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MODERN MUSIC THAT WORKS: JOHN CORIGLIANO AND ALTERED STATES by
David P. James

One never knows quite what to expect from a Ken Russell film. His visual conceptions and imagination have always been his best weapons against the stasis of cinematic convention, and his films can simultaneously delight and appall the moviegoer in their outrageousness. Yet while always ready to try something new with the camera or set design, costume, staging, or editing, he has been reluctant to rely on original music in his films, a not isolated trend among filmmakers. Russell's many television and feature film biographies of classical composers naturally depend on music by the subjects of such films: Tchaikovsky in *THE MUSIC LOVERS*, Delius in *SONG OF SUMMER*, and, of course, Mahler in *MAHLER*. *LISZTOMANIA* contained an unwise concoction of Rick Wakeman's rock arrangements of Liszt and Wagner (with lyrics no less), while *VALENTINO* had Stanley Black arrangements of Ferde Grofe. *THE BOYFRIEND* and *TOMMY* were based on existing musical material, while both *ISADORA: THE BIGGEST DANCER IN THE WORLD* and *DANTE'S INFERNO* interspersed twentieth-century pop tunes with nineteenth-century classical music.

Despite Russell's predilection for such use of music, a few of his films have been graced with original scores. Georges Delerue--himself the subject of a Russell biography (*PLEASE DON'T SHOOT THE COMPOSER*)--scored Russell's first feature film (*FRENCH DRESSING*) and his first critical success outside of television (*WOMEN IN LOVE*). Richard Rodney Bennett scored *BILLION DOLLAR BRAIN*, while David Munrow and Peter Maxwell Davies both contributed to *THE DEVILS*. To this small list must now be added the name of John Corigliano, who wrote the extraordinary score for *ALTERED STATES*, Russell's most recent film.

Russell's instinct in choosing a contemporary concert composer who had never scored a feature film before was well justified. Corigliano is fast becoming a major musical voice in this decade, and for *ALTERED STATES* he wrote an astounding score that is not only exciting musically but extremely effective cinematically. This debut as a feature film composer earned him an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Score and a Grammy Award nomination for Best Instrumental Composition.

Ken Russell has often been accused of visual excess, but compared to his past works, *ALTERED STATES* is curiously subdued. All the excess lies in Paddy Chayefsky's pseudonymous but sacrosanct screenplay, whose excruciating, jargon-laden dialogue simply destroys the film. The portentous academic argot undercuts and crowds out the inherent human emotion of the story, thus preventing any possible empathy from the viewer. Ultimately, the film is nothing more than a big-budget remake of *MONSTER ON CAMPUS* (Professor Tampers with Nature). The moral of Chayefsky's script is that love is the answer--but what was the question?

What holds the film and its flashy special effects together is the direction, the editing, and most important of all, the score. Corigliano's achievement is all the more notable because of what he had to work against on the screen. He wisely chose not to score the far-too-numerous scientific/academic jargon scenes (which are impossible to effectively score anyway).

Except for the brief dialogue scenes where human emotion does emerge, most of the sequences scored are without dialogue. The hallucinations and genetic transformations, the Ape Man sequence, and the major laboratory experiment are the *raisons d'être* for this film; how well they are scored affects not only their mood but their success with the audience as well. Corigliano does not disappoint, and Ken Russell is indeed to be congratulated for using a contemporary concert composer with the rare gift of theatrical sense and imagination. Compare the effect of Corigliano's score with the effect of the music used in any Stanley Kubrick film of the past decade. When not ravaging music in the public domain, Kubrick will cheerfully extract bits and pieces of Ligeti and Penderecki to drop into his films, but he never seems to ask either man to compose specific and original music for him. Over the past fourteen years since 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY was released, the average moviegoer who does not ordinarily listen to classical music has been inundated with dissonant, modern, atonal music via films and television; for those listeners, Ligeti and Penderecki are no longer as strange or *avant-garde* as they once were. In fact, more often than not, dissonant, abstract music has become a cinema cliché when indiscriminately used in thrillers and horror movies over the years. For such music to be effective, it must contribute creatively to the film. The composer must be aware of music's cinematic potential.

Corigliano's music is different and exciting enough to elude exact description, but his score can be generalized as multilayered, dissonant, visceral, theatrical, and abstract music. These qualities are very evident in the first hallucination, in which the music emphasizes the turmoil of Eddie Jessup (William Hurt) over the death of his father and his subsequent loss of faith. The hallucination is fraught with a mixture of Judeo-Christian imagery and Freudian symbolism. The music begins with oboes of frantic intensity (which are played Moroccan *rheita*-style) and are echoed by the other woodwinds. Timpani, a whooping French horn, woodblocks, and buzzing flutes follow and then give way to harp, piano, massive strings, and a quiet solo oboe passage. Suddenly from the brass and strings, snatches of hymn tunes erupt from a sea of Ivesian sonority.

After sampling "magic" mushrooms in Mexico, Jessup goes on a psychedelic trip accompanied by the Dionysian, primitive music of the "Hinchi Mushroom Dance" with its shrieking oboes, violent brass, and savage rhythms. During this hallucination, his subconscious literally reveals that his relationship with his wife Emily (Blair Brown) is strangling him. None of this comes out of the dialogue; only through the hallucinations and the vividly archetypal music do we get to know Jessup's attitude and true feeling about his marriage.

Despite the apparent verisimilitude of academe. Professor Jessup is at heart a Hollywood Mad Scientist. Following the time-honored film convention of experimenting upon oneself to further Man's knowledge (as well as the plot), he genetically regresses from University Prof to Ape Man. Jessup's mad spree which follows (attacking security guards, escaping from a pack of dogs, breaking into a zoo, killing and eating a goat) is accompanied by clusters of contrabasses arising in bombastic crescendos followed by a mixture of primitive music and modern, yet at first unrecognizable sonorities that could be summarized best as organized chaos. Close attention reveals that this lengthy musical sequence, which might be mistaken for electronic music, actually achieves its sonorities through orchestration. All this music is meant to unsettle the audience as well as to give them something they have not heard before. Much of the dramatic music in the score is also

mixed with the sound effects and seems to grow out of the humming machinery or amplified breathing in the isolation chambers. One is often unaware when the music begins, and its sudden crescendos keep the audience on edge.

While most of the scored sequences are hectic and thrilling, the few quiet, emotional moments with music are just as powerful. After Jessup has a religious vision during sex, variations on the opening phrase of "Rock of Ages" pass from instrument to instrument in the orchestra while he tells Emily of his religious memories and his father's death.

The film's characters are so self-centered and involved in their research that they have no time or use for other people. (Even Emily shows academic single-mindedness while pining for Eddie.) Their tedious dialogue further alienates the audience. Only Corigliano's love theme, easily the most accessible music of his score, provides any humanity for the characters as the dialogue continually undercuts and resists any expression of human emotion. This theme is very interesting for several reasons: Unlike the current movie love theme, which is usually nothing but musical wallpaper, Corigliano's theme is emotionally moving and used sparsely, yet only when necessary to the film. Also, it is a curiously one-sided love theme, that is, it is not a theme for two lovers, but the melancholy theme of a woman's love for a man who is unable to accept, much less give love. Complexly constructed, yet memorable, this long-lined, yearning theme is built on a rising and falling configuration of six notes that contain the interval of the second as well as the unusual interval of the tritone. (This use of the tritone gives the theme its unusual quality as well as an unsettling sound, as it is meant to.)

This love theme is first heard to express Emily's dejection when Eddie is too involved with his research and himself to hear her marriage proposal. He is so caught up in discussing his experiments that he does not notice her distress. Suddenly he stops chattering and surprisingly agrees to marry her. As she smiles, clarinet, flute, and then strings come in at this most appropriate moment for music. The theme is also passed to oboe, English horn, brass, and then back to the winds. But the theme ends on a strange note that moves us from this scene to seven years later. The music tells us something has happened, and we soon learn that their relationship is no longer intact. This theme returns tenderly later in the film as Emily again expresses her love to Eddie after his Ape Man adventure in the lab and zoo. But he is so excited with the results of his research that he is deaf to her declarations. After the film's major visual and aural set-piece, the laboratory experiment in which Eddie undergoes another genetic transformation which demolishes the lab, the love theme reoccurs. Despite the unbelievably inappropriate dialogue, the reappearance of the music, now calmly triumphant, reassures the audience that Emily through her love has "rescued" him from the physical and emotional maelstrom he had created. Back at their house after the exhausted Eddie falls asleep, the theme is heard again when she discusses with a colleague her true feelings for Eddie. She then goes into physical and emotional shock. The theme continues when Eddie awakens and goes to the sleeping Emily; he finally realizes what she has done for him. Therefore, by the time of the grand finale, the only way Eddie can fight off another genetic transformation and save Emily from a similar fate is through love—which he previously refused to give or accept. He finally realizes that "there are no great truths, only living life." This is indeed Eddie's "final transformation"; he is no longer just a Scientist, but a man. Meanwhile, the music during Eddie's final transformation (as he fights it off) carries a visceral intensity

that definitely affects the audience. Then the love theme returns for the final time as Eddie embraces the creature of energy that was his wife and brings her back through his love, exactly as she had done for him after his second transformation at the demolished lab. They are now nude in a pieta pose as he says, "I love you, Emily." Camera tracks back. Music swells. Credits roll. It is incredibly corny yet strangely moving, and the music provides an enormous emotional release for the audience.

* * *

The RCA recording (ABL1-3983) of the score, expertly conducted by Christopher Keene of the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, powerfully captures the excitement of the film. The album was produced by Corigliano along with pianist/composer Sheldon Shkolnik (who performs in the recording) and contains about 42 of the 70 minutes of music written for the film including some musical cues which were cut from the film or transplanted by the director. For example, the music for the entire first hallucination is heard complete on disc; only the last half was heard in the final cut of the film. An elegiac chamber trio which appears on the LP originally accompanied a Garden of Eden scene within the second hallucination (to symbolize Emily and Eddie's view of their marriage). However, when the studio decided that the whole hallucination seemed too logical, Russell intercut this brief scene into other parts of the hallucination, thus leaving no room for its accompanying music, which was meant to play against the terror of William Hurt being strangled by a boa constrictor. The "Primeval Landscape" selection was originally used for an isolation chamber scene in which Jessup regresses to a primitive man (unseen by audience) and relates his experience in a prehistoric landscape. Russell thought the music was covering up some of the dialogue, so he removed the music and inserted it into the Ape Man sequence later in the picture. (See "Between the Frames: John Corigliano and ALTERED STATES" by this author in the March/April 1982 issue of *Fanfare* for more details as well as an in-depth interview with the composer.)

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John Corigliano does not write music like anyone else. For him to turn to film was a natural choice as there is already an inherent streak of theatricality and originality in him that makes his concert works (such as the concerti for piano, oboe, clarinet, and flute) so appealing and accessible. His techniques are advanced, but to disregard his ALTERED STATES as merely inconsequential "modern music" would be simplistic. The visceral power, complex sonorities, and theatricality of his score will appeal to those who like their music to communicate with them, and certainly will not frighten those more traditional or timid listeners whose brush with the twentieth century has perhaps only progressed as far as Elgar or Delius. Those who appreciate the fine soundtrack album of ALTERED STATES should definitely investigate the composer's other recordings, particularly the Piano Concerto (Mercury SRI-75118), the Oboe Concerto (RCA ARL1-2534) and the Clarinet Concerto (New World NW-309). Later this year James Galway and the RCA will record the Flute Concerto (*The Pied Piper Fantasy*), while Christopher Keene and the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra plan to record the concert suite from ALTERED STATES entitled *Three Hallucinations for Orchestra*.

Corigliano's music works with the film, not against it. It is not used extraneously or as mere background; instead, the score enriches the filmic experience and communicates to the audience the theatrical and dramatic poten-

tial of image and music. ALTERED STATES is a vital piece of music and an important score—not because of its modern and complex idiom, but because it is a musically and cinematically effective score by a living American composer that avoids both the dissonant horror movie cliché as well as the pseudo-baroque style whose overuse in contemporary films has already become a cliché in itself. If a contemporary concert composer can write a film score so thrilling that an audience will remain in a high state of excitement some fifteen minutes after the end credits have rolled—whether they have liked the film or not—then clearly, the current, complacent state of film music can be revitalized.

Those interested in the musical career of Mr. Corigliano should refer to the bibliography listed in the extensive liner notes to the Clarinet Concerto album cited above. For more recent material emphasizing ALTERED STATES, see also the following:

Paul Gagne. "What's a Nice Classical Composer like John Corigliano Doing on a Film Like This? Very Nicely, Thank You." In "The Filming of ALTERED STATES." *Cinefantastique*, Fall 1981.

Bernard Holland. "Highbrow Music to Hum." *The New York Times Magazine*, January 31, 1982.

John Fitzpatrick. "Scoring ALTERED STATES: An Interview with John Corigliano." *Pro Musica Sana* 34, Winter 1981-82.

David P. James. "Between the Frames: John Corigliano and ALTERED STATES." *Fanfare*, March/April 1982.

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Did you know? The "Lygia" theme from QUO VADIS was once recorded as a song by tenor Mario Lanza. As most filmographies omit "popular" versions of themes, this item has not often been mentioned. It is, however, a lovely, flowing musical treatment—even if the lyrics ("the hours dance on golden sandals") might be heard to better advantage in, say, Hungarian. The song is included on Lanza's 1958 RCA Camden album of light operatic favorites. *You Do Something to Me* (CAL 450), and it may have appeared on other albums as well.

A DRAGONSLAYER INQUIRY: FROM TWO HEADY NOTES
TOWARD SOME HARD QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SCORE
by Ken Sutak

The "two views on Alex North's most ambitious score in years" offered by William Finn and John Fitzpatrick in PMS 34 were well worth airing: it's about time somebody beat a few critical drums for the music of 1981's DRAGONSLAYER. More needs to be said about this astonishing score, however. Or, as Finn's questioning commentary itself indicated, perhaps the proper word in this instance is not "said" but "asked." My own view is as awed as the Finn and Fitzpatrick ones, but it is also incomplete because too many questions about this score have been cluttering up my overall impression of it. Finn used the word "dazzling" to describe its effect on him, and I think that's exactly the right way to prime DRAGONSLAYER for the larger discussion it deserves. In fact I can't recall ever coming away from another important film score with more queries on my mind about what I'd seen and heard. Having raised the curtain on the subject with the Finn-Fitzpatrick comments, PMS seems the appropriate forum in which to set down a few of my own observations. Perhaps some prospective interviewer of the composer will be able to elicit explanations about further aspects of this late great work of his, if only for the sake of mitigating the wider speculation that might arise when and if DRAGONSLAYER does generate wider attention. Even then, though, nothing short of a broader examination of the DRAGONSLAYER music--and not just the DRAGONSLAYER music--will do.

What hath North wrought?

Now that's a cheeky way of putting the basic question of what it is that North has done in DRAGONSLAYER, I admit. But then DRAGONSLAYER strikes me as a terrifically cheeky score. At times it also impresses me as the kind of self-indulgent work wherein self-indulgence furthers the aims of art. Make no mistake: DRAGONSLAYER may come as close to perfection as film music--particularly Alex North's film music--has ever come. Certainly this is not another ear-pounding exercise in excess meant to wipe us out, as some other "special effects" movie scores have been in recent years. This score is absolutely uncompromising in its restrained way of applying drama music to narrative, setting, character, and theme. Though it's spry, there isn't a bit of musical pandering to be found in it; even the temptation to insert a couple of love themes into the score isn't acceded to, a decision which I think is correct inasmuch as both of the boy-girl relationships in the film are tenuously developed at best (Galen, the young sorcerer's apprentice who takes on the dragon, and Valerian, the plain peasant girl who eventually pairs up with him, on the one hand; Galen and Princess Elspeth, the beautiful daughter of Cassidorious Rex who sacrifices her life for the sake of her father's dragon-plagued kingdom, on the other). Nor do other forms of North's proven lyricism find much expression here. For the most part this is a feast of modernism at least equal in stature to John Williams' CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND and Jerry Goldsmith's LOGAN'S RUN. This time, however, the banquet has been served up like a succession of unusual delicacies by a more ambiguously minded chef.

Yet it is impossible to bring to the film an awareness of North's earlier film work, particularly in the "epic film" genre, and not come away with the

realization that North has drawn upon a number of his previous film music excursions to do something quite evidently personal in DRAGONSLAYER. Just how personal is this score, though? The artistic sensibility at work here isn't just a playful one: it's also sombre and it's quirky and sometimes it's so sublime that one gets the feeling that sublimity has become North's way of reacting to those who might have wanted him to show off here and there. I, for one, did want North to show off now and then in DRAGONSLAYER. After all, it's his first Dolby-encoded score even if the dubbing tends to efface the music rather than enhance it, and it's North's first really big film since his spectacle days, which ran virtually the entire gamut of the sixties.

This idiosyncratic composer apparently had other concerns in mind, however, and Finn's characterization of the overall mood—"half serious, half mocking"—seems to sum them up as well as any short summary can. But how much of DRAGONSLAYER is "serious" and how much is "mocking"? Yes, those are CLEOPATRA "fire divination" echoes in the old sorcerer Ulrich's oracle-of-fire and funeral scenes; especially when they flare up mystically early in the film to underscore a flock of shooting stars that streak across the opaline sky of the Dark Ages while Ulrich's lifeless body is burned on a pyre, you know that North is having some fun with his already patented innovations while at the same time adroitly supporting the film. And yes, those involuted brass configurations that accompany the first virgin sacrifice scene and several of the action sequences have seen stylistic service in North's "epic" output before: they were there in the battle scenes of SPARTACUS and CLEOPATRA even if they were difficult to hear under the tumult of sword-and-sandal sound effects, but they were prominently on display in the Cavalry-and-Indian confrontations of CHEYENNE AUTUMN, where there wasn't quite as much going on.

It's also true that North is not above showing sympathy for the devil in DRAGONSLAYER. He has done this sort of thing many times before in any number of the stage adaptations he has scored throughout his long film career and, like a musical Milton on this occasion, he raises this feature of his empathetic film music approach to its ultimate application here. Just listen to those brooding strings in the brief but stunning scene where Vermithrax Pejorative (the dragon) mourns its slain young and you can't help but recognize that North is making an effort to respect that monster, to show some understanding for any grieving creature whose babies, no matter how repulsive, have been violently cut down. Too, when this fabulous dragon flies into a vengeful rage over the liquidation of her infants to the accompaniment of some anguished musical shrieking on the soundtrack you'd think that North had momentarily placed Pejorative in the company of Cleopatra herself after Antony has taken Octavia as his wife. And you'd probably be right!

But the DRAGONSLAYER score is a lot more connected to North's earlier work than that. Has anyone else noticed that the four-note leitmotif for evil old Pejorative is yet another of those "bizarre variants" of otherwise familiar musical motifs that North has been employing with such philosophical tartness since his Emmy-winning score for RICH MAN, POOR MAN? (I take the term from Mark Koldys, who disapprovingly pegged the father's theme in that score as a "bizarre variant" of "My Country 'Tis of Thee" in EMS 15.) Here the variant in question is a growling off-key version of the same four-note leitmotif for the Roman Catholic Church that formed the "rock" of North's Golden Globe-winning score for THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN.

Now, Pejorative is clearly a hellish beast and the idea of representing DRAGONSLAYER's symbol of Evil Incarnate with the dark musical underside of North's own magisterial theme for the Church in THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN is a most provocative one. On one level it's only slightly more ingenious than the kind of clever, cross-fertilized shenanigan that, to my knowledge, only Bernard Herrmann had indulged in up to now (reprising the three-note leitmotif for PSYCHO'S Norman Bates in the closing frames of TAXI DRIVER when Travis Bickle goes back out on the streets). But on another, more complicated level it's also the kind of thing that auteurs would entertain with pedantic euphoria were they to turn their attentions to the composers' contributions to the authorship of films, so one shouldn't get too emphatic about it in discussing DRAGONSLAYER lest that particular Pandora's box be opened too far.

Nevertheless, in its Middle Ages guise the Church is a major element in the scenario that Hal Barwood (also the producer) and Matthew Robbins (also the director) have devised for DRAGONSLAYER, and some critics have chastised them sharply for the way they treat it in their script. One, the horror-fantasy writer Gahan Wilson, has gone so far in the pages of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone Magazine* as to accuse Barwood and Robbins of propounding "peculiar anti-Christian propaganda" with their film. I happen to think that writers like Wilson are wrong-headed in this regard but I can't say that even he is off-the-wall, since the representatives of the Church do come off pretty poorly in DRAGONSLAYER. At best they are portrayed as well-intentioned albeit foolish, at worst as inept and conciliatory to political corruption; but I think that the overall impression meant to be conveyed by the film's authors is that the milieu in which dragons can exist and the atmosphere in which organized religion can flourish are two sides of the same coin.

And so, interestingly enough, are North's own leitmotifs for the most pronounced emblem of good (the Church in THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN) and the most riveting incarnation of evil Vermithrax Pejorative in DRAGONSLAYER) that he has ever worked with in the film medium. Is this significant in the sense of a major American composer, now in his seventies, telling us something of serious import, by subtle reference to his own descriptive musical legacy, as he approaches the end of his career? Is it just another private little joke meant to make DRAGONSLAYER more coy, more mischievous than anything Herrmann himself ever dared do? I don't know, but I'd like to.

I do know that in DRAGONSLAYER we hear the leitmotif for Pejorative long before we ever see the dragon itself. In fact it's the very first thing we hear in the film. Groaning achingly under a pitch-black screen as the movie begins (Pejorative is shortly afterward diagnosed by Ulrich from the evidence of one of her discarded scales as being so old she lives in constant pain), the theme is literally belched out by some of the lowest-registered brass heard on a soundtrack since Herrmann went journeying to the center of the earth. What a device! it's both heavy and humorous. But what metaphorical electricity has been stored in the thing too. Listen to those four dour notes snap, crackle, and pop as Pejorative wings through the air, sometimes exhaling fire while a novice priest leads the peasants to cover down below, murmuring gentle proselytizations about salvation through conversion on the way. What is one to make of it? How much is one to make of it?

Well, I'd be more willing than I am at present to opine that North is being more than tour-de-forceful throughout DRAGONSLAYER, that he is saying something serious about the precarious relationship between good and evil throughout

mankind's existence, if he had restated the Pejorative leitmotif after the dragon is destroyed and the Dark Ages are represented as giving way, illusorily to light. I don't think the theme does reappear in the score after that point, though. At least I didn't manage to catch it amid what Finn calls the "jaunty bewilderment of notes" that goes on for some time at the finale (again, once the light of a putative new age fades away, under an ebony screen). But without an album to refer to who but the composer or someone with access to the sheet music can easily tell?

Which leads me to ask:

Where is the DRAGONSLAYER soundtrack album?

This isn't the first time that a really big film bearing a major score should have had an album released in tandem with its distribution but didn't, of course. In North's case alone the lack of a CHEYENNE AUTUMN album continues to fester, such that DRAGONSLAYER now makes for a pair of gaping holes in the North "epic" film discography. However, the situation is more perplexing than usual here. According to the New York Times DRAGONSLAYER cost \$18,000,000 to make but grossed only \$16,000,000 at the American box-office (for net U.S. rentals in 1981, according to Variety, of \$6,000,000). So the film was a commercial failure in the States. But it certainly didn't start out that way, and it went to market with a \$4,000,000 promotional budget. Though the Times called that a relatively modest amount given the size and expense of the film, certainly there was enough room within that sort of promotional budget to engineer the release of a soundtrack album. Moreover, neither Paramount nor the Disney organization (the film's co-venturers) is without the ability to see that soundtrack albums of their largest film productions are placed in the record racks. Each has consistently done so up to DRAGONSLAYER (albeit more for purely promotional rather than musical reasons). So what happened?

The situation is all the more mystifying in view of the fact that there were more than a half-dozen "special effects" movies competing with DRAGONSLAYER for mass audience attention during the summer of 1981, when all these films were released. Now, it was mighty nice to see that John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith weren't the only major film composers assigned to them, as fine and dependable as those two movie music-makers are. In fact, in addition to their own work on RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK and OUTLAND, respectively, it was downright grand to have ~~Aax~~ North back writing for the type of film he used to pick up every year or two in the sixties, to witness Elmer Bernstein also returning to the sort of cinematic scale worthy of his finer talents in HEAVY METAL, and to see yet another heavyweight like Laurence Rosenthal doing excellent work on CLASH OF THE TITANS. Given these goodies, one could hardly care very much that SUPERMAN II had Ken Thorne adapting John Williams' SUPERMAN themes into a thin stew of his own pop tunes, or that HONKY TONK FREEWAY couldn't seem to make up its mind who its music should be composed by, or that THE LEGEND OF THE LONE RANGER was so incompetently made from top to bottom that it didn't matter how silly or undernourished John Barry's music was for it. But North's DRAGONSLAYER score is far and away the superior score among even the best of this crop-- indeed, it's probably 1981's best film score period--and yet it's the only one of the entire bunch that wasn't recorded. Not by the Disney record company, not by the Paramount recording connections, not even by Varese-Sarabande, or Entr'acte or Citadel or Cerberus-California companies with a serious film music orientation that have recently been coming through quite regularly in the crunch. Why not? I wonder.

Recalling that Henry Mancini has talked about a provision in his scoring contracts

giving him the right to decide if there will be an album released of a given film score composed by him, I also wonder about something else. I wonder: did Alex North have something similar in his DRAGONSLAYER contract? Is it possible that DRAGONSLAYER hasn't been recorded because North himself doesn't want it to be--yet?

Not knowing, I ask. And I also ask because my gnawing question is related to a more pertinent one:

Where does the DRAGONSLAYER music come from really?

I don't mean to be cute, and I'm certainly not insinuating that a composer as original as Alex North would ever copy a note of music from anybody else (those quite permissible "bizarre variant" quotations aside). Nor do I have much inclination for attaching more potential significance than I already have to the fact that DRAGONSLAYER is linked to THE SHOES OF THE FISHERMAN, as can be done by extrapolation from the fact that FISHERMAN was composed in the very year of the infamous SPACE ODYSSEY affair. In any case, it's no secret that North has been sitting on his unused SPACE ODYSSEY score for some thirteen years now. It's also common knowledge that the Third Symphony which North has been endlessly shaping from that material over that time (and which at least a couple of those aforementioned California-based record companies, I'm told by the head of one of them, have been directing persistent inquiries to the composer about in recent years) has yet to materialize. It seems only fair to ask, then, if any of that unpublished SPACE ODYSSEY music has been used in one form or another in DRAGONSLAYER, and if so, how much and where?

The question also seems quite realistic to me in view of the kind of film DRAGONSLAYER is and the kind of music North has provided it with. There's a lot of music in DRAGONSLAYER, and much of it exhibits the sort of finished complexity that rarely appears in film music these days, particularly in big films. This is not for lack of talent, necessarily, but for lack of time even where talent already exists. North has come up with this kind of enlarged, highly polished writing in his "epic" film compositions before, notably in SPARTACUS where he had approximately a year in which to do the job. But nobody gets a year in which to write an intricately crafted film score for an expensive epic anymore, and we can be sure that North did not have anywhere near that much time in which to score DRAGONSLAYER. Indeed, in filmmaking economics as they exist today, composers assigned to blockbuster movies have even less time than they ever did in which to do just a decent job of scoring.

The reason for this is that the real cost of scoring an expensive film under the old temporal rules has gone up enormously. Forget about any inflation in the composer's fee or in the orchestra expense or in the recording or dubbing costs, where the new technologies have made their particularly high-priced marks, or even in the crazy union requirements, where costs have been burgeoning. It's the dramatic increase in the interest carried on the producer's investment in the final cut during the post-production period when the film is being scored that has produced the cramp. For instance, even at a 15 percent interest rate a \$20,000,000 movie will generate interest costs of well over half-a-million dollars during the scoring period if the composer gets as much as ten weeks (the old norm for an average film) in which to produce his score and weld it to the film. With that kind of expenditure hanging over every very expensive movie that goes into post-production work these days it's no wonder that we're starting to see shortcuts cropping up all over the place in the scoring of recent big films.

Sometimes these take the form of the subcontracting of source music (note that the source music in DRAGONSLAYER itself--two medieval dances and one religious hymn--is credited not to North but to another composer, just as the source music in OUTLAND

--for the scenes set in a futuristic disco--is credited not to Goldsmith but to somebody else). Sometimes the big film is given over to someone who can give it the quick fix of a hugely repetitive yet intrinsically slight score; John Barry (THE BLACK HOLE and RAISE THE TITANIC as well as LONE RANGER) has lately become something of a specialist in providing this sort of service. Sometimes the big film is so vastly over-budget and financial disaster is so encroaching that a whole collective of composers is called in to do its music (e.g., HONKY TONK FREEWAY, where everyone from Elmer Bernstein to George Martin to a slew of pp songwriters seems to have played a role in knocking out the score). And sometimes the film is not only very expensive but also very long, such that nowadays the chief composer on it does just half the film--or, as in the case of REDS, an even smaller piece of it--while another composer adapts his principal themes in the scoring of the remaining part (e.g., MASADA, where no composer, even one who works as fast as Jerry Goldsmith reportedly does, could have scored the entire seven-hour-plus film unless the producer was willing to run up a seven-figure fortune in carrying charges on that \$20,000,000 production).

How, then, did Alex North manage to infuse the \$18,000,000 DRAGON-SLAYER with a lengthy score of such sustained musical intricateness within the time limits he must have been presented with? Yes, someone else took care of the source music. Yes, part of the elegant texture he's written into the score harks back to some of the painstaking writing North had already immersed himself in during his SPARTACUS/CLEOPATRA/CHEYENNE AUTUMN era; he didn't have to get so inventive all over again in the present era for that. And yes, North can probably handle emotional resonances quite quickly by now, so gifted is he at dealing with character. One can also assume that North spent less time than usual pacing the floor to come up with his concept of the score; whether or not that concept is as profound as I suspect, it's also playful, and playfulness is often a prod. One can even suppose that he had sufficient time to also put together such impressive features of the score as the finely detailed writing that distinguishes the bucolic scenes, first for Galen's cross-country trek from the sorcerer's den to the dragon's lair, then for Galen's subsequent flight from the place and climactic turnaround, lastly for Galen's ride off into the transitory sunrise with Valerian, where for each related, substantial cue the orchestra sounds like an assembly of soloing instruments playing against one another with the kind of structural finesse usually found only in the concert hall.

But what about all that highly decorative "magical" music in the dragon's lair when Galen accomplishes the resurrection of Ulrich? What about the awe-struck sounds that accompany Galen's initial encounter with Pejorative, when the dragon is shown in its entirety for the first time moments before pitting its blowtorch breath against Galen's shield and spear? What about the fierce modernisms for the lance-and-sword fight before Galen goes into the dragon's lair to face Pejorative for a second confrontation, where the sparkle and glow cast off by the clashing weaponry carry the film into something of a STAR WARS orbit? And what about the really spacey stuff--the sweeping musical architecture comprised of a series of increasingly involved cues which North erects one after another when the resurrected Ulrich prepares to confront Pejorative on a mountaintop for the film's Armageddon-like showdown and the whole universe seems to get into the act, what with the earth heaving and the heavens parting for the sort of spellbinding galactic sound-and-light show that only certain sequences in CLOSE ENCOUNTERS and SUPERMAN and SPACE ODYSSEY itself can compare with? Was all of this, and more, composed from scratch over a relatively short period of time?

How, then, did all of this music originate? Has North actually been able to give us this extraordinary DRAGONSLAYER score under present-day working conditions (and those of his own presumably decreasing energy) without drawing upon his SPACE ODYSSEY material? Maybe so, but I for one will have difficulty believing it until that long-awaited Third Symphony of his has had a public exposure sufficient to allow comparison to DRAGONSLAYER.

Which impels me to ask:

What next now for North?

Finn has put that question more bluntly: "Has Alex North laid to rest the rumors concerning his retirement with his dazzling score for DRAGONSLAYER? Or is it to be his final film opus?" And Fitzpatrick, by drawing attention to North's 1980 opus for the unjustly neglected CARNY, has helped place that question in context. CARNY was "vintage 1950s North"--but it was also a close collaboration between our most "unpredictable" serious film composer and one of our finest rock writers (producer Robbie Robertson, former leader and chief composer for the long-reigning but now defunct group known simply as The Band, declared at the outset that he wouldn't let anybody but Nino Rota or Alex North do the job). DRAGONSLAYER might just as fairly be called "vintage 1960s North"--and yet, as with CARNY, something rather audacious seems to have been introduced to the musical admixture. Looking at that self-ribbing photograph on the back of the CARNY album cover of North and Robertson in shabby dress casually lighting up smokes together like a couple of utterly unfazeable carnival bums, listening to North himself jamming it up at the piano with Robertson's own musicians on the funky "Rained Out" piece, which is credited to Robertson as midway (source) music but which winds up as pure North dramaturgy (especially in the film, where the bluesy piano-and-horns coda movingly underscores a pathetic visual after the impromptu dance for which the rest of the piece was written has been "rained out"), remembering the short-cue/"bizarre variant" wryness with which North vested 1979's WISE BLOOD, and then trying to come to grips with what North has done in DRAGONSLAYER, I've reached the conclusion that North has taken up the mantle of pensive insolence left over by Herrmann and wrapped it around his own inimitable style for an easy and ever-so-appropriate fit. If so, he may need it given the coldness of the climate in which he's been demonstrating his undiminished talent lately. If not, at least it should be said that he's entitled to the cloak.

Think of it: CARNY and DRAGONSLAYER contain the best work North has done in years, each work represents a distinct side of North's film music output brought up to date (and then some), yet neither score has generated much mention, let alone interest. Perhaps it's the churning times in which sensation has become a favorite anodyne that account for this; perhaps it's the unwillingness or maybe even the inability to pay attention to any movie music that doesn't simply aim at blowing us away. If, say, Alfred Newman and Fats Domino had worked together successfully on an original dramatic film score in the halcyon days of the fifties the collaboration would have raised a lot of musical eyebrows. But when Alex North and Robbie Robertson work together successfully in 1980 even the film music cognoscenti just seem to nod out. Even as recently as 1977 John Williams had just about everybody agog over his CLOSE ENCOUNTERS modernisms; but when Alex North takes the art of film music a piquant nudge beyond those CLOSE ENCOUNTERS modernisms a bare five gars later it seems the mosthe can expect is hs umpteenth Oscar nomination rendered out of sheer musicianly respect. Some praise in PMS aside, the rest of the musically aware public just doesn't seem to notice. Why? For lack of a punk version of the Vermithrax Pejorative leitmotif to serve as

immediate turn-on?

Think, too, about the fact that between CARNY and DRAGONSLAYER North scored the Lamont Johnson western called CATTLE ANNIE AND LITTLE BRITCHES, but producer Alan King (yes, the comedian) ordered the score scrapped and replaced it with music credited to—believe it or not—a company. The comedian indeed! It's just this sort of rollercoaster ride of a film career that North has been bumping up and down on ever since Stanley Kubrick's supreme musical insult in the SPACE ODYSSEY affair ended his prestigious "epic" output of the sixties. Yet he always seems to suffer such misfortunes by springing back from them somehow stronger, at least in his music. For the junked SOUNDER we get the brilliant SHANKS. From the CATTLE ANNIE AND LITTLE BRITCHES scrapheap rises the resolve that produces a DRAGONSLAYER. Out of what must have been the immensely frustrating SPACE ODYSSEY experience comes—one hopes soon—the Third Symphony. This may not amount to indomitability but surely it stands for something more than tenacity. Here's a guy who turns around and gives you his blood every time he takes a wound.

What next then? we all may rightly inquire. Well, if a composer who has entered his seventies can produce a CARNY at the outset of the eighties and a DRAGONSLAYER one year later, then health allowing, he can probably do anything that film work can conceivably require of a serious composer for most of the present decade, if not after his own eighties are reached to boot. The rub is that North may just not want to anymore. He seems to have been having some impudent pleasure with his recent projects, alright, but he's also been looking back at his own career with something of a bitter sheen to his musical eye while formulating the application of his conscientious style to current films. CARNY, as Fitzpatrick points out, was "perfectly on target" but also "sour." DRAGONSLAYER, as Finn notes, bears "a tongue-in-cheek bristle" in some places, but in other places one wonders if the tongue has finally turned out-of-cheek. That may be all to the good in any art form where the artist exercises a substantial degree of control over his work, but in film music—where no control is vested in the composer—that's been the mark of a fare-thee-well before. It was insolence, after all, that reverberated from Herrmann when he went off into his self-imposed exile from Hollywood for all but one of the last ten years of his life.

If DRAGONSLAYER is meant to be a more unqualified and irreversible exit, well, at least North has gone out of film music with a wallop. If it isn't, so much the better: any North score that emerges after this can be considered the gift of a septuagenarian composer who can't resist keeping the technique flowing. In either case, Fitzpatrick is quite right to let loose with a hearty "Encore, please." For the real bang is still yet to come. And North must know that those of us who admire his music have been waiting to hear that bang go off for an awfully long time. Thirteen years going on fourteen, to be precise. He must also be aware—and here I must be even more blunt than Finn—that he may not have even half as many years left in which to postpone the firing of what must be the biggest gun he has ever drawn out of the armory of his art.

In other words, it's time for North to complete the SPACE ODYSSEY symphony and release it, and I won't mind being called presumptuous for saying that if it'll help get the message across and the music out. I suspect that DRAGONSLAYER demonstrates that North has lately been writing at the very peak of his form. Now give us your long overdue impressions of the firmament above that mountaintop, Mr. North; give us, please, before it's too late, more reason than

even DRAGONSLAYER provides to express wonderment once again and to compare notes.

NEWS [July 1982] :

Recordings:

There will be no album for DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID, but Miklós Rózsa did record a 25-minute suite from LAST EMBRACE with the Frankenland State Orchestra. This suite, possibly coupled with some reissue material, will appear on Varese-Sarabande in the fall. Varese is also planning to issue here the recent German recordings of the JUNGLE BOOK and THIEF OF BAGDAD suites, both without narration.

Pantheon's major release of the Piano Concerto and Cello Concerto (FSM 53901) is now pushed back to September. Although the record will list for \$10.98, Pantheon has offered a special discount to MRS members who order as described below:

1. Write directly to Pantheon Records, 211 East 43rd St., New York, NY 10017.
2. Mention your membership in the MRS.
3. Enclose \$6.50 per album, plus
4. Postage and handling: 50 cents per album in the U.S. and North America; an appropriate amount for shipments going to other countries (U.S. currency or international money order).

Events:

Dr. Rózsa's Venice appearance (June) was commemorated by a 24-page booklet prepared by Roberto Pugliese, the seventeenth in a series that also dealt with Herrmann (11), Morricone (13), and Legrand (15).

Although the National Film Theatre (London) did have a Rózsa series in June, the composer was not in attendance. There will be some public affair in early October to celebrate the publication of *A Double Life*.

Other forthcoming appearances (in addition to those listed in FMS 35):

Late August: At the Knocke-Heist (Belgium) Film Festival.

October 17-26: At the Cinemathèque Française (Paris) as part of a Rózsa series that may include as many as thirty films. There will be a "table ronde" discussion on the 25th.

November 2-7: At L'Ecole Nationale de Musique, Bourges (France), with a possible concert on the 7th.

Publications:

A Double Life is still scheduled for September in the U.S. The offer in FMS 35 remains valid. Books will be shipped as soon as autographed copies are available, which might mean late October.

The French Canadian film magazine *24 Images* featured François Vallerand's lengthy interview with Rózsa in its April issue (no. 12), the back cover of which has a large color photo of the composer. The issue is available for \$3.95 (Canadian) from 24 Images, 169 Rue Labonté, Longueuil, Quebec, Canada 54H 2P6.

We have just received yet another impressive-looking film music publication. *Score* (in Dutch). The present 24-page issue is number 42! Address: Postbus 406, 8200, AK Lelystad, Netherlands.

Other:

Renzo Rossellini, composer for 130 films and author of many works for the concert hall as well, died in Monte Carlo on 14 May. Among his credits, which included several films directed by his brother, the late Roberto Rossellini, are OPEN CITY, PAISAN, STROMBOLI, and TRIP TO ITALY.

At the College of Wooster (Ohio), Jack Gallagher led the Wooster Symphony in a performance of the *Jungle Book Suite* on March 2. The College library now boasts a substantial collection of Rózsa and related recordings, thanks to the generosity of Michael Yacura.

Corrections:

Concerning "Dead Men's Diary" in PMS 35, our apologies to Else Blangsted (not Blengsted), music editor on DEAD MEN DON'T WEAR PLAID. Also, Mike Sell points out that Lee Holdridge did not score RUN WILD, RUN FREE (David Whitaker, 1969). He did score FOREVER YOUNG, FOREVER FREE (1976) .

Society:

The modest dues increase we announced in PMS 35 has not proved adequate to the problem, which is simply that while membership remains steady (about 375) costs keep rising. With the present issue we will go, temporarily, into debt for the first time. Therefore we are obliged to raise dues again: \$7 for one year (four issues) or \$13 for two years (eight issues). Outside of North America: \$8 for one year or \$15 for two years. We thank those members who have made voluntary donations for tapes provided by the Society, and we urge all who own tapes to do likewise.

Once again we have run out of space for letters. We expect to have a very large selection of reader correspondence in PMS 37.

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