

Alexander Courage

and the Music of "Star Trek"



COURAGE PHOTO: COURTESY ALEXANDER COURAGE

Alexander Courage, the man who filled the final frontier with music.

In 1965, producer Gene Roddenberry needed theme music for his new, space adventure TV series, *Star Trek*. To compose the theme, as well as the rest of the score for the pilot episode, he sought composer/orchestrator/arranger Alexander Courage.

Now, 20 years later, Courage's original score has been released by GNP Crescendo Records. The composer is astounded and flattered to find himself still acclaimed for something which he then considered to be "just another job."

Music is a difficult subject to discuss. "That's one of the problems you always have with producers," Courage says. "How are you going to tell them about what you're going to do? If you're the art director, you can make a little sketch and show it to a producer so he can say, 'That's fine, but I think it ought to be over there.' You can't do that with music, because although they used to ask you to play the theme on the piano, it really doesn't come out right. How can you really tell how it's going to sound?"

Courage describes the step-by-step procedure in scoring a TV show. "First, if it's your show, you go in and look at that particular episode," he explains. "This is the way I used to do it with *Star Trek*. Later on, when I did *The Waltons*, they would send me a video cassette, and I would do the whole thing at home. It was much more convenient. But the normal procedure is to go in and look at the show and 'spot' it—determine where the music starts and where it stops.

RANDY & JEAN-MARC LOFFICIER, veteran STARLOG correspondents, examined the GoBots in issue #106.

The veteran composer remembers scoring those first adventures as the *U.S.S. Enterprise* expored where no man had gone before.

By RANDY & JEAN-MARC LOFFICIER

"You sit there with the music editor and decide where the music will start and stop, having seen the episode. He puts a mark on the frame for each point. Then, if there's anything in particular that you want, that you want to make sure is timed, you tell the editor. Later, you'll get a complete set of breakdown sheets, down to the tenth of a second, listing every piece of dialogue, every camera movement, every cut, every dissolve, everything. You pick out what you want to emphasize, or where you want to change mood, or whatever you want to do, and you make a little circle or square around that timing, and then you begin writing."

Score Trek

Curiously, Alexander scored only five episodes of *Star Trek*, and then left the show, a decision he still regrets. "It was one of the silliest things I did in my life," he says.

"I told Gene Roddenberry that I was very sorry, but I really couldn't stay with the show, because I had a much more important thing to do at 20th Century Fox—I was the associate music director on *Doctor Dolittle*, and that was the biggest, most expensive, most elaborate musical ever made at that point. I had associate credit before, but never on something that big. So, I said, 'I'm sorry, but I can't stay with *Star Trek*! It was very stupid of me, because if I do a musical, I do the musical and that's it. But if I'm the composer on a TV series, as long as that series is running, I collect royalties on it. I'm not collecting anything from *Doctor Dolittle*."

For *Star Trek*, Courage turned out as much as 45 minutes of music in a week and he's aware of the major differences between composing for movies and television. "First of all, there's a great deal more money involved in a film, so therefore, there's a great deal more time," he remarks. "There's more time to write it, to spot it, to record it. You don't have another film immediately, so you have a chance to go up to re-recording to find out what's happening to your music against sound effects and the dialogue. On a movie, you would be writing two minutes a day. And

I was turning out 45 a week on *Star Trek*. So, you have to write. Can't give it much thought. You just get the notes down quickly and make everything come out right."

He designed the *Star Trek* theme as a very conceived main title, deriving its power from musical cliches, evoking intrepid adventures and a sense of "space-ness" at the same time. "Gene Roddenberry told me he didn't want me to write space music," Courage recalls. "He wanted it to be an adventure show—which is exactly what John Williams did for George Lucas' *Star Wars*. That's an adventure score, it's not so much a space score. There's an old, old song I knew when I was a child, called 'Beyond the Blue Horizon,' a long kind of tune. In the old days, on radio, they played it with fast accompaniment behind it. So, I thought of something like that, something with a long, long melody, with a lot of motion underneath it. Then, I thought, 'What do I do about depicting space musically?' I thought long leaps and long scales going up, up, up...."

"There are cliches involved in this—the cliches everybody knows. You have an idea in your head what space music sounds like and what adventure music sounds like. Otherwise, if you heard some adventure music, you wouldn't realize what it is. Space music has something sort of eerie, funny things which give you the idea of being in a void. Adventure music is obviously full of punctuation and fanfares."

Courage's use of the word "cliche" is based upon the fact that many of today's great, rousing scores are often imitative of yesterday's sometimes lesser known, but vibrant music. It takes a knowledgeable composer to trace these relations. "That's why I'm talking about cliches," he explains. "Take the great march from *Star Wars*, for example—there was a marvelous march by Eric Korngold in the old days at Warner Bros. which sounded a little like it. That's the cliche. The idea is to know how to change it and make it even better than it was the first time. Korngold didn't invent it—he copied everything from Richard Strauss, who copied everything from Richard



When Courage scored Captin Pike's (Jeffrey Hunter) pilot voyage into "The Cage," he thought of it as nothing more than "just another job."

Wagner—a nice little line that goes all the way through music."

In the case of the *Star Trek* score, Courage was left to his own devices as soon as Roddenberry decided that his composer was on the right track. "Once he realized that I wasn't going to give him any problems, everything was fine," Courage remembers. "He was there for each recording, nodding. The first pilot, 'The Menagerie' was 80 minutes long—and in 1965, it was the most expensive pilot ever made for an hour show. It was considered to be extremely important, very expensive, and I had suggested that we try something different. When the crew landed on Talos, I thought that all of the Talosian sound effects should be done with a musical base. So, we went in with about five people one evening, and we made the elevator doors and the wind—all of it was really music which was then played with to make it into another sound. But it wasn't just another sound effect, it was a *musical* sound effect.

"We had a couple electronic instruments. Twenty years ago, there were only a few. The YC3 Yamaha was just coming in. But, you see, that's what Gene *didn't* want to hear in

the theme. He didn't want all that space stuff, he wanted macho action. The second pilot, which was the one that sold, was made more like a Western with fights and all."

The "Venus Dance" theme, a musical highlight of "The Menagerie," has a definite Arabic tonality. "It's the same old thing," says the composer. "I keep telling my class at USC that you have to be eclectic. There's a young disc jockey who used to be on an FM station in Washington state. He called me about once a year. And before they discovered the music at Paramount, which had been lost for so long, he kept telling me, 'Why don't you write a suite? Be sure to include 'Venus Dance,' because that's what everybody always talks about.' What you hear in the new recording is the whole thing. I put a little bit of 'Venus' in the suite."

Star Track

Courage's music was later recycled in other *Star Trek* episodes (most noticeably in *Amok Time*) which he did *not* actually score, a result of a practice called "tracking." "In those days, there was no union contract concerning that subject, but now you *can't* track shows



Kirk (William Shatner) and that "space geisha" Yeoman Rand (Grace Lee Whitney) stand transfixed upon hearing the news that Courage chose *Dr. Dolittle* over the *Enterprise*.

anymore, unless there's an absolute emergency. Back then, they would write about a third of the music for a series, maybe a little bit more. In a 24-episode season, 10 or 12 shows would be written, and the rest, tracked.

"Tracking means that they have stuff which has already been recorded—it's on film. The music cutter has it in his room and he makes a log book—'danger music,' 'movement music,' 'adventure music,' 'space music,' whatever—and if he needs a little bit of something, he puts it on his machine and tries to make it come out right with the picture. They'll dial it in and out in re-recording so you don't notice it too much. But that doesn't happen anymore."

Much to some fans' surprise, Courage had

STAR TREK TV SERIES PHOTOS: COPYRIGHT 1966, 1967, 1968 PARAMOUNT PICTURES TV

little involvement in the *Star Trek* motion pictures. "I wasn't asked to score the films because, by that time, I was kind of retired," he comments. "And there's a hierarchy involved. Certain people are feature picture scorers. When the first film was about to be scored, an acquaintance asked me if I was going to do it. I told them no, Jerry Goldsmith was doing it. Then, I was asked if they were going to use my theme, and I said, 'Of course not! Jerry will write a new theme. Which is what he *should* do.' When I did *The Waltons*, which had Jerry's theme, I didn't use his theme, except for the first couple episodes. So, why should he use my theme? But, they had so much mail, apparently, that he finally called me, rather reluctantly, and asked me if I would write a 15-second version of my theme and a 30-second version. It was used

Spock (Leonard Nimoy, left) and Sulu (George Takei) charted a course to "Where No Man Has Gone Before," accompanied by Courage's original score.



somewhere in the picture. Of course, James Horner [STARLOG #63] has used it in each of his films because they told him he had to, and that's all there was to it."

In addition to scoring, which is actually composing the film's music, Courage also orchestrates for two other genre melody greats, John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith (STARLOG #51). "You do everything under the sun," he says. "Some people don't in this town. Some people are just composers or arrangers or orchestrators. I've done just about everything over the years. Nelson Riddle, for instance, was an arranger, he did a background—when you take somebody's standard song and make an arrangement of it for orchestra. You add to it here, you do something to it there, you set it. You can make sketches as an arranger, but when you set the thing out for the whole orchestra, you're orchestrating.

"On almost all features, there's an orchestrator involved. I've done a lot of that for John Williams and Jerry Goldsmith. In fact, they're the only two people I work for—if they need some help. But they conduct their own music. Because of the time element involved in writing a piece of music, they're making a sketch that's almost complete enough to be copied, but not quite. The orchestrator comes in and instead of the music on this sketch here, he puts it up for the entire orchestra on a huge piece of score paper, with everybody transposed, everything exactly the way the copyist will copy it."

Among Courage's other music credits are numerous stints in episodic television, done mostly at 20th Century Fox, including such

genre series as *Lost in Space* and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*. "Lost in Space was a different sort of science fiction," he observes. "It was just a silly comedy, a family comedy with a space theme, *Dennis the Menace* with a rocket ship in the background. I also did a great deal of stuff at MGM for years, but mainly I did many, many musicals. I just had a big reunion with Andre Previn. We did at least 16 pictures together, including *My Fair Lady* and *Porgy and Bess*."

But it is *Star Trek* that has kept Courage's name in the public eye. The composer admits delight at seeing the results of a STARLOG poll which voted him in the top 10 of genre film and TV composers. "I think that's very sweet," he says. "I'm flattered. It's incredible, absolutely amazing. I've never seen anything like it. It's phenomenal what this show has done. There has never been another series like it—there are other series which came on at the same time still running occasionally, but nothing like *Star Trek*."

Now that his original score has been released by producer Neil Norman (and the composer will receive royalties from this LP), Alexander Courage is pleased. "I think it's wonderful!" he exclaims. "First of all, I have never really pushed any of this material. The tapes were there, and Neil called me and said that he would like to do something with them—it was very nice. Now, with this album, I have 17 albums at home with the *Star Trek* theme—done by Henry Mancini, the Boston Pops, the Cincinnati Pops, Maynard Ferguson, all kinds of people. It's amazing, lovely and very gratifying. And here I am sending it off again." ✨

The "Venus Dance" by Susan Oliver from "The Cage" is a fan favorite.

