

FILM SCORE BLOGS [Blog # 28]

Monday, June 19, 2006 at 5:47 pm

Saturday evening I sent Sarah my long Blog # 27 for the imminently upcoming update on the *Film Score Rundowns* site. A few developments occurred in the last day, so I decided to write a new and short (at least in comparison to the 33-page Blog #27) blog entry instead of tagging the new material at the end of the previous blog.

Yesterday afternoon (Father's Day) at 3:21 pm, I purchased a new music keyboard at the local Best Buy. My old one, a *Casio* CTK-1000, died on me a week again. I suspect my cats jumped on it or something because it was working fine the night before. Now it's stuck only on the 001 tone of the piano. I cannot get my favorite tones anymore, despite all my attempts to correct it and after reading the manual. The reduced volume "Touch Response" is stuck as well. That's ok. It's time for a beneficial change. I purchased the *Casio* at the now non-existent SILO store way back on December 7, 1993 in Cerritos. To show you how technology increased and prices decreased, that old machine cost me \$384.99 plus 8.25 % sales tax of \$31.76. The new machine is a *Yamaha* DGX-205 "Portable Grand" that happened to be a clearance item (last year's model) at a great price of \$249.99. I believe you can get it at Radio Shack for \$499 still, but the best deals are generally offered on the Internet. Even so, this was a great price. There are at least (built-in) 487 tones and sound effects. Most are good and acceptable, while some are not very realistic (predictably the horns, for example). After a few failed attempts (I didn't read the directions quite precisely), I learned how to record. Now it's easy to do—far easier than that old *Casio* recording procedure. I still need to learn how to use the MIDI, to download the cd-rom already provided called "Digital Music Notebook" (software needed to interface the music with the computer). I'd like to be able to transfer my music already recorded and transfer to my computer as files that can be e-mailed. Perhaps I can provide audio samples of my *Yamaha* rendition of Herrmann music on my site for educational purchases. But let's see if I can do it! I'm not computer literate or a technician-type. I still need to buy a stand for the instrument, probably model LW-15, to make it secure. For now, I simply placed it unattached on top of my old *Casio* stand.

Now: Today I quickly read an article in the periodical, *Hispanic* (May 2006 issue) written by Mark H. called "Mountain Music." The article is on Gustavo Santaolalla. The Argentinean (born 1952) who won the Oscar for *Brokeback Mountain*. HE started playing the guitar when he was five years old in Buenos Aires, the article says, quoting him, "...But I never really learned how to read or write music." He helped create the rock band "Arco Iris" where he combined rock with Latin American folk music styles.

In the article, Gustavo comments, "In *Brokeback Mountain*, we needed strings, so I recorded my guitar which is the instrument I used to create the themes. I used MIDI for my ideas of what I thought the strings should be. Finally, my orchestrator, David Campbell, and I worked together and he interpreted my ideas, and he put in some of his own, and that's it!"

So here's another composer from a performing rock background who wins an Oscar, and he doesn't even know how to read and write music. I can hear some

professional composers commenting: “Go figure! It’s a strange world!” You would think after all these years that he might seriously attempt to learn how to write music, but apparently he never really applied himself in that area. I guess it wasn’t necessary since he won the esteem of the Academy (as an Oscar). I’m happy for him but I rather like Danny Elfman, who also came out of a rock background, seriously applying himself in his craft and learning how to read and write music.

In today’s mail (surprisingly, since I thought I wouldn’t receive it for at least another few weeks) is the newly printed issue of The Journal of Film Music, Winter 2006, Volume 1, Number 4. The last issue was the Herrmann double issue that I received August 13, 2004 (so a long space of 22 months between issues). This new issue is devoted to Leith Amadeus Stevens, as I commented on in Blog # 27. It’s a bigger issue than I anticipated so perhaps it too is a double issue (?). It’s not clearly stated. Both issues are about 180 pages. I do not know how that works if you have a subscription. But if indeed this issue is a single issue (not a double issue), and a subscription of \$55 gets you four issues, then it’s a real bargain. With the cost of printing, I would gather there is no profit that can be made in this venture. It’s really a labor of love (as my own site).

I noticed that Jeongwon Joe is one of the Associate Editors for this Leith Stevens issue. I enjoyed meeting her last year when she visited my home. I commented on this in one of my other blogs. James Wierzbicki is also still an Associate Editor (and he wrote a review of Kassabian’s controversial film music book that I will read quickly). I want to read thru most of this issue so as to give a hasty review for this blog (and to meet the deadline provided by Sarah because she’s going on vacation!). First I will have the dinner my wife is so kindly preparing for me, read the papers I am most interested in, and then write a few comments. So far I am most interested in reading Wierzbicki’s review, Rosar’s paper on “Music for Martians,” and then Brill’s overview. The Leith Stevens lectures and papers are also interesting materials, but they can wait.

Rosar’s paper is fully titled, “Music for Martians: Schillinger’s Two Tonics and Harmony of Fourths in Leith Stevens’ Score for *War of the Worlds* (1953).” The initial joking association I have (before even reading the paper) is that some readers acquainted with Schillinger’s strange, theoretical writings, and also the music heard in the movie, might state, “It’s all Greek to me!” –or, more appropriately in line with the topic in question, “It’s all *Martian* to me!” Schillinger’s ideas are often as about removed from conventional (and workable) theory as Mars is from earth! Stevens’ association and application of Schillinger’s ideas are probably one reason why I never did temperamentally “take” to his music. It’s not unlike the removed feeling one gets from atonal music (as opposed to customary tonal music that most people can “relate” to easily and enjoyably). Atonal music is fine in small doses and when correctly applied (as in Robert Wise’s *The Haunting*, say, and the fantastically-themed *Fantastic Voyage*). I have the special edition dvd of *War of the Worlds* (1953) and I need to have another listen to the music tonight (after *Alfred Hitchcock Hour*). The “removed” feeling (and music) would seem to be appropriate in a movie like *War of the Worlds*.

[7:46 pm. Time to eat!]

[9:18 pm] Now: The overall impression I get from this paper, especially comments from the composers themselves who are quoted, is that quartal harmony was

associated with the primitive, the “eerie (Salter),” and brute strength or force. It tends to unnerve the listener, to loosen from the safe and the familiar. Objectively speaking, such harmonies or intervals do not innately contain such qualities, but rather these qualities are assigned to them. Paraphrasing from that funny line in the movie, “Quartal harmonies don’t unscrew!” Such harmony is in the ear of the beholder, and the attributions are more a situation of *comparing* it to conventional tertial/tonal harmony. So perhaps it seems strange in comparison or eerie (or “alien”!) because most people are not used to it as a steady diet. Philosophically there can be quite a discussion on this matter but I do not have time if I am to hastily complete this review.

I liked the long paper on Martial Music but it takes slow reading in order to digest all the ideas completely and to do it proper justice in a review. I liked it better than the previous paper in the Herrmann issue, “Bernard Herrmann: The Beethoven of Film Music?” Prefacing the paper on the left page is a photo. No, I don’t believe it’s a photo of the writer of this paper. Underneath this photo of the alien creature (although some musicologists I’ve met seem rather alien or “strange”) is either a statement in strange Martian written characters (looking a lot like a music staff in the bass clef) saying, “We don’t come in peace!” or it is a staff depicting a three-note quartal harmony of Great octave A/small octave D/F.

The paper opens with the comment of seeing the remake of the movie by Spielberg, and how a friend thought it reminded him (or her) of old *film noir* scores. That is interesting but once again meaning is attributed to a stimulus because, for example, I did not react to Williams’ score as being of this type. *Some* of Stevens score does, but not most (in my opinion).

Rosar comments on page 413 in footnote # 83 that his analysis examples are based on the Conductor score. Perhaps I missed it in my quick reading, but I do not believe he mentions anything about the Full score (orchestrated score). Where is it? Generally I prefer an analysis based on the autograph (or copy) of the full score, not “just” the Sketches or the Conductor score.

Rosar gives many examples of the score (although using the Conductor examples), but still this is good. The ideal would be to have examples of the full score as Cooper did in *Ghost & Mrs. Muir*. When I get more time, I will go over the audio music in the dvd and read the musical examples. These examples include not just the *War of the Worlds*, but also Stevens’ other two sci-fi scores, *Destination Moon* and *When Worlds Collide*, laying the groundwork foundation to build upon Stevens’ treatment of such film subjects (before he was assigned to WOTW). I’ll need to get the dvds of those two earlier films.

Rosar also discusses the use of quartal music of other composers, including (rather surprisingly) from tonal/melody master, Max Steiner. This was discussed in pages 429-430, and how Max used the “primitive” quartal spacing technique or attribution in his *King Kong* score, especially the cues “The Bronte” and “The Forgotten Island.” I believe I may have hand-copied those cues at UCLA long ago, and this stimulates me to dig the cues (or portions thereof) out and re-examine those sections. John Morgan, the Max Steiner expert (and champion of his music in new recordings), is credited for pointing this out to the writer of this Martian paper. Discussion is made of Rozsa using quartal harmony in his *film noir* works, a direct tie-in because it was used (as in the theremin) principally at first in such films, and how they were inserted in the “new” genre

of sci-fi films. Salter is commented on, and others. But no comment on Herrmann was ever given if he ever used quartal harmony at length. Why not?? I know he did in a few instances (such as the opening of “The Stone Faces” (Mount Rushmore) cue of *North by Northwest*, but I need to check out exactly where else. Probably it’s connected to his Early Works repertoire when he experimented more, still trying to define his true voice.

The slowest or most labored read is the section on Schillinger in pages 400-404, principally. After all, the subtitle of this paper is about the two tonics concept (separated by the tritone interval) of Schillinger (perhaps he was a Martian himself!) applied to quartal harmony, so *some* elaboration of the concept had to be done. Of course, Stevens studied under Schillinger and was quite taken by his concepts (apparently Herrmann was definitely not taken by Schillinger!). In fact, I’d like to know if Herrmann ever made any comment on Schillinger’s ideas (descriptive words such as “rubbish” or “nonsense” or whatever). If so, it would’ve been interesting or even helpful (more balance) to have included such Devil Advocate’s opinions from opposing or disagreeing composers in this paper. The feeling I get from Schillinger (I’ve poured over his work for a short while) is that it’s a strange mathematical construct, highly removed from the consciousness of most practicing musicians (but apparently not among many scholars and highly intellectual composers). It’s like one wants to say “Get real!” with the man, that he went over-board with his fascination with such musico-mathematical constructs. It’s an elaborate “toy” that he played in his special musical sandbox. It’s a Big World, a smorgasbord of ideas, and if you can have fun with some of those musical items (and find them actually nourishing, as Stevens did), then fine. Stevens himself seemed to have had a lot of fun with such toys in his own musical sand-boxes (scores for these sci-fi films). Whether most people can actually relate or enjoy such concepts and music (a strong fan base) is debatable. Obviously Stevens has a far smaller fan base than Herrmann. Herrmann apparently played with far more conventional and simpler musical toys or devices that most people could relate to.

Stevens was prophetic in stating (see footnote # 14 on page 397) that electronic devices/music would have a greater influence in upcoming composers’ works. An obvious example of this of course would be Goldsmith.

Anyway, I cannot stay on this paper any longer. Time is running short and I need to send this off to Sarah and go to bed. Overall, then, I would definitely recommend this paper for people to read in order to introduce the reader to the complex inner dynamics of Stevens’ music in *War of the Worlds* and his two other George Pal scores. You may or may not like Stevens’ music, but at least you can better understand what was “in his head” motivating him to write music in such a way, who influenced him (Schillinger), and so forth.

I quickly read most of the introductory paper by Mark Brill on Stevens. Looks good, a nice treatment. He gives the birthday of September 13, 1909, and the place—but no time of birth. I wonder if his birth certificate had the time. I’d like to know it for astrological purposes. Based on a speculative noon chart, I see he has a lot of Mutable, so there’s an obvious emphasis on mind, ideas, communication, and people. We find strong Virgo, Sagittarius, and Gemini areas especially. The nodes in Gemini-Sagittarius (and other factors) shows the natural teacher and perpetual student. It’s too much to get into

right now due to the lack of time. But I would need the verified time of birth (to the minute) to do an accurate chart.

There are many papers/lectures by Stevens provided in this issue but I did not have time to read them. They all look fascinating, so perhaps in a future blog I will discuss them.

There are also many fine reviews at the end of the issue. I liked the review of Michael Schelle on "The Score: Interviews with Film Composers." It's as though, as the reviewer commented in other terms, that many composers are more the "doers" than the intellectual speculators of what they do. It's like they respond to questions, in effect, by stating: "Did I do that?" They are too busy composing, not really analyzing what they are doing. It seems to come natural or out of habit (previously applied devices or tricks of the trade, etc). In fact, all of the Reviews are fine. I'm glad there are many of them here, describing what's out there in the film music world for people to read and get acquainted to (or what to avoid!). For instance, I'll say "thank you but no thank you" to Kassabian's book. I have better things to do with my time. Limited time means putting priorities on projects. That book will be Priority # 366 (gee, a day longer than given in most years). Maybe I'll wait for a Leap year to get to it. Actually, I read parts of it already in Google Books, and I did not find it of great value (to me, anyway). It felt a bit militant or bossy sometimes, in its statements. I was turned off. I'm more into research of actual scores than mere opinions.

Time for bed. Thanks for your interest!

Completed 10:57 pm
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