

ANCIENT EGYPT, c. 1954  
An interview with JOHN MORGAN  
February 1999

*John Morgan has achieved considerable standing in Hollywood as a composer and orchestrator for feature films and documentaries. In addition to his work in this field, John has also worked reconstructing and arranging classic film scores for the Marco Polo label.*

*In an earlier interview, John and I spoke about the recording of Bernard Herrmann's Garden of Evil and Prince of Players. Now we discuss the digital re-recording of The Egyptian, a film score composed by Bernard Herrmann and Alfred Newman in 1954.*

**MATT GEAR: So John, we now turn our attention to your new recording of the magnificent score for *The Egyptian*, composed by Bernard Herrmann and Alfred Newman. I have immensely enjoyed listening to your new work. Once again, you have brought music to the world that would otherwise be unheard. Can you tell us the story behind the score, and why two composers were involved?**

JOHN MORGAN: This was a big and important film for Fox. Not surprisingly, Alfred Newman was assigned to do the score, but when the release date was moved up three weeks...leaving five weeks for composition, it became an impossible task to complete alone. At that moment, Herrmann wasn't doing anything at the studio, and it was Herrmann who proposed the collaboration to Newman. They both agreed on style and off they went. Actually, Herrmann ended up composing about two-thirds of the score.

**Do you remember when you first became familiar with the score? Have you ever seen a proper theatre presentation in CinemaScope and stereo?**

I have never had the opportunity to see a proper theatre presentation of this film. I really knew it first from the original soundtrack, then on television. Of course, recently, we have the wonderful letterboxed stereo transfer of the film, which is the next best thing to seeing it on the big screen.

**Yes, I am glad they are starting to release proper widescreen videos / DVDs of a lot of early 50s CinemaScope films. Some of the early video transfers have terrible sound and picture - *Beneath The 12-Mile Reef* comes to mind. These films are meant to be appreciated in their proper screen ratio. Do you have any favourite 1950s Fox CinemaScope films?**

I finally got to see *Garden of Evil* in CinemaScope and true four-track stereo and although it still isn't my favorite film, it certainly took on another dimension seen under the proper circumstances. I also love *Prince Valiant* in scope and stereo. Frankly, I would love to see another series presented here in Los Angeles of films shown in their original formats. Although the script and other factors are still of paramount importance in a

film's real worth, most of them are quite a visceral experience on the big screen with sound and music coming to you in all directions. Actually, I think composers had the biggest artistic gain when scope came in for the stereo sound alone.

**Do you actually like *The Egyptian* movie?**

Well, these films are not my favorite genre, but I think *The Egyptian* is certainly one of the more intelligent ones. And it can't be argued that these types of films...especially in the fifties...brought out the best in symphonic composers. With film styles rapidly changing, this was one genre that required rich, symphonic underscoring. The old guard, including Steiner, Rozsa, Tiomkin, Newman, Young, Herrmann, and Waxman certainly wrote some of their finest scores of the period in this genre. Unfortunately, *The Egyptian* had a troubled history with Marlon Brando walking off. The great director Michael Curtiz was certainly past his prime and reports have it he was more interested in what the extras were doing than the principle actors!

**In our last conversation, you told me that you recorded 70 minutes of music from the 100 minutes of total score that exists. Did you ever consider doing a complete recording? Was it difficult choosing what to record and what to leave out? Any regrets? I noticed that the cue "The Lotus Pool" is absent. There is music on the old Decca LP that is not on the new CD.**

Well, doing a score like this, it would be impractical going to a second disc. Although the score is well regarded, the film isn't. Unfortunately, most film music recordings are title dependent, but we hope with the names of Herrmann and Newman attached and the superb music composed for this film, it will find an audience.

Of course, there are cues that some people will miss. It's funny, but if one leaves out one cue in a score, that one cue will be someone's favorite, so you really can't please everyone overtime. Although I listened to the original soundtrack, I chose the cues from the film itself and what I thought made the most compelling listening experience on purely musical considerations. I have played our re-recording for several Herrmann and Newman fans and have asked them if they missed a particular cue and they all named different pieces of music! I think our recording is well-balanced and sort of has a musical flow from one cue to another.

**Biographer Steven C. Smith suggests that Herrmann scored the darker sequences, while Newman opted for the love scenes and religious music. Is this an accurate observation, and does it reflect the particular talents of both composers?**

This is correct. Of course, either one of them could have provided a first-rate score by themselves. What is there is something of a masterpiece, but of course, we will never know what the score would be like if either of those giants had composed it alone.

**Although you can recognize the individual 'voice' of each composer, they have achieved quite a remarkable unity. Is this the only case in Hollywood history of two major composers receiving equal screen credit?**

Certainly of this magnitude, it is correct. And certainly they both were connected with the film from the start of the composing phase. There are many films where two major composers provided music in one way or another, but those instances were usually bringing in the second composer to "fix-up" something and there was really no collaboration.

**Was the album recorded at Mosfilm studios, like *Garden of Evil*, with the same team of engineers?**

Yes it was. We did it on our last trip with Steiner's *They Died With Their Boots On* in a two week period. It was something else going from millions of Indians and the battle at Little Big Horn, to millions of Egyptians vying for nuptial beauties.

**Do you have a favourite cue in *The Egyptian* score? I love Newman's "The Valley of The Kings".**

Yes, I also have a fondness for this Newman cue. It has real musical line and is a true tone poem in miniature. I also love Herrmann's audacious writing in "The Chariot Ride" and "Pursuit". Although I think Newman probably picked the most "musical" cues for the original album, we wanted to present the music more as it was presented in the film.

Newman rearranged several cues for the album and we went back to the film itself to present our version of the score. I also love Herrmann's Borodin-ish cue "Party's End".

**What would you say are the principal contrasts between the work of each composer in this score?**

Newman's cues were more plaintive, more long-lined (in the musical sense) and melodically oriented. Herrmann's cues were made up of short musical cells, as he often did, with subtle repetition varied by the use of his unique orchestral colors. What ties this score together is the common thematic material, scale patterns and instrumentation.

**Can you discuss the harmonic language of the score?**

As you mentioned, Matthew, both composers remained true to their own style. Although Herrmann wrote his music, on the conductor sheets, many of his cues say "theme by A. Newman, developed by Bernard Herrmann". This tells me that Newman must have come up with most of the thematic material before Herrmann entered the scene. Some of Newman's cues point to similar sounding material in *How The West Was Won*.

Herrmann stated in 1971: "No one knows anything about Egyptian music of that period, so we had to invent it, and I'm proud of the result. I feel that if they did have music, ours would be something like it. I don't feel this intellectually; I feel it emotionally and I feel it so strongly that I believe that in a way it must be so. Alfred felt that way too."

A good deal of the music is built around the 5-note pentatonic scale. This sound is associated with music of antiquity...certainly in Hollywood jargon. Also, the use of exotic percussion lends a sense of authenticity and oneness to the music. By all accounts, both Herrmann and Newman enjoyed the experience and were proud of their work on this film.

**Tell me about the preparation for recording. In what condition was the original full-score manuscript when you first approached it? Who has it? Did it require reconstruction or restoration?**

We secured the score from 20th Century Fox, which made the film. Since orchestra parts no longer survive, conductor Bill Stromberg and myself went through all the scores and made corrections. More often than not, when the original copyists copied from full scores they would have a proofreader check things very carefully. However, they rarely corrected the orchestral score, so Bill and I found several errors that we corrected before the scores got to the copyists. For instance, the "Prelude" had a wrong chord in the trombones that we corrected. In another cue, Herrmann started the timpani out playing quarter notes and when you turned the page, they stopped! Well, on the soundtrack you hear this part go through the entire cue, so Herrmann simply forgot to notate them. I am sure he just told the timpanist to mark these notes in his part and continue to play!!

Some of the Newman cues were missing in full score, so I had to reconstruct-orchestrate them from conductor-piano sheets. Fox had great people working on their copyist staff and their conductor books were pretty complete.

**Did Herrmann once again indicate microphone placements, stereo mixing, seating arrangements, etc., as with other early 50s Fox CinemaScope pictures? How was this adhered to for the new recording?**

By this time, Herrmann did not indicate precise microphone placements, but there were recording nightmares to deal with anyway. There were sections where both Newman and Herrmann wanted special effects...like a microphone no closer than 30 feet from an instrument, or certain offstage effects. We tried to adhere to these notations. Sometimes, a distant miking effect was only for dramatic purposes (like a battle scene off in the distant) One battle music cue was originally distanced miked so the loud music could be played loud and with a loud feeling, but still sound soft and distant in the film. Since this was only for film purposes, and it would sound silly in a re-recording, we miked it normally.

**Before you told me of the difficulties of recording with a chorus. Unlike the original soundtrack, you did the chorus and orchestra live, no overdubs. Can you elaborate on this process. How did Bill Stromberg deal with the added worry of a chorus?**

I am sure Newman and Herrmann would always prefer having all the musicians right on the stage at the same time, however the balance between orchestra and choir can be very difficult. By overdubbing, various levels can be adjusted to get it just right..after the fact. Since we record directly to two track stereo, we had to have the chorus and orchestra

together. We utilized a slightly larger choir than in the original film and Bill had to find that comfortable balance between orchestra and chorus. I think the orchestra appreciated having the choir there as they could adjust their playing to accommodate the singers. Most of the choir cues, however, really utilized the choir as another color in the orchestra, rather than big exclamations.

**How does Bill's interpretation of the music differ from the original soundtrack recording? I actually prefer re-recordings, because they give the music so much more room to breathe, so to speak, without reliance on the action on screen to set tempos, etc.**

Bill had a real feeling for the music and pretty much stuck with the original tempos. Both in performance and recording, Bill wanted to get that rough, in-your-face horn sound Herrmann preferred. It's strange, but there is a definite difference in Herrmann and Newman's conducting style. Newman would insist on smooth, absolute accurate readings of the music, while Herrmann didn't mind if there were rough places as long as the struggle, forcefulness of the music came out. There is violence in much of Herrmann's "action" music that I feel Bill brought out wonderfully. He also worked hard in bringing out the famous Newman string sound with emotional conducting that inspired the orchestra to really "feel" the music.

Also, I should mention that the orchestral forces were a bit complicated...all the flutes had to play alto flutes, and all the oboes had to play english horns, etc. There were cues with clarinets playing bass clarinets, and getting these "doubles" was quite a chore. Bill found true Egyptian sistrums in Los Angeles for the percussion parts. Percussion is always an adventure as scores like this ask for various bass drums, gongs, cymbals of various sizes and timbres.

**I'd like to talk about your own music. I know that you have composed a number of feature and documentary scores. Can you tell me about the documentary *Trinity And Beyond*? What else is coming up? Any concert works? Or more film music?**

Oddly enough and since we are talking about collaborations, Bill and I composed music for two *Trinity And Beyond* sequels entitled *Atomic Journeys* and *Nukes In Space*. These documentaries were recently recorded in Moscow and should be on DVD video sometime this year, as well as CD....we hope!!!! They seem to also show up on The Learning Channel from time to time.

**Is there any recent composer or score that has captured your attention?**

Yes, but for all the wrong reasons....Temp tracking and everyone one connected with films having an opinion on the music has destroyed most of the creativity in main stream Hollywood film music today. Film Music, by and large, is aimed at the lowest common denominator. Most editors can't even edit a film unless they are guided by a temp track, which really short circuits a creative composer.

Though I am hoping the new *Star Wars* film will inspire John Williams to create a great score, as he certainly is capable of doing.

**Tell me your thoughts on some other recent Herrmann re-recordings, like the Varese 7th Voyage Of Sinbad and The Trouble With Harry.**

I think Varese is doing a marvelous job in presenting these wonderful scores in more or less complete form. Ironically, *The Trouble With Harry* was being considered by Bill and myself a couple of years ago. After making a cassette dub of the music cues from the film's soundtrack, we both came to the conclusion that Herrmann's *Portrait Of Hitch* covered most of the musical ground and some of the cues were just too short to make musical sense in a pure listening experience. If we had done this score...knowing it only ran something like 45 minutes, we would have recorded *Portrait Of Hitch* at the conclusion of the film's score for inclusion on the CD. But, I am glad Varese did it and have played it several times.

I hesitate to criticize other labels, as it is bound to come back and haunt me. We all have unique ways of doing things, our passions, our favorites or methods, and with this in mind, I really think this plethora of new recordings is nothing short of miraculous. I am absolutely waiting with extreme excitement for Intrada's *Jason And The Argonauts*, which we had wanted to do, and Varese's (or is it now DGG) *Citizen Kane*.

*Kane* is an important film and score and that under-financed fiasco that John Lasher produced in Australia several years ago is an embarrassment to the score. With all the bad notes and bad playing in that recording, it was just a notch or two better than that Leroy Holmes recording.

**Tell me about some other recent recording projects you have undertaken. What have planned to record in the immediate future?**

Well, our *Moby Dick* and Victor Young album have recently been released. As far as the rest of 1999, Max Steiner's incredible score to *They Died With Their Boots On* should be released shortly...followed by Korngold's *Devotion*, Waxman's *Mr. Skeffington* and finally *The Egyptian*, which will be released fall of 1999, I hope.

Our next recording date will be in a few months and will consist of a Roy Webb album with music from those wonderful Val Lewton films (*The Cat People*, *The Seventh Victim*, *I Walked With A Zombie*, *Bedlam*, etc.) And we do have other Herrmann stuff planned, but would hate to advertise any titles, as some other record company would probably get ahead of us.

**Will the Marco Polo series of classic film music continue indefinitely? I imagine it could, because there are so many wonderful scores that have never been appreciated away from the film.**

Well, I guess if they keeping selling like they have, we will continue. Bill and I often joke about the fact if we recorded a classic score every week for the rest of our lives, we still

would not have covered everything we want to cover. There are not too many *King Kong*'s out there that cross over and become major hits, but there are certainly hundreds of hours of first-rate film music waiting to be played.

Since we deal with so many obscure titles, I hope buyers will become more "composer" educated in making their choices, rather than "film-title" dependent. Bill and I feel very lucky that Marco Polo lets us do things as we like them to be done. Most single score classic re-recordings are done in part because they have popular film-title-hooks to help promote the albums...such as Hitchcock and Harryhausen films. These are certainly great scores and deserve recordings, but I am proud of the fact we, more often than not, will pick the more obscure, but equally deserving scores to do.

*John Morgan's recording of The Egyptian, performed by the Moscow Symphony Orchestra under the direction of William Stromberg, is available on the Marco Polo label.*

Visit the Marco Polo website at [www.hnh.com](http://www.hnh.com).

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