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THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAIL: MUSICAL FORM AND FUNCTION IN PROFONDO ROSSO

BY SHELLEY O'BRIEN

The live performance of the PROFONDO ROSSO (1975) score by Italian progressive rock group Goblin is surely going to be the highlight of Celluloid Screams 2015. Goblin wrote and performed the scores for many horror films during the 1970s and early '80s, including BUJO OMEGA (1979) and CONTAMINATION (1980). However, the group is most noted for its collaborations with director Dario Argento; after PROFONDO ROSSO in 1975 Goblin went on to score SUSPIRIA (1977), TENEBRAE (1982) – credited as single artists – and PHENOMENA (1985). Keyboardist Claudio Simonetti later forged a solo career and continued to work scoring horror films for Argento, Lucio Fulci, Ruggero Deodato and others.

Initially, Goblin followed in the esteemed footsteps of film composers Ennio Morricone and Riz Ortolani, both of whom had already created experimental scores for horror films by incorporating jazz rhythms, electric guitar and bass, Echoplex effects and synthesizers into more traditional orchestral instrumentation. But the heavily textured sound, driving rhythms and complex arrangements found in prog rock music in the 1970s proved to be the ideal accompaniment for the excesses of Italian horror. As the films became more extreme, giallo killers, aliens, zombies and cannibals were increasingly accompanied by throbbing synths. Fabio Frizzi's scores are notable examples. Towards the end of the '70s, upbeat disco sounds became part of this increasingly unusual musical landscape – appearing at its most incongruous in Umberto Lenzi's incredibly gruesome CANNIBAL FEROX (1981). During this period, two of the most innovative Italian horror scores were composed and performed by Goblin. The films – PROFONDO ROSSO and SUSPIRIA – are regarded by many as being the most impressive of Argento's lengthy career and the score plays a major role in both; music doesn't just function to underscore events and create atmosphere, it's also an important narrative device.

In many respects, PROFONDO ROSSO is a typical giallo. Protagonist Marc Daly, a jazz pianist, gets drawn into a world of violence and insanity after witnessing the brutal murder of a famous psychic. The narrative, unsurprisingly, features the iconic black-gloved killer, plot twists aplenty, and extremely gruesome set pieces. With the addition of stylish set design, Argento's fluidly roving camera and the Goblin score, though, the film becomes a giallo masterclass. Although horror fans (quite rightly) often cite SUSPIRIA as one of the most effective and memorable scores ever written for a horror film, PROFONDO ROSSO isn't far behind.

The score revolves around three themes which feature a variety of keyboard sounds (both acoustic piano and synthesizers), electric bass, guitars, full rock drum kit and additional percussion. These themes are interspersed at times with a simple sung melody articulated as a rather dissonant lullaby; it's a significant recurring clue as to the identity of the murderer and is even referred to as "the leitmotif of the crimes." The opening credits theme is in a complex time signature which creates a feeling of relentlessly moving forward with no space for pause.

This effect is enhanced by the use of repeated rhythmic and melodic motifs on electric bass and using a synthesized harpsichord effect. The layering up of sonic textures is suddenly interrupted by a brief flashback of a stabbing as the lullaby plays. Fading back in, the bass and synth build to a crescendo ending abruptly as Argento's credit appears. So, the music creates atmosphere, but more importantly it cues the viewer into an association with violence and the crucial event which will trigger later murders.

This main theme returns at two key moments: during the initial stalking of the psychic and when Marc discovers a major clue. Here it's more heavily textured with guitar riffs, heavy rock drums, broad synthesized organ-like chords and a sonic stabbing motif. It further reinforces the relationship between the music and the identity of the murderer, but when the psychic is brutally killed with a hatchet, a second theme enters and the musical tone becomes incongruous as the score has a more upbeat and jazzy feel. Piano, bass and drums play in fast 4/4 time, pacing the murder set-piece rather than simply underscoring it. This tone doesn't last for long. As her head smashes through a window and Marc runs frantically to try and help, a new set of more abstract bass and piano motifs develop the theme. Here, the electric bass is played using a plectrum, giving a much harder edge to the sound. This technique reinforces the brutality of the action taking place and is used similarly during other violent set-pieces in the film: the scalding to death of one character and the infamous teeth battering/neck stabbing of Professor Giordani. The addition of throbbing guitar, frantic conga drumming, hammered percussive bass notes on acoustic piano, and synth 'singers' makes this jazz/rock fusion a perfect complement to the frenzied violence.

The third theme represents searching and it's used extensively as Marc is looking for clues in an abandoned house and towards the climax when he returns to the psychic's apartment. A guitar plays a mesmerising eleven note riff repeatedly as shorter motifs are introduced on synth and bass. The new musical theme underscores Marc's search and constantly changes key, use of modulation up and down conveys precisely the feeling of being on the verge of discovery. Further instrumentation is added gradually creating more layers of harmony and rhythm, eventually building to a crescendo as Marc uncovers the key to the murders. It returns when Marc is finally confronted by the killer, but it's mixed with the lullaby and dissonant orchestral chords, tying everything together. As the past trauma is revealed and the killer dispatched, the score returns to the original opening theme. This bookending ensures narrative closure and reveals how consistent the score has been at creating continuity throughout. Although it may not be as lauded as the SUSPIRIA score, Goblin's work on PROFONDO is certainly as effective and possibly more influential. In fact, it was so successful that it steered the musical direction Italian horror would take well into the 1980s and beyond.

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