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MUSIC

Roll Over Beethoven A review of: "Frankenstein"

Cashbox Classical Music Editor Rob Tomaro

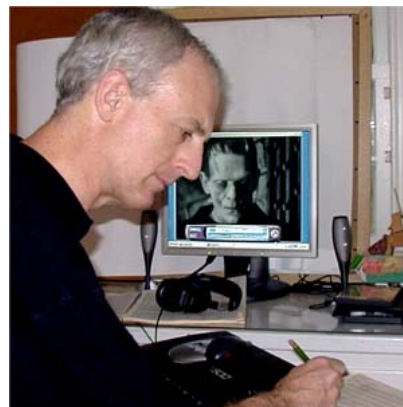
A new Filmscore for the classic film
Composed by Michael Shapiro

How important is music in a movie?



[Feature Stories]

Think of the shower scene in "Psycho". The knife appears. Picture it coming down through the air, again and again. What do you hear? Scree! Scree! Scree! You hear composer Bernard Herrmann's screeching violins on the soundtrack. The image of the knife is so deeply connected to the music that you can't imagine one without the other.



That how powerful movie music can be when it merges with a director's vision in the hands of a skillful composer. It's tricky, though. Not enough music and the scene falls flat. Too much music and the viewer gets distracted from the movie.

New York composer and conductor Michael Shapiro has written brilliant new music for the 1931 classic horror film "Frankenstein" starring Boris Karloff and, in a new twist, his score is designed to be performed by a live orchestra during the showing of the film. Unlike a pre-recorded soundtrack, his live score is not mechanically locked onto the image, so the conductor has the freedom to shape the music by feeling the nuances that occur in real time as the drama plays out, so the score lives and breathes with the movie.

Maestro Shapiro came to Wisconsin, where I conducted a performance of his piece for a Halloween gala showing of "Frankenstein." The audience was riveted to their seats. The power of the live music with the classic film was hypnotic.

His score is majestic and flowing when set against the flickering image on the screen, touching during tender moments, harrowing during disturbing ones, it eschews kitsch or clichés that would date it. So, his music will be just as powerful in fifty years as it is now. That is the definition of a classic.

When asked how he selects the sections of a film to set to music, he says: "The job of the composer is to find out what the director is trying to say in any given moment and then determine how you can use your music to move the drama along."

In speaking of his influences, he cites a whole host of movie music heroes: "Steiner. His score for "Gone with the Wind" is a miracle. The film is over three hours long. And what does he do? He reaches down deep into his soul and pulls out this big, lush Viennese melody and starts the movie with it. And now, we've grown up with that melody as part of the soundtrack to our lives."

Other favorites include: "Elliot Goldenthal's score for "Interview with a Vampire", Alan Silvestri: "Back to the Future", Hans Zimmer: "Gladiator", and especially Korngold for his sweeping music in "Robin Hood."

Shapiro, who is the conductor of the Chappaqua Orchestra in New York, points out that having your orchestra perform a score live with a film attracts people to the concert hall who might otherwise not attend a symphony event. For us conductors, who are constantly seeking to expand our audience, this may turn out to be the biggest benefit of all. How interesting that these old, old masterpiece films, created at time before sound was in pictures, are attracting a new audience to the symphony with this new hybrid medium, in this new century.

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