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CD Review by Arthur Lintgen

HERRMANN *Mysterious Island* • William Stromberg, cond; Moscow SO • TRIBUTE FILM CLASSICS 1001 (71:27)

HERRMANN *Fahrenheit 451. The Twilight Zone: Walking Distance* • William Stromberg, cond; Moscow SO • TRIBUTE FILM CLASSICS 1002 (77:40)

Tribute Film Classics is a new label “dedicated to the preservation of classic film scores,” with a stated goal “to create a collection of new recordings that we hope will perpetuate the specialized art of film composition.” I cannot imagine better news for serious film music fans. The driving forces behind Tribute Film Classics are William Stromberg, John Morgan, and Anna Bonn. Stromberg (conductor) and Morgan (score reconstructionist) are the creative team responsible for the highly regarded marco polo/Naxos classic film-score series. The marco polo recordings were magnificently compiled productions with extensive, informative program notes on the composers and their music. They included never before recorded complete scores by Korngold (*The Adventures of Robin Hood, Devotion*), Waxman (*Objective Burma, Mr. Skeffington*), Steiner (*The Adventures of Mark Twain, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*), and Herrmann (*Garden of Evil*), among others. Many of those CDs have been subsequently reissued on Naxos with less elaborate production values. Their apparently final Naxos release is a sensational complete recording of Korngold’s massive score for *The Sea Hawk* coupled with *Deception* (Fanfare 31:3).

Tribute’s first two recordings are blockbusters in every sense of the word. *Mysterious Island* is a great place to start. It is the only one of Herrmann’s four scores for the special-effects-driven films of Ray Harryhausen that has not received a reasonably complete recording in modern sound that does justice to Herrmann’s orchestration. There are extended but not absolutely complete CD versions of *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad* (Varese Sarabande) and *Jason and the Argonauts* (Intrada). A lengthy 26-minute suite from

Herrmann's brilliant 18th-century dance-derived score for *The Three Worlds of Gulliver* is included on his Decca-London Phase 4 recordings, but his suite from *Mysterious Island* contains only five cues amounting to less than 15 minutes of music compared to this 69-minute complete recording. The Prelude to *King of the Khyber Rifles* is included as a bonus track. *Mysterious Island* can legitimately be called the classic Herrmann-Harryhausen score. It calls for a massive orchestra that is nevertheless rather conventional for Herrmann in that it uses equally large numbers of brass, woodwinds, strings, and percussion, including eight French horns, four tubas, four harps, and a huge percussion section. From its opening brass fanfare punctuated by crash cymbals, Herrmann's score proceeds from one amazingly orchestrated part to another, all united by a recurring three note chord sequence that returns in various guises throughout the orchestra. The composer's brief Phase 4 suite offers some bona-fide highlights, but every other cue in this orchestral showpiece is on or near that level. I would maintain that *Mysterious Island* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* are the finest examples of Herrmann's fantasy-film scores, and are on the same level as his lyric-romantic masterpiece, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*.

For *Fahrenheit 451*, Herrmann creates an entirely different kind of score that evolves stylistically out of *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*. *Fahrenheit 451* is scored for strings, two harps, and one percussionist playing xylophone, marimba, glockenspiel, and vibraphone. The harps and percussion were deliberately designed to add color in contrast to the "black and white" sound of *Psycho*. Herrmann visualized that the futuristic society of *Fahrenheit 451* would revert to "lyrical simplicity" in reaction (from a musical standpoint) to the post-serial coldness of Pierre Boulez and Milton Babbitt, whose critically fashionable music Herrmann correctly deduced to already be the "music of the past." With *Fahrenheit 451*, Herrmann once again created an entirely personal and original sound that seamlessly blends with the film's images to stunning effect, most tellingly in the final scene as the book people move through the snow reciting their favorite books. The "Walking Distance" episode from *The Twilight Zone* was originally written for a small string ensemble plus one harp. For this recording, a full string section plus a second harp are used, resulting in a sonority similar to, but less arresting than *Fahrenheit 451*. From an interpretive standpoint Herrmannophiles (myself included) are so aware of the composer's recordings of his music on the Decca-London albums that it might initially take some time to adjust to Stromberg's inevitably different tempos and phrasing. It must also be noted that Herrmann's tempos were almost always slower in his later recordings, to great effect in this music. Stromberg's devotion to Herrmann's scores is obvious, and the Moscow Symphony Orchestra plays as if its life depended on the results. As with their

previous film music recordings, the orchestra's sensational performance of this difficult music must be a tribute to Stromberg and his team as well as their own artistry. The music crackles with excitement.

There are to my knowledge no other totally complete recordings of these scores, but some additional comments on their recording history are required. Needless to say, Herrmann's Phase 4 recordings are essential, but they are, in the final analysis, only suites, and *Fahrenheit 451* is a truncated version of his own suite. So these complete recordings are extremely important documents of Herrmann's genius. A Varese Sarabande recording of Herrmann's complete 10-part suite from *Fahrenheit 451* played by the Seattle Symphony Orchestra conducted by Joel McNeely is rendered obsolete by these versions, but that CD does contain rare and desirable short excerpts from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Tender Is the Night*. Those scores show still another side of Herrmann.

Sound is always critical to Herrmann's music, and Decca-London's Phase 4 ultra-close multimiking approach contributed greatly to the overwhelming impact of those 1970s CDs that have always been audiophile favorites. These new recordings take more of a concert hall approach, but the recording team was fully aware of the importance of preserving Herrmann's unique orchestral sound. Morgan relates that when the engineer was concerned about the up-front sound of the low woodwinds in the context of a full orchestral recording, they correctly assured him that this was the authentic Herrmann sound that they were seeking. Nevertheless, the brilliant Phase 4 high frequencies and analytical clarity create what could be termed the definitive sonic representation of the Bernard Herrmann sound. In these recordings, *Mysterious Island* could probably benefit from more bass impact and inner detail. Morgan notes that the French horns and harps were authentically recorded into the right and left channels because Herrmann composed the parts antiphonally.

This is an auspicious debut of what promises to be a critically important new label devoted to the recording of classic film music from the past with an emphasis on never recorded scores. According to Bonn, Tribute's recording decisions are primarily based on whether or not a score has been previously recorded or released utilizing original tracks or reconstructions, and the availability of materials, scores, and sketches that permit construction of a complete recording. The next announced, already recorded projects include Herrmann's *The Kentuckian* coupled with *Williamsburg: Story of a Patriot* and Steiner's *She*. They will be followed by Steiner's *Charge of the Light Brigade/Arsenic and Old Lace*, and Korngold's *The Prince and the Pauper*, with plenty

more to follow. I can't wait. **Arthur Lintgen**

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