More Morricone

A brilliantly curated trove of the sound track master's lesser known works

By Peter Margasak

Ennio Morricone turned 77 last month, but age apparently hasn’t slowed him down much: according to the Internet Movie Database he’s written scores for two feature-length films and five TV programs that came out this year, and four more movies he’s worked on are slated for release in 2006. I’ve yet to encounter a complete list, but he’s quite likely the most prolific film composer in history, scoring somewhere between 450 and 500 movies since 1961.

More important, he’s one of the few film composers worth listening to outside the context of a movie: when’s the last time you yearned to hear a soundtrack CD by John Williams or Danny Elfman? The vast majority of films have a score or incidental music of some kind, but only a handful of visionaries like Bernard Herrmann and Nino Rota have achieved legendary status by reinforcing and enhancing the vision of a filmmaker while also creating music that works without the visuals.

Even if you don’t know his name, you know Morricone’s music—his work for spaghetti westerns directed by Sergio Leone and others is now so familiar it’s become the stuff of parody. The twangy electric guitar and spooky whistling (both performed by longtime Morricone sidekick Alessandro Alessandroni), the lonesome harmonica stabs associated with Charles Bronson’s character in Once Upon a Time in the West, the fake ay-ye-ay-ay coyote cry—all have become signifiers for hard-boiled characters from the old west. But that’s only a tiny proportion of his vast repertoire. He’s written more conventionally orchestral scores for Days of Heaven, The Mission, The Untouchables, and Bugsy—all of which earned Oscar nominations. And perhaps unsurprisingly given the sheer size of his output, he’s created music for loads of sleepers, clunkers, and cult items in a variety of forms: documentaries, spy flicks, horror movies, and giallo films—a genre of stylized Italian thrillers. The movies themselves might be subpar, but Morricone’s done excellent, highly distinctive work on them, creating music rife with daring experiments in melody, structure, and instrumentation.

For years reissues of Morricone’s soundtracks to these lesser-known films has been limited to imports where no effort was made to separate his most original pieces from more functional themes. Crime and Dissonance (Ipecac), a two-CD set compiled by Alan Bishop of the Sun City Girls, changes all that. The carefully assembled compilation focuses on the darkest, most experimental moments from the soundtracks to Italian films made between 1968 and ’74 (and one from ’81). The music’s had a clear influence on the folks who put the new CD together: Ipecac is co-owned by Bay Area nutjob Mike Patton (Mr. Bungle, Fantomas), who shares Morricone’s taste for stylistic experiments. The result is a brilliant and beautifully packaged trove of the sound track master’s lesser known works.
patchworks; the brief liner notes were written by avant-jazz icon John Zorn, who delivered a feverish take on Morricone’s compositions on his 1985 album *The Big Gundown*, wildly magnifying his herky-jerk sensibility. Morricone’s had a keen interest in jazz throughout his career; in the 60s he played trumpet in the long-running radical Italian improv outfit Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza, which performs two of the pieces on the compilation. “Seguita” and “Folle Folle” have different percussive frameworks—the former is loose, the latter more swinging—but both use wah-wah guitar, sour trumpet blurts, bowed bass scrapes, and scratched piano strings to pull against the rhythm, creating an exquisite tension. Jazz is the touchstone in all these works, which are often decidedly creepy—there are patches of free improvisation and tightly deployed swing passages, with music in between that seems deliberately designed to unnerved you. The brief “Studio di Colore” sounds like the Gil Evans Orchestra wandered into a western, the dark brass harmonies turning its cool jazz murky.

Miles Davis’s electric period had a strong influence: there are loads of squealing and distorted electric guitars, rolling and funky bass lines, and Harmon-muted trumpet cries. But instead of letting the music settle into extended grooves, Morricone keeps the pieces terse and frequently juxtaposes other sounds: dissonant piano clusters, female heavy breathing that could be heard as sexual ecstasy or sheer terror. His compositions for the tawdry, violent giallo films have the familiar hallmarks of horror soundtracks—slashing strings à la *Psycho*, the harrowing church organ featured in countless creature features—but Morricone marvelously extends that tradition, adding atonal string arrangements, lurching rhythms, wordless female vocals, and splattery electric keyboards. These pieces were designed for a specific purpose—to creep out a moviegoer, usually—but many of them succeed in their own right thanks to this experimental instrumentation. “Attratto 3,” from *Veruschka (Poesia di una Donna)* continued on page 36
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Donna), a film about the ’60s fashion model, mixes faux-ethnic percussion, woozy wordless vocals, and damped marimba melodies; on “Ric Happening,” sleepy koto notes and haggard bamboo-flute toots drift over blocky percussion; and on “Rapimento in Campo Aperto” an almost comic-sounding Jew’s harp bounces over sinister, sawing strings, but instead of easing the tension it seems to add another level of madness and fury. On “Memento,” snippets of a romantic orchestral work seemingly played through a cheap speaker are layerd over dissonant string arrangements, and the effect of them fading in and out of the mix is downright nightmarish.

There are a few sweeter moments, but they rarely work in a straightforward manner. “Ricreazione Divertita” morphs from a delicate music-box melody limned by a lyric violin to a snippet of a woman singing a cappella to some ’60s-style dance-pop; less than two minutes in you get a stately string procession alternating with a stiff voice-and-drum marching rhythm, then a reprise of the a cappella section. “Ninna Nanna per Adulteri” features a gorgeous wordless female vocal floating amid lean but pretty strings and sparse glockenspiel, but its singsong repetition begins to sound ominous over time. After a dozen spins I’m still struck by the originality and dynamic sound of the comp as a whole. Bishop’s an odd but effective curator: he doesn’t adhere to any chronological or stylistic organizational model, instead he sequences the material in the way that flows most seamlessly, and it’s as if he’s created a new sound track for the greatest movie ever made.

Nanna
If nothing else, you have to admire *Dessa Rose* for the risks it takes. Composer Stephen Flaherty and librettist Lynn Ahrens have adapted an unsparring 1986 novel by Sherley Anne Williams, who weaves together the stories of two real-life people from the antebellum south, one a pregnant slave, the other an abandoned wife. This is hardly the sort of musical popular now in our culture, which favors thinly plotted jukebox revues a la *Mamma Mia!* and shows based on popular comic movies or cult favorites like *Hairspray*, *The Producers*, and *Spamalot*. And Apple Tree Theatre has made a brave choice by producing a script at the holidays that deals with rape, torture, murder, and all the other atrocities of the “peculiar institution.”

For her novel, Williams drew on the story of a female slave in Kentucky who in 1829 was sentenced to be hanged for leading an uprising on a coffle, a chain gang of slaves headed to market, but was spared until she could deliver her baby—a valuable asset, of course. Williams imagines that this woman escaped and met a white woman who turned her North Carolina farm into a sanctuary for runaway slaves in 1830, after her husband left her. The novelist not only indicts slavery (duh) but looks unblinkingly at the roots of America’s unease with interracial romance and at white writers’ tendency to speak for their black subjects. Like the novel, the musical includes a smug white journalist, Adam Nehemiah, who’s writing a book on slave rebellions and tries to make the imprisoned Dessa Rose talk by implying that her story will be forgotten unless she cooperates. Perhaps “bloody tales are good for sales,” as Nehemiah says. But something of the novel’s wispiness is lost in translation to the stage even though Ahrens and

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**DESSA ROSE**

**APPLE TREE THEATRE**

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