

A Christmas Carol | A Child Is Born

You can't imagine how exciting and unique it was, not unless you were there. We got our first TV in 1952. I was around four. It was, to these young eyes, a huge set – a 12-inch screen, if I recall correctly. My first conscious memories of watching TV (in our own house – just like being at the movies, but at home!), were the shows *Boston Blackie*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Annie Oakley*, *Superman*, *The Roy Rogers and Dale Evans Show*, *The Cisco Kid*, *Dragnet*, and whatever else my little eyes could find as I relentlessly switched channels, all thirteen of them (not really thirteen, because we didn't get channels three or six or ten or twelve in Los Angeles). In those days the experience of TV was so unique, that you wouldn't even leave the room for the commercials – you'd sit there, glued to the screen, and watch it all, and, for me, that included the test pattern early in the morning.

Old stars were reborn on TV, new stars were born, and the diversity of programming was incredible. Some shows were on film, some came to you live – there were dramas, sitcoms, variety shows, game shows, soap operas, wrestling, news, and yes, even reality TV, like *You Asked For It* and *Queen For A Day*. It was wild and wooly, with network shows, local shows (local to LA), the weird and the wonderful, and the esoteric likes of Korla Pandit and Liberace and Kukla, Fran, and Ollie. Some of these shows look amazingly crude and simple now but, back then, we were inviting these people into our living rooms – and unlike radio, we got to see them. Very early on, specials (sometimes called Spectaculars – although it was hard to be Spectacular on a 12-inch screen) found their way into our homes. These were Special Events that were even more special than the series and the episodes of anthology shows. One of those specials became a perennial – *Peter Pan*, starring Mary Martin, repeated every year for many years (the original and then a later version). *TV Guide* would usually give special space to the Special and as soon as I saw a Special listed, I circled it (I circled all the programming I wanted to watch, from the time I was five), and never missed it. Nor did most of America. It really was a Special Event, and the entire family would gather 'round the TV set to watch.

One such evening occurred in 1954. *Shower of Stars*, an anthology show on CBS, had their very Special Christmas special that aired on December 23rd – an adaptation of Charles Dickens' beloved tale, *A Christmas Carol*, starring Fredric March and Basil Rathbone (as Scrooge and Marley). It was truly a spectacular – shot on film and broadcast in color – although the majority of viewers saw it in black-and-white, as few people had the ability to watch color back in those days. The show was sponsored by Chrysler and their family of cars. The adaptation was by Maxwell Anderson, who also wrote the lyrics for the songs, and the score was by film composer Bernard Herrmann. Herrmann had scored the CBS radio version of *A Christmas Carol*, and was the natural choice to do the TV special.

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 immobile 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 lavished 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