

# JOHN BARRY *for the record*

by DAVID TOOP

Having a father who owned a small cinema chain may not guarantee a successful career as a film composer, but it would certainly help. In John Barry's case it was a formative influence. Growing up in York in the 1930s, Barry had the opportunity to soak up an enormous quantity of celluloid and at a tender age had already learned the skills of the projection box. The start of his filmmaking came impressively early, too, as he furtively acted out dramas on the living room carpet with Dinky Toys to the accompaniment of Sibelius's Symphony No 1 playing on the family gramophone. From these modest beginnings he has emerged with a reputation as one of the most successful contemporary soundtrack composers, with nearly one hundred scores to his credit.

"I think I'm one of the few people who started off wanting to be a movie composer. The first scores I remember are the ones Korngold wrote for THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD and THE SEA HAWK. Korngold's reputation is huge. He only wrote probably 12 scores in his life, whereas Max Steiner did 60 pictures for Warner Bros in one year. Korngold had a very specific career and an excellent one. I can still watch ROBIN HOOD and be totally enamoured and enthralled with it. The music had such energy - It enhanced the action, the spirit of the adventure, the romanticism. The most important thing for a movie writer is the atmosphere, the spirit, the uplift - being accurate to a scene. (Erich Wolfgang Korngold: THE ADVENTURES OF ROBIN HOOD and THE SEA HAWK). Varese VSD 47202 and VSD 47304.

"I think my favourite score is Alex North's for A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE. You can listen to that today and say, 'My God, it still works.' It still has all the vitality. It's a classic - a fusion of jazz and classical music. In terms of the atmosphere of Tennessee Williams and the deep south it was exceptional - a jazz mood piece. I've never been a great lover of pure jazz scores because I think they start to depart from the dramatic needs, but STREETCAR was brilliant. I think that's the proof - when you can still put it on and be amazed and surprised. (Alex North: A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE. Cloud Nine CNS 5003).

"Nino Rota's scores for Fellini's films are extraordinary. He had a terrific sense of circus. JULIET OF THE SPIRITS, LA STRADA - I can't pick one because I truly love them all. Everything he did had a freshness about it that is still surprising. He was always so touching and humorous. He had such an original approach to things but it did help - working with Fellini! (Nina Rota: JULIET OF THE SPIRITS).

"One of my favourite movies is THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE. I think 75 per cent of Max Steiner's work was very overrated. You can't do 60 movies a year and think at the same time. But THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE was totally inspired. It was such a wonderful subject and he just lit up on that. (Max Steiner: THE TREASURE OF THE SIERRA MADRE).

"THE BIG COUNTRY was probably the best western score. It was beautifully thematic. Wonderful themes and wonderful rhythms that weren't typically western. Every goddam scene was just so beautifully scored. Again, you've got a great movie. The first rule of doing a good score is to have the privilege to be asked to do a terrific movie and to relish all the aspects of its excellence from the directorial point of view, the performance and the story. (Jerome Moross: THE BIG COUNTRY. Silva Screen FILM CD 030).

"On MIDNIGHT COWBOY we strictly said picture is more important than music. In terms of an example of using songs in a movie, MIDNIGHT COWBOY was the tightest. It sounds like I'm blowing my own trumpet but it's still shown at UCLA as an example of the song and score totally serving the drama of the film. (John Barry: MIDNIGHT COWBOY. Liberty CDP-74809-2).

"CHARIOTS OF FIRE worked like a bitch. I have a theory about it. Everybody said it was the synthesiser that made it; but it's essentially a piano score. He wrote a great, simple theme which he played on the piano. I guarantee if Vangelis had played it on a piano with a legitimate orchestra, it would still have been a huge success. Musically it was very touching. (Vangelis: CHARIOTS OF FIRE. Polydor 800 020-2).

"I think John Williams is terrific. I'm sure his favourite movie composer has to be Korngold. He totally took up that huge symphonic gung-ho spirit and he's served those movies with excellence. Wonderful scores, wonderful spirit. The kids go and watch STAR WARS and they hear that theme - terrific! A whole injection of vitality into classic movie writing. (John Williams: STAR WARS. RSO 800 096-2).

"Ennio Morricone gets mixed reviews. That little whistle theme for THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY was so haunting. I know certain composers in Hollywood who laugh and say, 'What the hell is that?' I say, 'That's simplicity and brilliance. It's less being more.' ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA is a fantastic score. Morricone is an extraordinary talent to be reckoned with. (Ennio Morricone: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY and ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA. Liberty CDP 748408-2 and Mercury 822 334-2).

"If I were to pick one Bond score it would have to be GOLDFINGER. It was a question of finding a style. From everybody's point of view, not just musical, it came together. It was the true birth and it had a freshness and energy. From the musical point of view it's like grand Mickey Mouse opera. The theme was the craziest song ever. Shirley Bassey didn't know what it was about but she sang it with such total conviction that she convinced the rest of the world." (John Barry: GOLDFINGER. EMI CDP-7-95345-2).

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DAVID TOOP is a freelance writer for 'THE FACE', 'ARENA' and 'THE TIMES'.