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Days of Happiness

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Days of Happiness* (2023), directed by Chloe Robichaud.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



Days of Happiness (2023), dir. Chloe Robichaud
Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdLoKvMH1rY>

The opening of Chloe Robichaud's *Days of Happiness* is almost like its own self-contained short film. A young woman at a spa resort is trying to find a place where she can comfortably rest after a treatment. On the resort's layered terraces by a lake, she tries one chaise and then another, adjusting herself, closing her eyes and trying to concentrate on relaxation. Inevitably the conversations of others, and the sounds of life on the terraces, pushes her out to try again. After several unsuccessful attempts, she finds a moored raft mattress, dockside, and climbs on it, as others have on other rafts along the shoreline. We watch her finally close her eyes, settle, and let her body become released into the gentle rhythm of the underlying waves. Time passes. The woman has opened her eyes to find herself floating out in the lake. On the shore, someone with a megaphone instructs her to swim back towing the air mattress. In front of all who are watching, the woman has to call back that she can't swim. Instead, someone swims out to her and, taking the rope, tows her to safety as she shrinks in embarrassment.

This touching and funny sequence feels like something a screenplay might set up for its heroine to wake up from. But Robichaud doesn't fall for such easy tropes. The moments are real

and the possibility of public spectacle or failure in Emma's life is equally vivid. The sequence offers a perfect preview of everything that lies ahead, inviting us to reflect on what it means to seek, lose, and regain control of one's own destiny.

“With the simple movement of her hands, Emma tells us a story,” Chloe Robichaud tells us in the press kit for *Days of Happiness*. Emma is a rising star conductor, based in Montreal, whose career is on the brink of a breakthrough. The Orchestra Métropolitain, which exists in real life, has given Emma the chance to conduct a Mozart symphony; her father Patrick, who is also her agent, has helped bring this opportunity forward. The performance passes well enough, but Emma fails to make a strong impression. The pressure is on for her to double down and somehow regain the toehold she has briefly had with the orchestra.

The film's structure is shaped by three performances: after the Mozart, Emma conducts Schoenberg's *Pelleas and Melisandre*, and finally Mahler's third symphony. This framework allows the character's development and growth to have measurable milestones, even if the emotional line of the story is often unpredictably charged and takes us in many directions.

Emma is caught in a web of influences and expectations. Her father's priorities are straightforward, but his methods are brutal. The extent of his abuse over the years is part of the film's unfolding narrative, as we visit earlier moments in Emma's formation when he has had relentless and ruthless control over her. Both the orchestra's director and her father are telling Emma that she needs to learn how to “feel” the symphonic works she conducts, more than intellectually assess them. Soon we come to understand that Emma's biggest priority will be finding a strategy for listening to her heart, before it is drowned out by the needs of others. We know from that first resort scene that random sounds, even in a restaurant or elevator, are often overwhelming to her. But the voices of others trying to tell her what to do make her equally claustrophobic.

Emma's private life offers an escape that comes with its own problems. A new relationship with Naëlle, a young mother, is some months old and hitting the rocky challenges of further commitments and whether Naëlle will share the relationship with her young son and her son's father, from whom she is estranged. Naëlle is also in the orchestra, making her more than an offstage romance. But her girlfriend understands Emma as the others don't. She encourages her partner to believe that people respond to her music, more than just its technical brilliance.

Emma negotiates being given a "carte blanche" with the orchestra, a chance to select the program and then conduct it. She is talked into the Schoenberg by her father, despite that it is not in her repertoire and is a difficult work. He then torments her into making it good. While Emma works hard, she is unable to unlock the emotion behind the dissonance of the music. Instead, what she feels is rage toward both her parents, for the ways in which they have prevented her from being more fully herself in her music. Things start to go south with Naëlle as well.

At its heart, this film is about abusive mentorship. As we delve further and further into the backstory of Patrick's life, we become familiar with the violence that also marked his own childhood. In a brilliant sequence, the truth of this is revealed while Patrick is speeding in a car, going so fast that Emma has to placate him and say what he wants to hear, in order to keep them from crashing. It is the last straw for her. Patrick's past does not change in any way for her what is becoming clear in her present: Emma has outgrown her father and no longer needs or wants to be bullied by him.

When Emma starts seeking out other representation, Patrick is crushed and vengeful but also knows that it is inevitable. Emma also learns how to speak to Naëlle in a way that will help them move forward. Working intensively on the next concert, she now reaches into her own heart.

The film culminates with the orchestral performance of the third movement of Mahler's third symphony, which we hear in its full length. As we see Emma become more and more transported, we know she has pushed through. She has landed in her own emotion and has begun to be the artist she wants to be. We intuit that Emma is now about to have her 'days of happiness,' freed from the powerful grip of the controlling power of others.

Sophie Desmarais and Sylvain Marcel hold the two ends of the taut emotional line of this film with breathless strength. Marcel's Patrick is convincing in his cunning and manipulative strategies, rarely becoming histrionic or yelling. His power lies in his unpredictability. When he closes the piano lid, nearly damaging Emma's hands as a younger music student, her trembling hands hover above the closed keys, seemingly lost. Robichaud uses the body of Emma to help us feel her transitions. Her large eyes, her hands, her body caressed by Naëlle, show how Emma learns from her own senses about her internal life, which then helps her use her body in her music. As Emma, Sophie Desmarais conveys the anxiety and the confidence with effortless tension; she is like an embodied vibrato. Her choices are both vulnerable and vivid.

Critics have been quick to note the similarities between *Days of Happiness* and *Tár*, Todd Field's movie, which is also about a lesbian conductor. But beyond these external layers, the two films are very different. Robichaud is more interested in relationships surrounding an artist than the artist's demons. Emma's foes, unlike Lydia Tár's, are entirely in the world around her.

The film circles round to its start after the triumphant Mahler performance, when we find Emma entering a pool: she is learning to swim. In an earlier scene, we see what has caused her fear of swimming, when her father once threw her into the water as a child. Things have now shifted. Emma is now the author of her own story. She is ready to push herself through her fears.