Fredric March was no stranger to makeup – after all, he'd starred in the classic 1932 version of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

And one of the reasons he wanted to do A Christmas Carol was to create the makeup for Scrooge, which he did in conjunction with makeup man Carl Herlinger. His interpretation of Ebenezer Scrooge is nothing like Alistair Sim's or Albert Finney's or even George C. Scott's. Part of the reason for his approach to the character had to do with the Reader's Digest approach to the script – the story had to be told in fifty-two minutes, so Scrooge's transformation happens much faster than in the book or the many film and TV-movie adaptations. March is marvelous in the role – very believable, and his journey from bitter curmudgeon to someone filled with Christmas spirit is a good deal of fun to watch. Basil Rathbone only has one scene as Marley, but he's his always-wonderful self.

The rest of the cast was serviceable – Ray Middleton as Fred/the Ghost of Christmas Present, Bob Sweeney as Bob Cratchit (Mr. Sweeney would have a Herrmann connection in his future – he appears in Hitchcock's Marnie), Christopher Cook as Tiny Tim, and the lovely Sally Fraser as Belle/ The Spirit of Christmas Past. Also appearing as the Cratchit children are Janine Perreau (who, the year before, had appeared in an unforgettable small role in the classic sci-fi film, Invaders From Mars), and sisters Bonnie and Judy Franklin. One look at Bonnie and you know it's the same girl who would grow up to star in the CBS series, One Day At A Time. The singing ensemble was portrayed by The Roger Wagner Chorale, and the sprightly choreography was by Donald Saddler.

The show did very well in its premiere showing – well enough that it had Christmas repeats for the next two years. Weekly Variety thought it was the show for which Shower of Stars would be remembered, and called it “superlative TV.” They called Anderson's lyrics “poetic” and his adaptation “stunning.” Best of all, the reviewer called Herrmann's score “majestic” (while misspelling his name, just as Chrysler had on the show's full-color ad). And they praised Ralph Levy's direction. The show was nominated for four Emmy awards – Best Individual Program, Best Actor In A Single Performance (Fredric March), Best Art Direction – Filmed Show, and a nomination for Herrmann's score (his only Emmy nod). The only win was Art Direction.

Herrmann’s music is indeed wonderful. His underscoring is in the classic Herrmann mode (Herrmann conducted the 40-piece orchestra), and his songs are quite delightful and infectiously melodic. I could delve deeply into the music and throw in words like modal, contrapuntal, ostinato, descending strings with rising flutes, but, you know, I’ve never been one for armchair analysis, and Mr. Herrmann’s music speaks beautifully for itself.

One year after A Christmas Carol, Herrmann was back writing another Christmas Special, this time for CBS’ anthology series, The General Electric Theater, which was hosted by future President-to-be, Ronald Reagan. A Child Is Born was an adaptation of Stephen Vincent Benet’s blank-verse play. Unlike Shower of Stars, General Electric Theater was a thirty-minute show, which meant twenty-six minutes of actual show. A Child Is Born featured two stars of the Metropolitan Opera, Nadine Conner and Theodor Uppman, along with the wonderful actor, Victor Jory. According to the TV Guide synopsis, the musical drama (they really stayed away from calling it a short opera) told the story of Mary’s arrival at the inn. Her coming is viewed through the eyes of the innkeeper and his wife. The director was Don Medford, and, once again, The Roger Wagner Chorale did ensemble duties.

The show was broadcast “live” on December 25, 1955 opposite NBC’s re-airing of Amahl And The Night Visitors (and a week after the second airing of Herrmann’s A Christmas Carol). This time, Herrmann received over the title billing (“A musical adaptation by Bernard Herrmann of A Child Is Born”). Unfortunately, the show was not well received, with Variety’s review echoing the critical and audience sentiment – “…a poor choice for television in the manner in which it was presented. Most of the drama was in one set, there were only three principal characters, and the religioso was immoble instead of inspiring.” The critic went on to praise the singing of Conner and Uppman and the performance of Victor Jory. The Variety review closed with, “Bernard Herrmann’s original score and adaptation were not distinguished, ditto the direction by Don Medford.”

The show received only one repeat, on December 23, 1956. Herrmann’s score is hardly “not distinguished,” at least not in my opinion. It has beautiful sung passages, and his underscoring, as always, is not only distinguished, but masterful and typically Herrmannesque. Herrmann would, of course, go on to write a great many more television scores for shows like The Twilight Zone, The Alfred Hitchcock Hour, The Virginian, Have Gun – Will Travel, as well as a whole slew of cues for the CBS Music Library. He vanished the same care on his TV work that he did in his film work, and these two Christmas specials, with their underscore and songs, are a particular pleasure to bring to CD.

A note about the CD: These two scores were mastered from the best sources available. No known master tapes survive on either title. A Child Is Born had a promotional 10-inch record issued, and an excellent copy of it was used for mastering. A Christmas Carol is more interesting – there was no promotional LP issued. In fact, there was nothing. In the mid-1970s, I came into possession of what was probably the only surviving set of acetates for the show. I had a 15ips copy made from the acetates, and it was that tape that was used for this mastering. While our mastering engineer has done an incredible job of making these sound as good as they’re ever going to sound, please understand that the sound is archival in nature and that there are occasional (but not many) anomalies in a handful of tracks.

— Bruce Kimmel