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Proud month for memorable film composer

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CLASSICAL

Most film scores fall like an empty suit to the floor without their bespoke images. But Ennio Morricone, over a career scoring some 400 films, has a way with an ear-catching tune or an atmospheric timbre that can resonate far beyond the screen. The Italian composer's themes have influenced generations of disparate musicians, from Yo-Yo Ma and John Zorn to Metallica.

In one of those strange oversights in the awards game, Morricone never won an Oscar for any of his now-classic scores, not for "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly," not for "Cinema Paradiso." But the many nominations and an iconic reputation will lead to the 78-year-old receiving an Academy Award for lifetime achievement on Feb. 25. The overdue trophy is just one aspect of Morricone's red-letter month.

Morricone, in another odd lapse, never conducted a concert of his own music in the U.S. until this weekend. On Friday, he led a performance at the United Nations of a nonfilm work, his 9/11 cantata "Voci dal Silencio." And on Saturday at Radio City Music Hall, the composer conducted the 100-piece Roma Sinfonietta orchestra and 100-voice Canticum Novum Singers in a concert of his film music.

The Radio City audience -- full of proud Italians and famous faces from the worlds of music and movies -- received Morricone's music with reverence. The orchestrations were the soundtrack originals, although there were no backdrop images. The composer's themes were recast as pure music. A more intimate concert at Carnegie Hall would have worked better for this, as Radio City's amplification inevitably gave the well-drilled orchestra and chorus a glassy, synthetic sound.

Still, Morricone's best, most classically minded scores -- such as the suite from Sergio Leone's 1984 epic "Once Upon a Time in America" -- came across with emotive weight. That film's main themes are redolent of the operatic intermezzi of Morricone's Italian forebears, as well as -- in their mix of romantic wistfulness and incipient tragedy -- the Adagietto from Mahler's Symphony No. 5.

Morricone could have plucked his melody "Gabriel's Oboe" -- a key theme to Roland Joffé's 1986 conquistador tragedy "The Mission" -- from a Bach cantata or passion, the instrumental aria an ineffable mix of spiritual yearning and human frailty. Morricone also wrote touching tunes to Guiseppe Tornatore's films "Malèna" and "Cinema Paradiso," the latter played lovingly as solo piano and saxophone fluttered through the strings like ribbons in a breeze.

Morricone's other side showed with the prowling faux-jazz of "The Untouchables," as well as the laconic irony and weird bombast of his career-making themes to Leone's "spaghetti westerns." Starting with one of the composer's signature motifs -- the whistling ocarina to 1966's "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly" -- the Leone suite climaxed with another of that film's famous cues, "The Ecstasy of Gold." The demanding vocalise almost seemed bound to drive soprano Susanna Rigacci into a delirious tizzy not unlike that of Eli Wallach in the movie.

Not everything from Morricone's pen has dated well, particularly the gauche "Godspell"/"Jesus Christ Superstar" choral antics of "Abolisson" from 1969's "Queimada." And hearing so many of Morricone's scores unadorned underlined how he has retooled similar melodic shapes over the years.

But a prime way to judge the enduring quality of any music is by how well it travels, as Morricone's does. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma -- having interpreted the composer's music beautifully on a 2004 disc that included a whispering retake of "The Ecstasy of Gold" -- is also part of an all-star tribute album, "We All Love Ennio Morricone" (due Feb. 20 from Sony Classical). Metallica camps it up on "The Ecstasy of Gold" this time, while Bruce Springsteen plays noir guitar on an instrumental version of "Once Upon a Time in the West."

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