

TSO brings 'Frankenstein' to life on big screen

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Boris Karloff stars in the 1931 Universal Pictures horror film "Frankenstein." Musicians from the Traverse Symphony Orchestra and guest conductor Michael Shapiro will present Shapiro's film score to the original version of the film Wednesday at the State Theatre.

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TRAVERSE CITY — Michael Shapiro is a big fan of the 1931 Universal Pictures horror film "Frankenstein." There's just one thing missing, he said: a music track. "In the early days of the talkies they did not have the technology to have a music track," said the New York-based composer, pianist and conductor, who set out to right that wrong by creating a score to accompany the film.

Shapiro will conduct members of the Traverse Symphony Orchestra in two live performances of the film score — all 2,000 measures of it, including an overture — to the original version of the movie on the big screen. The shows begin at 6 and 7:45 p.m. Wednesday at the State Theater in downtown Traverse City.

Director James Whale's adaptation of the Gothic Mary Shelly novel stars Colin Clive and Boris Karloff as a scientist obsessed with assembling a living being from parts of exhumed corpses, and the monster he creates. It became an instant horror classic when it premiered in Santa Barbara in 1931, according to Turner Classic Movies, which typically airs the movie around Halloween. The 70-minute screen version is still regarded as one of the most iconic horror films in movie history.

The TSO will perform alongside the restored, 75th Anniversary Edition on DVD, which includes two original scenes later cut from the film.

“It’s a classical movie but a contemporary composition, which gives it a completely different kind of emotional underpinning,” said Shapiro, who composes opera, symphonic, chamber and choral works as well as scores for documentaries like a series of upcoming specials for “Dateline NBC.”

The art deco-style State Theater is the perfect setting for the 1931 film, and musicians will dress accordingly, said Rick Jaissle, TSO manager of operations and orchestra personnel.

“We’re going to go with 1930s chic, formal,” Jaissle said. “And if (the audience) wants to dress up in black tie, I think this is a perfect occasion. Back then, people dressed up to go out.” Just don’t expect Shapiro’s original score to come out of the 1930s mold, he said.

“Unlike opera, where you overwhelm the stage with music, here you’re operating so you’re not overpowering what’s happening on the screen. After a while, (audiences) forget it’s a live orchestra,” he said.

Jaissle said the 15-piece TSO orchestra has been passing around a CD of the score played on synthesizer as members practice their parts. But they’ll have to resist the temptation to sneak a peek at the screen when they rehearse and perform to the movie Wednesday.

“It’s a challenge. But the way they’re seated they’d have to get out of their chairs and turn around to see it,” he said, adding that the front two rows of theater seats will be removed to accommodate the musicians in front of the stage. “Shapiro’s written the score but he still has to watch it to cue what happens when.”

In fact, Shapiro watched the film “continually” over the six weeks during which he wrote the score for the 2002 opening of The Film Society of Lincoln Center’s Jacob Burns Film Center near his hometown of Chappaqua, N.Y. — and several times since while conducting it. So far the score has received nearly 20 performances around the country, he said.

“I know every frame,” he said.

Tickets for the TSO shows are \$20 online at www.traversesymphony.org or at the symphony box office, 947-7120. Students and first-time attendees get in for half-price.