

MYSTERIOUS ISLAND and FAHRENHEIT 451

(both *****/*****)

A review by Michael Boldhaus (translation by Dietrich Haas and Marko Ikonić)

Now they are independent: John Morgan and William T. Stromberg, former producers for Marco Polo/Naxos – known since 1994 for excellent re-recordings of vintage movie scores. Together with Anna Bonn – Stromberg’s wife – the trio is now operating under its own label “Tribute Film Classics”. As a start-up in December 2007 two new albums, recorded in Moscow, were published containing for the first time the complete scores of Bernard Herrmann’s *Mysterious Island* (1961) as well as *Fahrenheit 451* (1966).

About the movies

Producer Charles H. Schneer, director Cyril Endfield and effects specialist Ray Harryhausen used a low budget for staging *Mysterious Island*. However, based on Jules Verne’s adventure story they created an entertaining film plot enriched with additional fantastic elements: In a stormy night, during the last weeks of the American Civil War, an attempt to escape by using a captive balloon makes a group of Northerners and Southerners fellows. They strand on an unknown island occupied by giant creatures. Besides these dangers more secrets such as the Nautilus or Captain Nemo wait to be revealed.

The adventure-fairytale offers nothing less than solid entertainment brought to screen in a rather colorful, dynamic and charmingly naïve way. Nowadays, the obvious artificiality of the inexpensively realized animations – of course sensational for their time – makes for quite a bit of nostalgic charme. Particularly so because these so-called “Super Dynamation” effects out of Harryhausen’s workshop amply exhibit the imagination and finesse that went into their making.

For *Fahrenheit 451* director François Truffaut adapted Ray Bradbury's novel of the same name. The temperature giving the book its title represents the flashpoint of paper. Taking into account the book burnings of the recent past (the work was published in 1953), this was taken as a symbol for the knowledge saved in books that encourages its readers to think and reflect. The problems of modern life resulting from mass consumption and trivial entertainment are mirrored in a dark, sarcastic vision of a totalitarian society. The fire brigades, organized in an almost paramilitary way, do not extinct the fire, but rather are in appropriately "hot" pursuit of non-compliant individuals. When necessary, the people are burnt together with all their illicitly hoarded books.

Unlike the technical science fiction in John Wyndham's rather realistic novel "The Triffids", the stylized and symbolically inflated plot of *Fahrenheit 451* mainly lives on its language and refinement of its characters. Truffaut's film adaptation of Bradbury's sociocritical future vision doubtlessly contains a number of powerful scenes as well as a very atmospheric showdown. Unfortunately, the film cannot completely convince – mainly because of the less than ideal cast.

The re-recordings

We are dealing with two vastly different movies, accordingly sporting two very different scores by master composer Bernard Herrmann. In its immediately prominent parts the music for *Mysterious Island* is a powerhouse that has the composer capably flexing his muscles with a very large orchestral ensemble. This time eight french horns, as in Wagner's Ring cycle, exemplify Herrmann's well-known extravagance at instrumentation. The rousing main title makes for a fitting and atmospheric start by suggesting a stormy seascape clearly modeled after Wagner's prelude to "The Flying Dutchman".

At the same time the initial fanfare motif is associated with what is probably the island's biggest secret: In "The Nautilus" (track 37) it is quoted at the appearance of Captain Nemo's submarine, though in a completely different sonic guise. There it can be heard in an almost spiritual-sounding arrangement for strings, vibraphone

and muted trumpets. This instance also shows the striking contrasts of this Herrmann score, in which raw eruptions of sound are only one part of the equation. The other part consists of frequent impressionistic moments of utmost gentility and elegance, for instance the pastoral, dreamily floating island music in "Exploration" (track 17). The musical illustrations of the island's monstrous fauna are among the famous film music moments off-referenced in textbooks: They span a witty tone painting of "The Giant Crab"'s snapping claws (track 18), a neat adaption of a baroque fugue by Bach-pupil Johann Ludwig Krebs for a giant bird (track 29) and the musical depiction of a gigantic bee in "The Giant Bee" (track 32), which is influenced by Rimsky-Korsakov's famous "The Flight of the Bumblebee". Benny Herrmann's goal in fashioning the music for those kinds of sequences was never pure illustration, however. Instead of just "doubling" the picture acoustically he favored a markedly visceral approach by relying on the suggestive power of the winds in their lowest registers. Therefore, analogous to the "fight with the skeleton" in *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad*, it is more about what you sense and feel than about what you actually "see".

The music to *Fahrenheit 451* differs greatly from everything said above. Instead of a huge, Wagner-sized orchestra the music calls for an ensemble without brass, woodwinds or large percussion. The spotlight is taken instead by an expanded string section, joined only by harp, chimes and xylophone. The tone of the music is both romantic and elegiac but it is also dominated by edgy tone figures which reveal a certain kinship to *Psycho* (1960).

In the enchantingly beautiful finale, the escapees from the totalitarian regime wander through a picturesque winter landscape, each of them reciting from their favorite book. This glorification of literature is underscored with a slow movement vaguely resembling Barber's "Adagio for Strings" and using harp arpeggios to paint a tonal picture of falling snowflakes.

In addition to impressionistic influences, both *Mysterious Island* and *Fahrenheit 451* showcase another almost omnipresent and thus formative stylistic trait of

Herrmann's music: a quasi-minimalistic compositional technique based rather on short motifs instead of longer thematic ideas.

On top of it the *Fahrenheit* album comes with a lovely bonus in form of the complete 20-minute score for the episode *Walking Distance* of Rod Serling's TV series *The Twilight Zone*. For their re-recording Morgan and Stromberg have considerably extended the original orchestration, once again taking Barber's string adagio as a model. The one harp of the original is now supported by a second, while the string section has been fleshed out to full symphony orchestra size. In spite of the instrumentation being strikingly similar to that of *Fahrenheit 451*, this composition is altogether decidedly different in tone: Melancholy and especially nostalgia permeate this consistently tranquil, melody-oriented and immediately appealing piece of (TV) film music.

By the way, the album to *Mysterious Island* has an additional track on offer as well, the identity of which is not revealed on the artwork, but only in the liner notes. It is the rhythmically striking main title of [*The King of the Khyber Rifles*](#) (1953): A small but really nice bonus.

Mysterious Island and *Fahrenheit 451* cannot be generally classified as instantly accessible, "easy-listening" fare. A little patience, however, is sure to unveil the overwhelming fascination that lies in the multifaceted and unusual sounds of the great Herrmann scores.

The musical means employed are mostly rather simple but, minimalism notwithstanding, it is their handling by way of virtuosic instrumentation that betrays utter mastery. Especially *Mysterious Island* confronts the listener with startlingly modern combinations of sound. Moreover, the recording at hand lets you fully experience the unique spatial soundscape inherent in this film score for the first time. The meticulous placing of single instruments and groups in conjunction with a sophisticated stereo recording technique help to illustrate another impressive facet of the music, which viewers of the film with its monaural (!) optical soundtrack must inevitably miss out on.

One certainly could think of slightly differentiated ratings for Herrmann's Harryhausen fantasy scores, starting at 5 (of 6) stars and probably putting *The 3 Worlds of Gulliver* at the top. I for one could not bring myself to it because I view all of these extraordinarily inventive works to be on roughly the same level of highest excellence.

Both of the technically very convincing albums contain musical material not used in the films, e. g. the thrilling cue accompanying the attack of the pirates (track 41, "Attack") in *Mysterious Island*, set only for large percussion. For more information and additional very detailed elaborations on the composer, the movies, the music, and the restoration work, do have a look at the booklets; John Morgan for instance tells about the emendation of various wrong notes in the scores and proudly states that probably even Herrmann himself would be hard-pressed now to detect any remaining mistakes in the re-recordings. The texts by Kevin Scott – richly illustrated with scene shots – provide information on each single cue and the respective scene in the movie. And they also relate a curious story about director François Truffaut: Apparently bemused by Herrmann's instrumentation, he felt that the use of chimes and xylophone would come across as cartoon-like, a fact which then necessitated several adjustments to the score. As with *Mysterious Island*, the music to *Fahrenheit 451* can now, for the very first time, be heard exactly as envisioned by the composer.

Both scores are composed of a large number of single cues: *Fahrenheit 451* of 47 and *Mysterious Island* even of 61! Despite the tendency hereby to create an abstract succession of musical particles with a duration of less than a minute the album can surprise with a consistently persuasive musical flow. This is even more impressive as the cues are sorted chronologically as they appear in the film. Thus, the music did not have to be adjusted/resequenced as is usually done with commercial soundtrack albums.

At the same time *Mysterious Island* represents the finale of the re-recordings of Herrmann's most idiosyncratic and experimental compositions for the Harryhausen-Schneer fantasy productions – see also [The 7th Voyage of Sinbad](#) (1957), [The 3 Worlds of](#)

[*Gulliver*](#) (1959) and [*Jason and the Argonauts*](#) (1963). Obviously, Herrmann's interest in this sort of sound experiments waned after *Jason*. For the next Harryhausen spectacle, *First Men in the Moon* (1964), the composer was not available anymore. Laurie Johnson ([*Captain Kronos: Vampire Hunter*](#)) signed instead, picking up Herrmann stylisms in his music.

In total, I cannot find any serious fault with both of the Tribute Film Classics albums. Of course, there are some accents and oddities in the new interpretations you have to get used to at first, especially with the diverse suite compilations or even the originals in mind. However, all the recordings taken into account for this comparison include a more or less different sound pattern. Beyond doubt this has tremendous influence on the listener's sense of "well-being" – sometimes even unknowingly! But this is "the problem" of every re-recording, irrespective of how ambitiously it has been produced. (See also Korngold's [*The Sea Hawk under Rumon Gamba*](#).) You can get a good impression of the very different opinions concerning this matter by having a look at Internet forums where heated arguments are led regularly.

Bill Stromberg for example takes the main title of *Mysterious Island* (only a tiny) bit slower than the composer in the original recording. But that won't hurt at all! I myself rather have considered the tough tempo of the Herrmann-conducted original as less appropriate apart from the film, even the respective bit too fast! Taking his 1970s suite recorded for Decca (London), the composer noticeably chooses a slower approach. At least the main title still works well, the successive balloon sequence however appears quite overstretched – especially in comparison to the Stromberg interpretation, which is held very close to the movie.

In case of *Fahrenheit 451* a lot of possibilities of comparison exist besides the original (which is only available as a bootleg): the suite versions by McNeely (Varèse), Herrmann (Decca), Bernstein (Milan), Salonen (Sony) and Bateman (Silva) to name but a few – see also ["Herrmann-CD-Sampler"](#).

These latest recordings hailing from Moscow feature the same exquisitely sumptuous yet transparent sonics already known from the [Naxos production of *The Sea Hawk*](#). They are a perfect mixture of a full concert hall ambiance and careful close-miking of single instruments. Concerning the fascinating canonic fanfare heard at the first on-screen appearance of the mysterious island, with its muted-trumpet echoes, I would have opted for a little more distance in the mix and consequently more spaciousness. But as I see (or better: hear) it, that is a critical side note at best.

All things considered, the trio Morgan-Stromberg-Bonn has kicked off its newly founded label "Tribute Film Classics" with a bang. Both albums are undoubtedly among the very best re-recordings of classic film music yet released. I heartily recommend them to all open-minded listeners, especially to those who might not (yet) be very experienced with Bernard Herrmann. After all, these recordings mark the beginning of an extremely promising project helmed by real experts who care deeply about this kind of music. So film music collectors, take note: Tribute Film Classics needs – and more than deserves – your support! All of this makes *Mysterious Island* and *Fahrenheit 451* must-buys for any lover of classic film music, does it not?