

The Online Magazine
of Motion Picture
and Television
Music Appreciation



film score daily

CD Reviews: The Punisher and Du Barry Was A Lady

The Punisher ****

CARLO SILIOTTO

La-La Land LLLCD 1020

30 tracks - 65:37

The most interesting thing about *The Punisher* is that it doesn't contain any standard action music at all. Siliotto mentions in his liner notes how happy he was that writer/director Jonathan Hensleigh supplied him with great characters, and his music reflects just that -- character. The first track's moody trumpet solo announces that this music doesn't intend to go for the throat, instead aiming for the heart.

The sheer amount of thematic writing Siliotto packs into this score is an absolute joy; there are roughly five themes in total. One for Punishment, one for Remembering, and three slithering ideas for the three villains. The Punishment theme gets the most treatments, opening the album with a rendition that makes it sound similar to Zimmer's trumpet work in *The Rock*. In other places it completely escapes this similarity, played quickly in staccato bursts it sounds more like James Horner ("She Took the Train/Punishment" is a good example). This theme stays melancholy the entire way through, only finally becoming vaguely heroic at the end ("The Skull").

The Remembering theme gets the standard piano orchestration, but what distances it, as well as the rest of the score, from other similar ideas is Siliotto's approach. His background in predominantly foreign films is a godsend, because he doesn't approach this the same way a typical American composer would. There is very little percussion, and the melody stays right up in your face the entire time. It doesn't interfere with the dialogue, but plays alongside it, underscoring the emotions. It's prominently mixed in the film as well, unlike the murky string work or percussion samples that hide in the background in many similar films. Siliotto's music also carries a slight tinge of Spanish flavor that isn't apparent in the orchestration, yet casually surfaces as the album progresses.

Siliotto's choice to include a saxophone in the score especially piqued my curiosity, because this instrument often signals the essence of cheesiness. Surprisingly, he manages to wrangle some evocative moments out of it, underscoring the evil Mrs. Saint. Tied to the very instigation of the revenge against Castle, she gets her own theme, which frequently plays against Howard Saint's menacing piano and string melody. Evil henchman Quentin Glass also gets his own theme, another slow, minor key piece so subtle it isn't even immediately recognizable as an actual theme.

Before walking into the theater, I never expected *The Punisher* to sound like this. I feared repetitive percussion. I feared techno. I feared the new world (though some of Siliotto's string passages coincidentally sound like Don Davis' *Matrix* work!). Instead, I was treated to a rich, melodic score that harkens back to yesteryear and continually soars to the forefront of the mix. La-la Land's presentation also impresses, as it includes a whopping 60 minutes of score. Only one corny pop song finds its way on the album, as does a selection from "Rigoletto," (used as underscore during a fight scene). Rarely does a score get treatment this good, and even more rarely does it actually deserve it. -- Luke Goljan

Du Barry Was A Lady **

PORTER, EDENS, HARBURG

Rhino Handmade

23 tracks - 78:27

Another sterling example of how Hollywood has an uncanny knack for getting it wrong, the 1943 film treatment of Cole Porter's 1939 stage smash *Du Barry Was A Lady* really lost something in the translation to the screen. For starters, belter extraordinaire Ethel Merman may have had the rafters ringing at the 46th Street Theatre on Broadway but by the time cameras rolled, the Merm's powerhouse pipes were sacrificed in favor of Lucille Ball, a comedic genius to be sure but no great shakes in the high notes department. Arthur Freed, M-G-M's legendary producer of top notch musicals, seemed intent on molding Ball into Metro's answer to Betty Hutton, Paramount's raucous and bankable comedienne. For *Du Barry*, Ball was newly coiffed and her tresses tinted a striking henna hue that studio stylist Sydney Guilaroff christened "Tango Red." As a result, the future Mrs. Lucy Ricardo would never photograph more ravishingly than she did in the resplendent Technicolor process. Still, an elaborate musical seemed an odd choice for a performer far more comfortable with pratfalls than Porter tunes.

The incomparable Bert Lahr and Ronald Graham ("The Boys From Syracuse") were lauded for their performances during the triumphant theatrical run of *Du Barry* but they were replaced on film by Red Skelton and Gene Kelly respectively. Like Lucy, Skelton and Kelly were being groomed for superstardom by M-G-M and the revue-like qualities of the project were deemed ideal for showcasing their distinctive talents. With a youthful Zero Mostel, Virginia O'Brien and Tommy Dorsey and His Orchestra stirred into the mix, *Du Barry* boasted the most eclectic movie cast ever assembled until *Myra Breckinridge* arrived nearly 30 years later (speaking of Mae West vehicles, scenarist Herbert Fields first offered *Du Barry* to the inimitable West as an original screenplay specially tailored to her lascivious persona, which the star promptly rejected as unsuitable.)

Another obstacle Irving Brecher faced in adapting the story for the screen was the frothy innocuousness of the book by Fields and B.G. DeSylva: A nightclub cloakroom attendant (Skelton) covets comely headliner May Daly (Ball) who only has eyes for a nimble chorus boy (Kelly). During a delirious episode, the attendant imagines himself as Louis XIV, wooing the

scandalous coquette Madame Du Barry in overdressed 18th century Versailles. Not exactly *Porgy and Bess*, but thanks to Porter's reputation and Merman's fiercely dedicated fan base, it racked up 408 performances on the Great White Way.

This limited edition Turner Classic Movies Music/Rhino Handmade version of the *Du Barry* soundtrack offers knockout fidelity but immaculate audio is beside the point when the material being presented is almost uniformly uninspired. This is one movie musical with a notable absence of vocals. Merman's spotlight numbers "When Love Beckoned," "Come On In" and "Give Him the Oo-La-La" were either relegated to instrumentals or dropped entirely by the Freed Unit. Several other Porter compositions were tossed overboard and substituted with fresh concoctions by Burton Lane, Roger Edens and Ralph Freed. Considering the talent quotient involved, it's surprising that none of these newfangled arrangements amounted to anything memorable.

In fact, the *Du Barry* cinematic score only ventures into sublime territory once as Kelly serenades Lucy with "Do I Love You?," one of Porter's most tender and satisfying ballads. The only other keeper is Dorsey's "I'm Getting Sentimental Over You/We'll Get It" medley, which is presented in its entirety on this soundtrack release. Following *Du Barry* are five tracks from Metro's *Meet The People* (1944), which reunited Ball and O'Brien and added Lahr and Dick Powell to the marquee. The musical content is as unimpressive as the batch of *Du Barry* misfires and these latter selections are also marred by intrusive hiss and other auditory imperfections. Taken in tandem, this is a disappointing double feature for M-G-M musical aficionados. -- Mark Griffin

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