from Wagner.

The film is beautifully acted by Beur, who makes Beethoven a rather disagreeable old curmudgeon but a very real one, without the God-like pretentions of Gance's concept of Napoleon, and without the self-indulgent histrionics that a Jennings or a Muni would have brought to the role. Nobody else has much of a chance, though Gance does seem impressed with Jany Holt's superficial resemblance to Dietrich, and in the closing sequence frames and lights her closeups in such a way that they almost look like dupes from "The Devil is a Woman".

Despite such shortcomings as rather sketchy supporting figures, and an uncertainty about time lapses - nobody ever seems to age, despite the passage of years - "Beethoven" is often a very moving film, and at times a cinematically stunning one. It's a pity it couldn't have been included in the recent Museum of Modern Art Gance cycle, for it is quite one of his most interesting films.