

Pirates

“You son of a double-eyed whore from the reeking gutters of Rotterdam!”

It took Disney's 2003 film *Pirates of the Caribbean* before scurvy pirates and their adventures would become a viable and bankable genre for the 2000s. Before that, there had been quite a few attempts to bring the pirate genre back all throughout the 1980s and 1990s – some were true pirate films, some had pirates amongst its players, and some had pirates of other natures. Most were not successful; some, where the pirates weren't the point, had more success, but most of the true pirate pictures came and went without lighting the box-office on fire.

Roman Polanski had long wanted to make a pirate film; a grand, lush, fun pirate film like those he'd seen as a child. He and collaborator Gerard Brach (with whom Polanski had collaborated on *Repulsion*, *Cul-de-Sac*, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, *What?*, *The Tenant*, *Tess*, and others that would come later), wrote the script after Polanski had finished with *Chinatown*. The film was set up at Paramount and was meant to star Jack Nicholson as Captain Red and Polanski himself as his first-mate, The Frog. But Nicholson's excessive salary demands put the project on ice. It would not be until a decade later that the film would finally be made, this time with Walter Matthau as Captain Red. The budget, which had been \$15 million while the project was at Paramount, escalated to \$40 million. A full-sized working galleon (albeit with a motor and steel hull), christened the Neptune, was built for the film in Tunisia, near the film studios of the producer, Tarak Ben Ammar.

The story begins with the grizzled pirate, Captain Red, and his first-mate The Frog, stranded on a raft in the middle of the sea in the middle of nowhere. Starving, Captain Red cracks and chases Frog around the raft trying to eat him. Just in time, a Spanish galleon appears and they are rescued – but not really. They are immediately put into slavery in service to the Spaniards in charge. From there, it's business as usual for a pirate film – a splendid mutiny, a treasure to attain (a golden Aztec throne), a beautiful damsel who's the niece of the Spanish governor and with whom The Frog is immediately smitten, swordfights, reversals, explosions, captures and escapes, cutthroats, and

dining on rat, all presented with panache and occasionally very dark humor.

The film premiered at the 1986 Cannes Film Festival, after which it opened in the United States to critical disdain and box-office apathy. Grossing only two million dollars, the film was simply not what audiences of the day wanted and it disappeared quickly. Even so, it did manage to pick up one Oscar nomination for Best Costume Design (Anthony Powell). It vanished for a while, but thanks to home video and cable showings over the years, people have come to appreciate its many pleasures, including Matthau's terrific performance, the sometimes-mordant black humor, the gorgeous visuals (photography by Witold Sobocinski), and Polanski's excellent and robust direction. And, above all, the wonderful, colorful, lush, exciting, and altogether beautiful score of Philippe Sarde.

Polanski had begun what would be a wonderful collaboration with Sarde on *The Tenant*, which was followed by Sarde's incandescent score for *Tess* (for which Sarde was nominated for an Academy Award) and then *Pirates*. Born in 1945, Philippe Sarde began scoring films in 1970 with Claude Sautet's *Les Choses de la Vie* (he would go on to score many films for Sautet). From then on, he became one of France's busiest and best composers. Right from the get-go the Sarde sound was instantly recognizable – his wonderful gift for memorable and melodic themes, his ability to do just about any genre, but in his own unique style. His film scores throughout the 1970s were some of that decades' best. Soon thereafter, Hollywood discovered him, and he did many terrific scores for US films, such as *Ghost Story*, *The Manhattan Project*, *Lovesick*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Music Box*, along with an impressive list of French films and films from other countries. He continues to be prolific and that Sarde sound continues unabated in all its glorious beauty, whether romantic, rueful, humorous, atonal, bluesy, or whatever mood is called for. He is a film score treasure as priceless as the Aztec golden throne in *Pirates*.

As Roman Polanski said in his note about the composer that accompanied the original CD release, “Philippe Sarde is not only a composer – he is a filmmaker. He adores movies and knows all aspects of filmmaking from beginning to end.”

About the scoring of the film, Polanski said, “As it turns out, *Pirates* was quite a difficult picture to score. Philippe and I began our discussions about this film long before it came into existence. Even then we realized there were many directions we could go and for a long time we didn't know which way to turn. Over the years we came to the conclusion that *Pirates* is really an homage to the old swashbuckler films. I did not intend to make a spoof and therefore I did not ask Philippe to spoof the music, though we both wanted to make references to the period and the atmosphere of the old Hollywood action flicks. I wanted a music that would underline certain actions and gags, and yet I didn't want a “Mickey Mouse” type of score. I wanted to avoid a caricature.” Sarde delivered exactly what Polanski wanted and an absolutely brilliant score.

Pirates was originally released on LP and then on CD by Varese Sarabande. Their CD release was quite a bit longer than the LP. That release was oddly sequenced, as a quick perusal of the cue titles will tell you. Most likely, they probably wanted to front-load the CD with adventure cues, but that doesn't reflect the film at all, and the music doesn't tell the story as it does in the film, with its natural ebbs and flows, and valleys and peaks. We were going to leave it that way until we actually arranged the cue titles so that they followed the film's story, and once we heard that we knew that we wanted to present it as Sarde wrote it. And interestingly, we later found out that's exactly how the original LP presented the score – the CD mixed it all up, but if you look at the LP cue order you'll see it's all in film order, sans the music that was added for the CD.

We've completely remastered the sound, and additionally we've included two bonus cues: the main and end titles as presented in the film, taken from the beautiful-sounding foreign DVD release.

Matey, they don't seem to write scores like this anymore, so it's a real treat to have Philippe Sarde's great swashbuckling music back on CD, sounding better than ever with enough buckle and swash for a dozen films.

— Bruce Kimmel