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Solar Max: music from the film (Nigel Westlake)

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Nigel Westlake. Solar Max (IMAX film soundtrack). ABC Classics 476 176-1,

Reviewed by Michael Hannan

The Solar Max website (**www.solarmovie.com**) explains that "SOLARMAX is a 40-minute giant-screen documentary that tells the story of humankind's struggle to understand the sun. SOLARMAX takes audiences on an incredible voyage from pre-history to the leading edge of today's contemporary solar science."

In the credits for the soundtrack, Nigel Westlake makes the distinction between 'musicians' and 'orchestral musicians' as if to indicate that the former stand apart from the expected orchestral film score approach. Indeed the most distinctive and impressive sounds from the score are created by the "musicians" including the Sydney Chamber Choir (directed by Nicholas Routley), percussion genius Greg Sheehan, shakuhachi virtuoso Riley Lee, Andean panpiper Carlos Villanueva, kotoist Satsuki Odamura, bone flautist Michael Atherton and overtone chanter, Wendy Grace. Westlake himself is featured playing a mean glass harmonica.

The straight orchestral music is, however, performed with great finesse. In keeping with film music tradition it is somewhat stylistically derivative, paying homage to what screen music theorist Claudia Gorbman terms "cinematic musical codes". The opening track, "Starfield", acknowledges the slow music style of Copland's *Appalachian Spring*. The next cue,"Solarmax", is reminiscent of Bernard Herrmann with a hint of Philip Glass. Here we first hear the monumental vocal chorale adapted from a Neapolitan madrigal that director John Weiley asked his composer to use. In this score Westlake is keen about arpeggios: "Crystal Spheres" and "Aurora" both use them, the former inhabiting a classical symphonic soundworld, the latter, taking some cues from John Adams.

There are some big thematic gestures and, as is to be expected in a film score, some themes are used as the basis for a number of different cues. For example, the main theme of the opening track is heard in later cues "Now Voyager", "The Great Observatory", "SOHO", and in the second part of "Shrine of the Sun Goddess".

Although the orchestral and choral cues are well crafted, the more abstract sections that use unusual forces are perhaps more remarkable. The opening of "First Light" combines static drone elements from chanters and spooky wind-like sounds of the shakuhachi, and is then followed by a haunting Celtic flute solo. The track develops into a tribal percussion frenzy accompanied by Ligeti-like choral effects reminiscent of those used for the apes in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

"Inti Huatana" presumably used for the sequence set in ancient Peru, employs the remarkable talents of Villanueva whose opening flutter-tongued panpipe phrase initially sounds remarkably like a snare drum roll. The sparse combination of panpipes, bass drum, flute and piccolo eventually becomes more sustained through the dramatic introduction of choir and orchestra.

Similarly the opening sections of ”Shrine of the Sun Goddess” employs a haunting shakuhachi solo punctuated with some koto flourishes before the orchestra enters. Riley Lee cleverly fashions his solo in the manner of the traditional *honkyoku* repertoire.

Reviewing a soundtrack album when one hasn’t seen the film is a somewhat problematic task. Film music is composed in the service of the film and can sound disjointed and unresolved when played without the images it originally accompanied. The way that this CD has been assembled certainly doesn’t give that impression. It is an engaging set of interconnected pieces that has been brilliantly played and recorded.