

THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL

2014 marks the centennial of legendary producer/director Robert Wise, who was born in Winchester, Indiana on September 10, 1914. Within the Hollywood industry, he is fondly remembered as a mentor to many (including this writer) as well as for his dedicated leadership of the Directors Guild of America and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. To the rest of the world he is the renowned editor of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* and the producer/director of the big screen (and Best Picture and Director Oscar-winning) musical versions of *West Side Story* and *The Sound of Music*. His 40-picture filmography also boasts, arguably, the best boxing movie, best submarine movie and best haunted house movie ever made. Science fiction can certainly be added to the list of genres that he mastered.

Wise's three forays into the realm of the imaginative share a common theme: how shortsightedness about our own technology might eventually be our planet's downfall. *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* is all about advanced computer technology threatening to overtake our humanity—a theme even more resonant today than when the picture was released in 1979. Earlier in that decade came *The Andromeda Strain*, the groundbreaking first adaptation of a Michael Crichton story which, like *Westworld* and *Jurassic Park* after it, is set in an environment that is supposedly controlled by sophisticated technology... but where chaos nonetheless results. The threat is a lethal and potentially pandemic virus that arrives on a fallen satellite—a subject that also remains eerily topical. In retrospect, 1951's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* stands as a precursor to the overall concept of *Star Trek* as envisioned by its creator Gene Roddenberry. It considers whether the human race is (or ever will be) ready to take its place among a peaceful community of intelligent life in the cosmos. As with Wise's two later science fiction movies, it is no less relevant an issue to ponder today.

To say that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* is a benchmark of its genre is an understatement. Along with *The Thing From Another World*, released earlier that same year, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* ushered in a steady flow of pictures where flying saucers and monsters reflected the Cold War paranoia of the atomic age. But Wise's film stands above them all. It's no surprise that every fantasy filmmaker—including Steven Spielberg, George Lucas, John Carpenter, Peter Jackson, James Cameron and Christopher Nolan—has cited the influence of this picture upon their own. What Wise responded to was a straightforward, tight screenplay by Edmund H. North, adapted from a story by Harry Bates, and the fact that it focused on relationships rather than spaceships. Yet it is quintessential science fiction and brilliantly cinematic. The sequence that gives the movie its title is a montage that combines terror with irony and wit, executed with a panache

that reveals Welles' influence upon the director.

Deserving of equal credit for the power of the sequence (or is it the lack thereof?) and of the entire film, is, of course, the music score by Bernard Herrmann. It cannot be a coincidence that the composer's first feature film project was *Citizen Kane*, a spare yet impactful score that works hand in hand with the editorial brilliance implemented by Wise under Welles' guidance. Undoubtedly the experience of *The Magnificent Ambersons*—on which Wise was called upon to shoot additional material and complete editing after Welles' dismissal—solidified his admiration for Herrmann. When *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was offered to Wise, it was no doubt a thrill that Twentieth Century Fox, at his suggestion, assigned Herrmann to the project.

Just as Wise would be primarily associated with his hit musicals, Herrmann would ultimately be remembered mostly for his collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock. But his score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (the first he composed upon moving to Hollywood from his native New York) stands among his most memorable achievements and may possibly be his most innovative. At the fore, of course, is the use of the theremin (two, actually, one "high" and one "low," played by Samuel Hoffmann and Paul Shure), which produces its oscillating tones by interrupting electrical waves with hand movements. It is an appropriate marriage of the electronic and the organic that stands as a musical representation of the themes Wise would address in all three of his science fiction films (Jerry Goldsmith's use of the "blaster beam" serves a similar and equally memorable function in *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*). While also notably used by other composers (such as Miklós Rózsa in his scores for *The Lost Weekend* and Hitchcock's *Spellbound*), the theremin still instantly evokes the otherworldly. That is entirely due to the lasting impact of Herrmann's score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still*.

In contrast to Herrmann's famous strings-only score for Hitchcock's *Psycho*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* utilizes none—unless one counts the meticulous punctuations of harp, piano (two of them) and cinema's first use of the electric violin (performed by Felix Slatkin). Also absent are woodwinds, a choice that allows the score's evocative brass clusters to take center stage. The sound field is further dominated by the versatile resonances of the Fox scoring stage's Wurlitzer pipe organ, offset by percussion instruments sitting in the extreme high and low ends of the frequency spectrum.

All elements merge in the aforementioned montage, which adds yet another innovation—the playing of percussive stingers in reverse. In 1951 this was accomplished by running tapes backwards and re-recording them. Today one

only has to press a few buttons. That the interface aboard Klaatu's spaceship still seems more technologically advanced than today's computers exemplifies how the film was ahead of its time in every way. And if one needs more convincing, one need only consider how three ascending intervals in Herrmann's main theme for the film mirror the famous introduction of Richard Strauss' "Also Sprach Zarathustra"... seventeen years before Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* gave that piece an irreversible association with outer space. Herrmann got there first!

I had the honor of working with Robert Wise during the last ten years of his life and was privileged to accompany him to a screening of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* in Newport Beach, California on the occasion of the film's 50th anniversary. In attendance was Mrs. Norma Shepherd Herrmann and actor Billy Gray, who played the role of young Bobby Benson in the film. It was an evening to remember, with the packed Lido Theatre reverberating with music that defines the science fiction genre as well as brilliantly scoring Mr. Wise's classic. Despite good-naturedly humorous moments of datedness—doctors lighting cigarettes while marveling at Klaatu's 130-year life expectancy, for example—the film seemed amazingly relevant, its warning against humanity's propagation of war even more resonant just then—two weeks after the events of 9/11.

The score for *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was first released on CD in late 1993. Indeed it was one of the first titles that producer and historian Nick Redman tackled when he began Fox's music restoration program. Many years later I had the opportunity to undertake a fresh restoration in the 96k/24bit high resolution format, the result of which is presented in this reissue along with all previously available bonus material. Working with the recording reveals that the techniques employed on the Fox scoring stage were just as cutting edge as the music itself. As with numerous other scores in the so-called "optical era" (basically everything before the changeover to 35mm magnetic film with *The Robe* in 1953), *The Day the Earth Stood Still* survives in separate "long shot" and "close shot" microphone perspectives, allowing for the creation of a legitimate stereo sound field. With this score in particular, additional flexibility is possible thanks to the separately layered theremin and "stinger" overlays. The result is a presentation that remains as dynamic and timeless as the movie it accompanies. Once more, let us listen. The message is as clear as ever.

— Mike Matessino