

That strain again – where have we heard this before?

Sounds from outer space

Doctor Who has been frightening audiences since 1963 but has also provided a number of notable composers with an income. **Michael McManus** investigates their music

Every Prom brings special memories but few have been more exotic or vivid than the occasion in July 2008 when the Royal Albert Hall was invaded by creatures from other galaxies. The BBC Philharmonic is a familiar Proms presence but it is not generally required to contend with an array of aliens, plus RSC actor Julian Bleach in the elaborate guise of Davros, creator of the notorious Daleks. Another newcomer to the Albert Hall podium was conductor Ben Foster, who orchestrates and conducts Murray Gold's music for the cult TV series *Doctor Who* and also composes the music for its successful spin-off show *Torchwood*, making him perhaps the top-selling British orchestral conductor on CD these days. Numerous screens around the hall showed specially edited sequences from the show and Foster didn't miss a cue. Everything was perfect down to a fraction of a second.

No one should have been surprised by this virtuosity. Not only is Ben Foster already a highly experienced conductor; he is also a very serious musician indeed, having studied contemporary composition and conducting at the Guildhall School, where he was awarded the Lutosławski Prize. He has chaired the judging panel for the BBC Young Musician of the Year and, in October 2008, had a new commission, *The Edge of Infinity*, premiered by Paul Daniel and the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, with whom he works on a regular basis. By working on the music of *Doctor Who* he not only fulfils a childhood ambition; he also joins a list of first-class musicians who have played their part in adding drama and mystery to the longest-running science fiction series in the world.

Although it is immediately obvious in conversation that Ben Foster is a very serious musician indeed, he says he always "did have a leaning towards working in the commercial arena, because I figured it would provide a particularly good opportunity to work with other musicians and orchestras, and turn things over in a prolific way. These shows give me the opportunity to be a busy musician, constantly trying out new things in new ways". He is an avowed admirer of the legendary composer and big-band arranger Laurie Johnson and attributes his early interest in music to "a mixture of listening to my dad's huge classical collection, reading *Gramophone* and also being interested as a kid in science fiction and television. Laurie



William Hartnell, the first Doctor (above), and his arch-enemies in London in 1965 (below)



Johnson was a huge influence. His music for *The Avengers* was all about instrumental colour, use of leitmotifs and the use of specific orchestrations to signify certain characters or moods".

One renowned conductor recently described Mahler as the "first great composer of film music". Ben Foster agrees but also cites *Petrushka* as "the backbone for all the cartoon music of the 1960s and '70s". He is an evangelist for breaking

down musical barriers. "My personal hope," he says, "was that kids would go along to our Prom because of their enthusiasm for *Doctor Who*, then through that develop an enthusiasm for seeing orchestras perform. It wasn't a dumbed-down introduction to classical music. This was a concert of very serious, well composed, refined music."

Of course, Ben Foster is by no means the only serious musician to be best known for his

work in film and television. One need think only of Miklós Rózsa or Bernard Herrmann to make that point. It is perhaps more surprising, however, to learn that “classic” *Doctor Who* – famed more for its wobbly sets and occasionally clunking storylines than for its musical excellence – has in fact provided presumably welcome work to quite a few musical luminaries in its time. Another notable figure to compose music for the show was Carey Blyton (1932–2002), the nephew of Enid Blyton.

Although Blyton is best remembered now for his book of nonsense poems *Bananas in Pyjamas*, music was always his first love. He contracted polio in his teens and never again enjoyed the best of health but built a considerable reputation both as an academic musician and as a composer for film and television. He studied music at Trinity College in London (where he was awarded the Sir Granville Bantock Prize for Composition) and then in Copenhagen, later returning to Trinity as professor of harmony, counterpoint and orchestration from 1963 to 1973. From 1972 to 1983 he was visiting professor of composition for film, television and radio at the Guildhall School, where he pioneered the first formal course of tuition in these specialised aspects of musical composition at a musical conservatoire in the UK – the course from which Ben Foster subsequently benefited.

Carey Blyton also made his mark as a music editor. He worked at Faber & Faber for a decade, serving as Benjamin Britten’s personal editor from 1963 to 1971. He was responsible for the editorial work on that composer’s works from *Curlew River* to *Owen Wingrave*, and also edited many works by Gustav Holst. Most of his compositions are miniatures, with or without voice, and while a recently released CD of Blyton’s music (“Carey Blyton in Camera”) from Upbeat Classics does not necessarily reveal a distinctive voice, he evidently had a marvellous ear for melody and balance, plus the ability to write attractive music in a number of genres. Blyton’s widow Mary recalls that her late husband had “a lot of fun” working on the music for three *Doctor Who* stories between 1969 and 1974, not only because he took the opportunity to write some extraordinarily modernistic, atonal music for a children’s programme but also because “he was a science fiction man – an enthusiast for science fiction and fantasy”. Such work evidently helped keep the wolf from the family door, but Blyton was not afflicted with vanity and positively enjoyed writing commercial music.

In the first of his *Doctor Who* commissions, for a story called “The Silurians”, Blyton wrote some peculiarly haunting music in a tough, modern idiom, including a chromatic march in honour of the Doctor’s trusty sidekick, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart, played by Nicholas

Courtney. At Courtney’s 80th birthday party in December 2009, his friends presented him with a recording of the piece, to his visible delight. “I’m really keen that some of this music should be put about a bit,” says Mary Blyton. “I’m sure Carey would be so thrilled with all this interest. Music was his total world really. He was a very disabled man and music gave him a world of his own, which seemed to help him through the physical disabilities.” He also took the opportunity to score for some exotic instruments, including the ophicleide, the serpent, a prepared piano and a pair of basset-horns.

It takes a special composer to make a sink plunger seem terrifying

In the mid-1960s the Blytons bought a flat from Richard Rodney Bennett, whose music Carey Blyton had edited at Mills Music.

He too had written music for *Doctor Who*, albeit only once. One of the most celebrated of the earliest stories from the show saw the original Doctor, William Hartnell, journey with his companions to the time of the Aztecs. Abduction and human sacrifice must have seemed pretty strong stuff for children in 1964 and the haunting score, full of dark hints of superstition and violence, must be one of the most authentic and atmospheric the show has ever boasted. The now knighted Sir Richard is certainly one of the most versatile musicians of our time, whose compositions encompass the concert hall, film and television and, of course, jazz. He now attributes the very considerable success he has enjoyed in the past three decades to “his move in 1979 to New York City, away from the pernicious British habit of pigeonholing”.

A third notable name from the classic era of *Doctor Who* is that of Tristram Cary (1925–2008), son of the writer Joyce Cary. It was while serving as a naval radar officer in the latter part

of the Second World War that Cary conceived the idea of electronic and tape music and, as soon as he was released from the Navy in 1946, he began to establish himself as a pioneer in the field of musical technology. Resuming his education, he received a BA at Oxford and then went on to Trinity College of Music; by the mid-1950s he was working very successfully as a leading freelance operator musician and musical technician. In 1955 he wrote the music for *The Ladykillers* and numerous other scores followed in a variety of forms and genres. His works for the concert hall were predominantly modernistic in design and tone, with much use of taped sounds.

In 1967 Cary founded the electronic music studio at the Royal College of Music, which is still going strong. Cary also designed and built his own electronic music facility, Electronic Music Studios (London) Ltd, which soon created the first commercially available portable synthesiser. His scores range from pure electronic music to instrumental solos and substantial orchestral and choral works. Countless terrified children must have been familiar with his incidental music, for in 1963 he wrote the score that accompanied the first appearance of the Daleks. It takes a very special composer to make a sink plunger seem terrifying, but Cary certainly had the knack. In November 2009, the RCM hosted a special concert of his music, including excerpts from his uncompromisingly modernistic *Doctor Who* scores. There will always be those who look down upon the best efforts of those who turn their hands away from the concert hall and towards the more demotic worlds of television, film and the recording studio but, as Ben Foster says, “the music, say, in *Thunderbirds*, was really interesting...I remember thinking, this is like classical music, but it’s functional, it has a huge audience – and it’s influential”. ●



The BBC Philharmonic and conductor Ben Foster look on as daleks invade Kensington Gore