

RECORDING HERRMANN: An exclusive interview with John Morgan

The following is a 1998 interview with John Morgan (with a comment from William Stromberg). They are respectively producer and conductor of the Bernard Herrmann recording, Garden of Evil/Prince of Players (Marco Polo) with the Moscow Symphony Orchestra. John shares his experiences of recording Bernard Herrmann's music and his impressions of Herrmann as a composer.

MATT GEAR: Herrmann's popularity has increased dramatically in the 1990s, as seen in the massive outflow of reissues and new recordings. Why in this era are Herrmann releases more commercially viable than they were during his lifetime?

JOHN MORGAN: We are seeing a sort of renaissance of classic film music by many composers from the "Golden Age". I think the simple reason is the music is very good. It can stand up as a listening experience away from the film as music, and not necessarily film music. I have always believed that film music that is heard on its own---away from the film--- must have life and interest as pure music. Today, virtually every major film has a soundtrack release. Most of these are purchased as a reminder of the film rather than intrinsic musical value. Frankly, today's film music is by and large so generic, I find it painful to listen to. It isn't the composer's fault, but the stupid producers who must build their films up with a temp track and then insist the composer adhere to those narrow, uncreative decisions. Unless you are among the top 5 or 6 composers with a long track record, you are more a musical arranger than a creative composer. Many film editors can't edit a film unless they are editing to a temp track. Once this is done, the composer (creativity) is a dead duck. Of course, there are exceptions, but too often, music is considered wallpaper rather than a creative element in movies.

Yes, it's interesting that in a time when new movie music is generally quite formulaic, there is a new market for the quality scoring of the past. In your relationship with Marco Polo, how is it decided what is recorded?

I am in a very good position with Marco Polo. They let me choose what to record completely and never have interfered with any of my choices. Basically I decide on a composer, choose a score I am fond of and let the music itself determine the length of the suite. Sometimes an entire disc is one film, sometimes more, but my main objective is not to do bits and pieces, but a complete representation of the material in a score that works as a listening experience without the film. Of course, Bill Stromberg and I do this together and he has input too. We are a team in the best sense.

Why have these recordings been made in Russia with the Moscow Symphony? Did you find the Russian musicians approached the music from a different perspective than a Hollywood orchestra may have?

Marco Polo (Naxos) is an international record company that primarily records classical

music. They have associations with many international orchestras. Both Bill Stromberg and I feel the Moscow Symphony is the best for our film music series. We are able to get all the extra instruments (choirs, oddball instruments) we need. They are enthusiastic and love playing this music. They are not musical snobs and want to get the best out of the music. We have improved the recorded sound and think this is the best venue for this type of large-scale orchestral music. Of course, we would love to record here in Los Angeles at Fox or Warners, but the cost would be so prohibitive, it would make no fiscal sense, unfortunately.

Marco Polo has a standard policy of live mixing to 2-track. Did you find this process restrictive in any way?

Ideally, Bill and I would love to have some control in mixing after the fact, but this is traditionally how European orchestras work. It keeps one on their feet.

Herrmann is famed for the thoroughness and originality of his orchestrations. Can you tell me about any unique orchestrations or expressive techniques used in *Garden Of Evil*?

The orchestra players must really pay attention to Herrmann's dynamic markings for his music to work, as Bill says, "Even exaggerating dynamics is needed for the excitement of the music to come through". You can't be lazy and just play the notes or the music becomes static and ultimately boring.

I believe he indicated orchestral seating and three-channel stereo mapping in this score. How was this adhered to for the new recording?

Although we recorded two-channel, there is a phantom center channel, so we could duplicate the soundscape as Herrmann envisioned. Often different cues would have completely new set-ups for certain stereo effects. We tried to implement these set-ups, as groups of instruments played off of one another.

I direct this question to Bill: As a conductor, did you use Herrmann's original soundtrack recording of *Garden Of Evil* as a reference, or did you rely on your own interpretations of the score? In what cases do your interpretations differ from Herrmann's? What were your general intentions with this recording?

WILLIAM STROMBERG: I've known this score intimately since I was a kid. I made a cassette copy of all of the cues right off of the video many years ago. So, yes, I did use the original soundtrack as a reference. I took this tape with me to Russia and studied the scores while listening, making my conducting notes. You know, you really can't take the music and just play it as is. Since Herrmann was catching cues originally, he would have to modify the cues slightly, whether it be altering the tempi, or actually applying a fermata (a hold) to any specific part of a measure of music to make it fit the scene just right. Often the written scores don't have these specific alterations written on them, so I have to listen to the original to catch these and write them into my conductor score. You will notice that I took some of the action cues slightly faster than Herrmann did. All I can say

is that it felt right under these conditions, with this orchestra. To me, it is very ferocious, and energetic music that benefits from an aggressive tempo. I did not go into this recording with a preconceived idea of stamping my own interpretation onto it, as I really wanted to be faithful to Herrmann's final vision as it appears in the film.

John, what does the 'reconstruction' of a score involve? In what condition was the *Garden Of Evil* score when you first approached it and were there any crucial decisions you had to make?

JM: Thanks to Christopher Husted at the Santa Barbara Library, the scores were in good shape. We didn't have to reconstruct, but restore the score to make it readable to the Moscow copyists, who hand copied the music for the individual instrumentalists. We restored one cue, as well as various sections of other cues that were cut or dropped for any number of reasons. Since we didn't have the original corrected orchestral parts, there were mistakes in the full score we corrected. We occasionally annotated things on the score that we heard on the original recording.

It's great to see an obscure score like *Prince Of Players* receive an official release. What attracted you to doing a suite from that film?

I like to do things that haven't been done to death already. Both *Garden of Evil* and *Prince of Players* were two scores from Herrmann's most creative period that never had legitimate releases. Before Herrmann's death, he was planning an adventure album of his scores and planned on doing a suite from *Garden of Evil*, but it never happened. *Prince of Players* is a delightful score and since we had time left on the disc for a "filler" I thought this score would be perfect. It isn't a long score and it was easy to develop a suite of all the major and important cues.

Why did you decide to do a new recording of *The Egyptian*?

Originally, Bill and I planned on doing a complete recording of *Five Fingers* and about 35 minutes of *Snows of Kilimanjaro*, but another, bigger company happened to have the same idea and we were denied permission to do these! Although the soundtrack of *The Egyptian* has been around forever, the sound and acoustics are not very good. The original stereo tracks seem to have rotted beyond use, and the original soundtrack only ran about 40 minutes and much wonderful music was omitted....much of it Herrmann's. I have no idea if this will be a commercial venture, but the score is magnificent. We have recorded about 70 minutes of music from a total score of over 100 minutes.

***The Egyptian* is unique in the works of both Herrmann and Alfred Newman. Do you feel there is any imbalance between the cues by Herrmann and the cues by Newman, resulting in a lack of unity?**

Of course if Herrmann or Newman wrote the entire score, it would be different, but under the circumstances and taking the scope of the film in consideration, the teaming worked well. Much of Herrmann's music is developed from Newman's themes, so we have Herrmann's dramatic take on Newman's motives, which is interesting in itself.

How does *The Egyptian* score measure up, in consideration of the less-than-ideal conditions in which it was composed?

Both Herrmann and Newman gave their best and the score is very moving and dramatically sound. Many film fans have grown up with the soundtrack and I don't think it has ever been out of print for a significant period of time.

Tell me about the experiences recording with a chorus.

Well, it was tough. The original had the chorus record separately as an overdub. We did it live....all together, so we worked hard on balance, as we couldn't just "turn" up the choir later. We have used chorus in several of our Marco Polo recordings and they always add a great deal of extra time in set-up, rehearsal and balance considerations.

Is there a date set for the release of *The Egyptian*?

No, but I hope it is early next year [1999]. We still have 5 film music CDs to release before it!

What are your personal favorite Herrmann compositions?

Too many to list here, but I would love to see someone do his *Moby Dick* cantata, my favorite classical work of his. As far as film music, there are many, but off the top of my head: *Ghost And Mrs. Muir*, *Jane Eyre*, *Mysterious Island*, *Garden Of Evil*, *All That Money Can Buy*, etc.

Music scholars are now recognizing that Herrmann was responsible for great innovation. If you study the 'minimalist' school of the mid-1960s you can see that some elements were pioneered by Herrmann in the late 1950s in scores like *Vertigo* and *Psycho*. Do you think that Herrmann will be remembered as one of this century's great composers?

That is impossible for me to answer. Hindsight is difficult to predict. What is important to us today, may not be 100 years from now. Who knows. I would like to think that a handful of film composers will be remembered as important in future generations, but whether this remembrance is in relation to the art of film or the art of music, I can't say.

I'd like a number of Herrmann's non-film works to be rerecorded with first class orchestras (such as his 1941 Symphony). I think he is still under-rated as a concert composer. What are your thoughts on this? Do you know of any plans for new concert recordings?

Like I said previously, number one for me would be *Moby Dick*. I would also love to see a complete first-class production of his opera *Wuthering Heights*, but that opera does have certain difficulties. I do think his greatest contribution was in the realm of film music, but he has written marvelous concert works too. Bill Stromberg is conducting a

marvelous series of *Americana Concert Music* for Marco Polo. So far he has recorded works by Meredith Wilson, Ferde Grofe, Robert Russell Bennett and Morton Gould and they are sensational. All the above composers have flirted with film music, so I think Bill would be keen on doing some Herrmann concert works.

There still remain a number of unreleased film scores, for instance famous Hitchcock collaborations such as *Marnie* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. Do you think Herrmann music will continue to be released and recorded at the current rate?

Perhaps not at the current rate, but I always hear rumors about this and that score, so who knows. Good music can be interpreted and reinterpreted over and over again, bringing new views to the music. If all the rumors hold true, this and next year should be a banner time for Bernard Herrmann.

What are your plans for future Herrmann recordings?

Well, we are kicking around some ideas, but must remain mum on this or another record company may jump on our ideas. I can say with a certain degree of confidence, we will be doing more Herrmann.

The recording of Bernard Herrmann's Prince of Players/Garden of Evil (featuring the Moscow Symphony Orchestra) is available on the Marco Polo label.

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