

AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL PRESENTS

EDGAR ALLEN POE'S CLASSIC TALE OF THE UNGODLY . . . THE EVIL "HOUSE OF USHER"

STARRING VINCENT PRICE CO-STARRING MARK DAMON · MYRNA FAHEY WITH HARRY ELLERBE

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JAMES H. NICHOLSON · PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY ROGER CORMAN

SCREENPLAY BY RICHARD MATHESON · MUSIC BY LES BAXTER



INTRADA SPECIAL COLLECTION

House of Usher

ORIGINAL MGM MOTION PICTURE SOUNDTRACK
COMPOSED AND CONDUCTED BY

Les Baxter



"The house itself is evil now." So Roderick Usher (Vincent Price)

laments to Philip Winthrop (Mark Damon) in a central scene from the classic 1960 horror film *House of Usher*. It must have been evil indeed to inspire Mr. Usher to bury his own sister alive in the family crypt.

The film tweaks and expands on the Edgar Allan Poe short story, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (the film title was reportedly shortened to fit on theater marquees). The script, by



celebrated science-fiction writer Richard Matheson (*I Am Legend*, *The Incredible Shrinking Man*), has the dashing, purple-favoring Winthrop arriving at the ominous Usher mansion to retrieve his beloved Madeline Usher (Myrna Fahey), whom he once courted in Boston.

He is met by the aging family butler (Harry Ellerbe) and the politely hostile Roderick Usher, who make

every attempt to compel Winthrop to leave. Usher, whose every sensory faculty is outrageously sensitive, explains that the Usher house has been blighted with madness and tangible evil, and

with it every carrier of the Usher name. For Philip to marry and bear children with Madeline would be to ruin a new generation with the Usher curse.

Philip refuses to believe Usher or leave without his fragile Madeline, but is increasingly perturbed by the house's seeming attacks on his life, Madeline's somnambulism, and her fascination with death. After a row with her brother, Madeline appears to have suddenly died—but Usher buries her alive knowing that she merely suffered a cataleptic seizure. With bloody fingernails and terrorizing screams, Madeline escapes her coffin to exact revenge on her brother, and the entire Usher house burns to the ground in the kind of lightning storm that only happens in horror films.

House of Usher was a gamble taken by Roger

Corman and American International Pictures, who made their profit cranking out inexpensive genre films primarily for drive-in audiences throughout the 1950s. Corman wanted to concentrate a larger budget (\$27,000) on a longer shoot (fifteen days), employing a reputable screenwriter and sophisticated actor. He picked *Usher* for the project, having loved reading it as a teenager and knowing that the story had a built-in audience—everyone who had ever been assigned Poe in school.

While two film adaptations of *Usher* had been made across the pond in previous years, American filmmakers had shied away from it. The brevity of the source story made fleshing it out to feature-length difficult, and American audiences were used to having a monster in their horror flicks.

Corman was able to convince AIP producers Samuel Arkoff and James Nicholson that the house *itself* was the monster. He was also able to convince Price—who expressed concern about being





cornered as a “one-note villain,” and who was a far bigger-budget actor than AIP typically cast—that the Poe film would be a great artistic challenge for the horrifically delightful thespian.

“In one scene,” Corman recalled, “Vincent had to utter the line, ‘The house lives, the house breathes.’ ‘What does that mean?’ he asked me. ‘That’s the line that allowed us to make this movie.’ ‘Well, fine,’ he said reasonably. ‘I suppose I can breathe some life into it then.’”

Price is unforgettable as Roderick Usher, super-sensitive and white-haired (bleaching his hair was Price’s idea; “If you lived in that house, you’d be very strange!” he told Corman). The tormented character was as likely to compose a dainty tune on his lute as he would put a padlock on his still-breathing sister’s coffin.

Like Corman, Price had always admired the works of Edgar Allan Poe, drawn to the romantic fatalism and atmosphere of the author’s gothic tales. “I loved the white-haired character I was playing,” he said, “because he is the most sensitive of all Poe’s heroes.”

Corman and crew made good use of their upscale artistic commodities, while still generating a cinematic product with the same corner-cutting efficiency that had made AIP a success. They also “capitalized on luck”—shrewdly shooting the opening exterior scene in the ghostly wake of a Hollywood forest fire, and capturing footage of the (planned) fiery destruction of an Orange County barn for the film’s ending. (Corman liked the fire footage so much that he reused

it in several of his successive Poe films.)

Equally hot was the film’s popular and critical success. *House of Usher* played the entire summer of 1960—on a double bill with Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*—and grossed two million dollars at the box office. It established AIP as the leading independent production house, and launched the popular “Poe cycle” of films created by the same core team. An endorsement from the New York Herald Tribune praised *Usher’s* “restoration of finesse and craftsmanship to the genre of dread.”

“The Poe films did earn me quite a bit of critical attention,” said Corman, “first in Europe and then in the States...[They] brought my directing up a few notches in budgets and schedules and I have several very good-looking, psychologically effective horror pictures to show for it.”

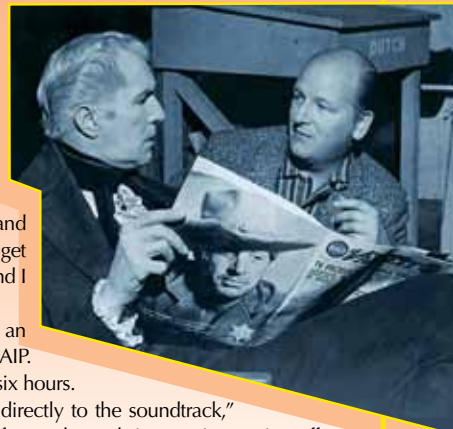
One recurring team member on AIP's parade of low-budget films

was composer Les Baxter. A classically-trained composer who idolized Ravel and Stravinsky, Baxter entered pop culture consciousness in the 1950s with his singular brand of “exotica” lounge music. He scored his first film, *Tanga-Tika*, in 1953, which led to a prolific career in show business (he scored over a hundred films for AIP alone).

“Films enabled me to compose the sort of serious music I wanted to do,” Baxter said. “But the only films I was offered were small pictures. It’s a fact that I was respected far more in Europe and South America than I was here, but I could only get B-pictures, always with a very, very small budget, and I learned to perform miracles with small orchestras.”

Baxter (pictured at right with Price) was given an average of two weeks to write any given score for AIP. Recording sessions generally lasted no longer than six hours.

“We went in a hurry, monaurally, recording directly to the soundtrack,” he recalled in 1981, “and nobody really thought of or took much interest in running off a



quarter-inch protection. Neither did anyone think of preserving the original tapes for any sort of purpose. As soon as the film was recorded and the music tracks dubbed in, then they were erased or dumped into the garbage can.

“The fact that now people think some of those scores were valuable is unfortunate, but



by the *Usher* theme in its brassiest, most grandiose form. Though this theme largely represents the tragedy of the Ushers, it arrives with the visiting Winthrop, and with him barely escapes the house alive at the story's end.

The theme is developed in a number of interesting ways. It bobs up and down with a

didn't seem to matter at the time.

Of the 100 or more films I have scored, only a handful of the original tapes have survived.”

Baxter carried in his car audio cassettes of his scores for *House of Usher* (with dialogue) and other films, and was proud to show off his work to anyone who showed interest. He took pride in his standards of composition and attention to detail, and the *Usher* score is a testament to his creative chops. An elegantly multifaceted theme binds the film together, and the score squeezes every possible bit of the Gothic scale, haunted hallway suspense, macabre terror, and melodramatic romance out of the horror genre.


A long-dormant “**Overture**” opens the album and introduces the main theme. This piece is actually a clobbering of sections from “**Main Title**,” “**Reluctance**,” and “**Fall Of The House Of Usher**,” showcasing many of the major thematic elements of the score.

Baxter's fanfare for the American International Pictures logo opens “**Main Title**,” followed

seasick accompaniment and “**Tortured**” counterpoint.

Fragments of it are repeated with the same tragic fatalism that plagues the Ushers in “**The Sleepwalker**” and “**The Ancestors**.” The theme's more swooning guises can be appreciated in the tracks “**Reluctance**” and “**Catalepsy**,” with *Romeo and Juliet* levels of passion. In the “**Fall Of The House Of Usher**,” the theme returns in the midst of an escalating storm, as if trying to dodge burning rafters and escape the collapsing house. It ultimately does, and closes the album with a heraldic finale.

The theme's finest interpretation arrives in “**Pallbearers**,” the most haunting piece of the score. After Usher has closed the lid on Madeline's casket (having just seen her fingers twitch), he and Winthrop carry her from the chapel down to the crypt against an elegy form of the theme. Lush string harmonies carry the dirge, marching to the beat of requiem timpani—Winthrop's



eyes filled with tears and Usher's shifting nervously. Here is Baxter's music at its most operatic, and its most lovely.

An interesting musical element *within* the story is the presence of the lute, upon which Usher atonally strums (“**Madeline Usher**,” “**Lute Song**”). There is some unintended hilarity in Winthrop's straightforward response to Usher's amateur pluckings: “Remarkable! And you composed it yourself?” Vincent Price clearly had no prowess on the instrument (“He faked it very well,” Corman charitably said), which emitted a sound akin to that of a hammered dulcimer. But it effectively has a rather jagged, unsettling result atop the bed of Baxter's music.

Another atypical instrument featured heavily in *Usher* is the bass flute, which snakes around the house mysteriously in its low register. It is often paired with other members of the woodwind family in dissonant counterpoint (“**Roderick Usher**”), but occasionally solos in the score's more lyrical moments (“**House Of Evil**”).

Baxter said he composed music “in the daytime

in a very businesslike manner, because I know how to do what I'm doing. I have an enormous ‘bag of tricks’ like most composers.” That bag of tricks gets unpacked for the score's many jolts and frights, in which piano bangs and brass growls contribute to an overall feeling of unease (“**Buried Alive**”). The massive, 13-minute “**Fall Of The House Of Usher**” is replete with terrorized propulsion from various instruments, sharp string jabs, and even a cameo by the “*Dies Irae*” on contrabassoon. The result is an exhausting track that alternates between a clambering escalation of tension and sudden moments of panic.

The most overtly ghostly presence on the score belongs to the vibrato wailings of an adult chorus—the cursed spirits of the Usher dead. As Winthrop begins to discover Madeline's obsession with

death, the ghoulish voices creep into the score (“**The Ancestors**,” “**House Of Evil**”). The wailing mounts proportionally to the stakes in the album's final two tracks; having plunged Madeline into the grave, the ghosts stoke her madness and drive her to drag Roderick down with her into Hell.

Roger Corman claimed that these voices were recorded in post-production and later mixed with the music. This seems feasible, except in the passages where the chorus takes on more melodic (latter part of “**Fall Of The House Of Usher**”) and churchly roles (“**The Sleepwalker**”).

“[James Nicholson] gave me absolute carte blanche,” Baxter fondly reflected. “I had an old castle, and Vincent Price with a strange disease where he hears things from the dungeon and is sensitive beyond belief to touch and sound...What more could I ask for? It was a composer's dream...*Usher* was very sensitive for a horror film...The music was very much on the sensual side—in some scenes, almost to the point of passionate.”

Baxter's score has every bit of the horror, suspense, romance, and graveside reflection befitting Poe's indelible stories. Edgar would be proud. —**Tim Greiving**

Tech Talk From The Producer...

With the first of eight cinematic Edgar Allan Poe adaptations produced by Roger Corman, *House of Usher* was an important project for Les Baxter. As such, he pulled out all the stops, scoring for full orchestra plus large choir and writing in an idiom both soothingly tonal and frighteningly dissonant. It is a lengthy



score, with music covering literally three quarters of the film's final 85-minute running time.

For this premiere release of Baxter's score from *House of Usher*, we have edited and mastered the CD from the only surviving music elements available through MGM—the music-only dubbing masters used for the final soundtrack of the film. While these masters were complete and happily contained no sound effects or dialog, they did include the cue assemblies and crossfades used in the film as well as several quick fades at the end of some cues. These tapes also included the “potting” of various levels made by the

original music editor to accommodate dialog and sound effects. These mono scoring elements were in remarkably clean shape overall, considering their frequent use with the steady re-release of the popular film over the years, including numerous foreign-dubbed prints and video incarnations. For our CD, where possible, we have minimized any abrupt level changes, albeit some fluctuation in overall relative levels remains apparent. The dynamic range is reasonably crisp and effective throughout.

For the initial presentations of the film in 1960, a three-minute “**Overture**” was created by Baxter to help create the right mood for audiences as the show was about to begin. This sequence was subsequently dropped from re-release prints and home video presentations. For our CD, we were fortunate enough to have access to this complete and rarely-heard overture, recently restored and newly-mastered by Chace Productions for the video department of MGM. It is included at the start of the CD.

So let Les Baxter and his orchestra, complete with chorus, now usher you into the terrifying world of Edgar Allan Poe and his immortal tale of Roderick and the *House of Usher*. CD player on. Volume up. Lights out.

—*Douglass Fake*



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