

TARAS BULBA

Released a week after *Lawrence Of Arabia*, *Taras Bulba*, a rousing adventure yarn and not a thinking man's epic like *Lawrence*, didn't really have a chance with critics or audiences. Epics of that era had been massively huge but intelligent films like *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, *El Cid*, and *King Of Kings*. *Taras Bulba* must have seemed lightweight back then and it was – painted on a colorful, larger-than-life canvas, with Yul Brynner turning in a commanding performance as Taras Bulba and Tony Curtis in a charming and energetic performance as his son, Andrei. Amusingly, Curtis and Brynner were only five years apart, age-wise. The film was written by Waldo Salt and Karl Tunberg (from the novel by Nikolai Gogol), and directed by J. Lee Thompson, who'd just come off a smash hit, *The Guns of Navarone*. Unfortunately, reviews weren't kind, and the film did little business, but some of those who did see it (me being one of "those") found the film a great deal of oversized fun, enlivened especially by the absolutely brilliant score of Franz Waxman.

According to the composer's son, John, Franz Waxman inherited the assignment from Bronislau Kaper, who was busy working on the remake of *Mutiny On The Bounty*. It was fortuitous timing since Waxman had been invited by the Soviet government to conduct all the major orchestras of the USSR in six symphony concerts, and it was during that time that Waxman did his research for the score, studying the harmonic structure and colors of Russian folk music. And what a score he came up with, filled with energy and passion and gloriously robust and beautiful themes. In today's film music world, when main title music has seemingly gone the way of the dodo bird, Waxman's main title music (called "Overture") is a textbook lesson in how to grab an audience and get them in the mood for what they're about to see – it's an amazing showpiece for orchestra and as main title music it's exhilarating and breathtaking. "The Wishing Star" (lyric courtesy of Mack David) is one of Waxman's loveliest and most incandescent themes and every time it makes an appearance in the score it's completely magical. The won-

derful cue "The Ride To Dubno" is not only perfection in the film itself, but the piece has been performed in concert halls all over the world. The great Bernard Herrmann called Waxman's *Taras Bulba* "The score of a lifetime."

1962 was, for me anyway, one of the greatest years in the history of film, and it produced some of my all-time favorite scores, and *Taras Bulba* stands high on that list. Even though the competition that year was fierce, Waxman's score for *Taras Bulba* received an Academy Award nomination, and a well-deserved one it was.

Franz Waxman's Hollywood legacy looms large, having written an extraordinary number of classic scores such as *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Rebecca*, *Sunset Blvd.*, *A Place In The Sun*, *Prince Valiant*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Rear Window*, *Mr. Roberts*, *Crime In The Streets*, *The Spirit Of St. Louis*, *The Nun's Story*, *Sayonara*, *Peyton Place*, and many, many others. He could do anything – symphonic, jazz, tonal, atonal, whatever the film called for, Waxman was one of those composers who just didn't lay music on with a shovel, but knew how to get under the skin of the film and characters, and to enhance and illuminate the images on the screen.

The soundtrack LP of *Taras Bulba* was, in fact, not the soundtrack, it was a re-recording done with a smaller orchestra. While I don't know where it was recorded, I can tell you that the acoustic of the room was dry as a bone and that dryness was exacerbated by the instruments being close-miked (which is the way I like my film music). Furthermore, the dynamics of the original LP were limited because for an LP it had a longer-than-usual running time. The sound was shrill and dry and I always wished it could have sounded better. The LP release was issued on CD by Ryko back in 1998. While the CD was well-produced, it was basically, a cleaner version of the LP sound, with its shrillness and dryness intact. I just assumed that was the way it was going to be. But when it was recommended to me that I might want to think about reissuing it on Kritzerland, because it had been out of print for years, and because it was such a beloved score, I wondered if there was anything that could be done.

So, I asked for all the tapes that were in the MGM vaults. What we found were the original two-track stereo album master (which I believe was used for the Ryko release), although according to its log, it seemed to be a copy made in the 1970s. There were no two-track stereo tapes dated 1962. We also had a 1630 digital copy, a mono version, and this one other box. Yes, that's right – this one other box. And what was in this one other box was the original three-track album master – the original chosen takes from the session master – in other words, the first generation tape. Needless to say, I was over the moon. My transfer guy, John Davis, put up the tape and it was like hearing something that was recorded yesterday. Yes, still shrill and still dry, but pristine and clean as a whistle, and in perfect condition. We transferred the entire thing and then it went to my mastering engineer, James Nelson. I asked him to put a little subtle and very clean room ambience on the whole thing, along with some very necessary low-end. He sent me three tracks to sample with the new EQ and room ambience and I was almost moved to tears. Suddenly the instruments, instead of sounding shrill and unpleasant, sounded like they had natural space around them, and hearing tight, focused low-end basically ended up alleviating what was way too shrill on the high end, without losing any of the incredible bite of the brass. It was all very subtle but, for me, the difference was astonishing, especially as we were using the first generation materials.

Also on the three-track tape was a version of "The Wishing Star" (called "Pastorale" on the tape logs) for female chorus only (the album version is male and female), and the instrumental-only track that they sing to – we've included both as bonus tracks.

So, here is Franz Waxman's *Taras Bulba*, sounding, I hope you'll agree, better than ever before, which is befitting one of the greatest action/adventure scores ever written. The score of a lifetime indeed.

— Bruce Kimmel