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Article

Gil Mellé's electronic score for *The Andromeda Strain*

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Abstract

Composer Gil Mellé boasted that his 1971 music for *The Andromeda Strain* was Hollywood's first-ever all-electronic film score. This is demonstrably not the case, yet Mellé's effort, which for the most part utilised instruments of his own making, nevertheless does count as something of a landmark in the intertwined history of cinema and electronically generated sound. By way of framing, this essay first puts into perspective Mellé's boastful claim and then suggests that Mellé's effort impacted little on subsequent Hollywood productions precisely because it was mandated by the film's director to be more like sound effects than like traditional film music. But the primary content of the essay is Mellé's *Andromeda* music, genuinely innovative music that is ear-worthy when heard in isolation and theatrically effective when heard in the context of the film, and at the same time music that to date has been neglected as much by scholars of electronic music as by scholars of film scoring.

Keywords: Electronic score; Gil Melle; The Andromeda Strain

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1. Introduction

In 1983, when Randall D. Larson was working on his book *Musique Fantastique: A Survey of Music in the Fantastic Cinema*, he conducted an interview with Gil Mellé, composer of the score for Robert Wise's 1971 film adaptation of Michael Crichton's science-fiction novel *The Andromeda Strain*. During this interview, in the book merely alluded to but published in its entirety following Mellé's death in 2004, Mellé boasted that he was 'literally the very first electronic composer in films' and that his music for *The Andromeda Strain* was 'the very first electronic [film] score' (Larson 2005: 23). Even more boldly, shortly before his passing, Mellé wrote on his MySpace page that 'virtually every innovation in electronic music was made by me … an awesome statement, but true'.[1]

Several awesome statements, to be sure, but none of them true.

This essay seeks not to belittle Mellé for his hyperbolic bluster but, rather, to give due credit to his *Andromeda Strain* music, music that is ear-worthy when heard in isolation and theatrically effective when heard in the context of the film, and music that does count as something of a landmark in the history of electronic scoring, yet at the same time music about which to date the literature, scholarly as well as popular, offers scant reliable information.[2] Before addressing Mellé's *Andromeda Strain* music as it exists both within the film itself and on a vinyl recording that was released simultaneously with the film's first showings, however, the essay puts into perspective Mellé's easily dismissible claim that over the course of the twentieth century he was electronic music's primary innovator and his perhaps debatable claim that he was responsible for Hollywood's first-ever all-electronic film score.

Without reciting the well-known history of electronic music that had unfolded long before Mellé even began to think about voltage-controlled oscillators, the first part of the 'Perspective' section notes the innovations that Mellé in fact *did* effect, and it suggests that these innovations, while in themselves not especially influential, nevertheless were displayed in the right place at the right time and thus brought him to the attention of a seasoned filmmaker bound and determined that the music for his latest effort should be in no way conventional. The second and third parts of the 'Perspective' section compare Mellé's working methods not just with those of Louis and Bebe Barron, creators of the now iconic electronic soundtrack of Fred McLeod Wilcox's 1956 *Forbidden Planet*, but also with those of Oskar Sala, producer of

[1]Mellé's MySpace page no longer exists, but the quote is available, with presumably proper attribution, on such fan-based websites as 'Gil Melle – Gil's Guests' (https://www.organissimo.org/forum/topic/39507-gil-melle-gils-guests/); accessed 10 September 2025) and 'Film Score: New Intrada: The Andromeda Strain' (https://filmscoremonthly.com/board/posts.cfm?forumID=1&pageID=7&threadID=65842&archive=0; accessed 10 September 2025).

[2]The film itself, not least because of the relevance of its subject matter to contemporary worries about pandemics, has often been discussed in the serious literature devoted to science-based fiction, but discussions of the film, if they refer at all to the film's music, tend to note only that the music was somehow electronically made.

Since its 2010 re-issue on CD the so-called 'soundtrack album' has received enthusiastic attention from reviewers anonymous and otherwise, but this commentary tends to be riddled with factual errors; a vividly descriptive account of the film score is indeed included in Trace Reddell's 2018 *The Sound of Things to Come: An Audible History of the Science Fiction Film* (295–304), but this account is hardly analytical. Beyond that, Mellé's *Andromeda Strain* music has kept a remarkably low profile, and it seems that even scholars who specialise in the music of science-fiction films mention Mellé's work only in passing.

Trustworthy sources of information regarding the film score are limited to the producing studio's official cue sheet, a copy of which is included in this essay; a *Los Angeles Times* article published shortly before the film's release; and a chapter in a 1995 book devoted to the career of director Robert Wise. The only other sources, often drawn from in the course of this essay but suspect because they are so obviously self-serving, are the Mellé-informed liner notes for the vinyl recording and Mellé's abovementioned interview with Randall Larson.

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the electronic sounds that permeate Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 *The Birds*.

2. Mellé in perspective

2.1 Mellé's innovations

Born in New Jersey in 1931, Mellé was first and foremost a jazz saxophonist, and when he was just nineteen years old, he became the first white musician signed to the prestigious Blue Note label (Bettencourt 2004; Burlingame 2004). During the 1950s, he established a strong reputation for himself not just as a reliable Greenwich Village session player but also as a designer of album covers. Formally trained neither in music nor in engineering, yet intrigued by what he read about the sonic capabilities of the RCA Mark II Synthesiser that, with much fanfare in 1957, had been installed at Columbia University, Mellé began to scour army-surplus stores in search of what he needed to tinker together various devices whose electronically generated sounds were not merely programmable but performable. Very much in the shadow of similar-minded but commercially more savvy developers such as Robert Moog and Donald Buchla, Mellé eventually built up a collection of instruments that he first displayed in public, three years after relocating from New York to Los Angeles in the hopes of breaking into the film/television business, at a 1967 gig at the Monterey Jazz Festival with a quartet he called the Jazz Electronauts.

With this quartet – which, along with himself on soprano saxophone, included pianist Forrest Westbrook, bassist Benfaral Matthews, and drummer Fred T. Stofflet – Mellé attracted a modicum of notice at Monterey and convinced the Verve label to commit the group's sounds to vinyl. In the liner notes for the 1968 Verve album titled *TOME VI,* Mellé wrote that his invented instruments produced sounds not emulative of sounds that already existed but, rather, sounds that were 'strongly indigenous to [the instruments] themselves'. And at length he described at least some of these instruments, among them the Electar (an entirely electronic device whose means of access was somehow comparable to that of a plucked-string instrument and which allowed the performer to control such parameters as 'pitch, decay, and amplitude'), an Envelope that generated mostly rhythmic 'mutations' of notes played on bass or cello, a Doomsday Machine that was 'a lower register' version of an otherwise not mentioned Electronic Cymbal, a modestly named Effects Generator ('capable of producing arpeggiated passages of infinite variety and complexity'), and the album's eponymous Tome VI (whose acronymic name derives from 'transistorized oscillator/modular envelope' and which was 'a subminiature system of … circuitry built into a conventional soprano sax') (Mellé 1968).

Commentators on the Monterey performance were largely indifferent to what Mellé and his colleagues had to offer. Remarking on the festival's Sunday afternoon 'experimental' session that featured not just Mellé's ensemble but also the Don Ellis Orchestra and a group fronted by Ornette Coleman, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Sentinel* noted that the entire affair 'only succeeded in having people walk out of the stadium in droves' (Robinson 1967); an anonymous writer for *Newsweek* observed that 'for the futurists' in the crowd the festival indeed featured 'cosmic crashes and busy-signal bleeps supplied by the Gil Mellé quartet', and that all this was contextualised by Mellé almost condescendingly saying: 'We play these [invented instruments] solely because they increase the range of sound the group can produce, not … to impress you' (anon. 1967).

Reviewers of the ensuing *TOME VI* album of course noted the group's sonic palette, but for the most part – almost as if they were responding directly to Mellé's address to the Monterey audience – by the new-fangled sounds themselves they were not impressed. Journalistic response to the Electronauts' characteristic sound – a sound described by a latter-day critic as 'a breezy blend of cool jazz and modal jazz with electronic sounds interwoven naturally into the mix' (Holmes 2017: 238) – was on the whole tepid, and in the long run the results of Mellé's experiments came to be regarded, as Richard S. Ginell politely put it in a retrospective review of the *TOME VI* album, as 'merely a curiosity' (Ginell 2017).

What director Wise actually thought of *TOME VI* is anyone's guess, but he must have been at least intrigued by some of its sonorities. It was surely the album's unusual sounds, not its 'cool' and 'modal' elements, that caught Wise's ear.[3] In a memoir, Wise noted that he 'listened to a number of people who were doing electronic music at the time' and eventually 'settled on Gil Mellé' (Leeman 1995: 199–200). But this settling on Mellé, to judge both from Wise's further comments and from what Mellé told Larson, resulted less from Wise's audition of *TOME VI* than from a face-to-face meeting early in 1970 during which a 39-year-old novice somehow managed to convince a 66-year-old Hollywood veteran that he was the one person on the scene who could provide a still-aborning new project with music at the same time rich in what the filmmaker vaguely said he wanted and absolutely devoid of what the filmmaker in no uncertain terms said he did *not* want.

2.2. Mellé vis-à-vis Forbidden Planet and The Birds

In his interview with Larson, Mellé admitted to being quite familiar with *Forbidden Planet*, the 1956 MGM production that most people today would probably say was in fact the first Hollywood film to be accompanied entirely by electronic sounds. But Mellé insisted that what Louis and Bebe Barron had done for *Forbidden Planet* was neither music nor a composed score. It was all just noises, he said, generated by 'ordinary test equipment that you would find in any television repair station' (Larson 2005: 25).

It is true that for *Forbidden Planet* the Barrons did not compose film music in the traditional sense, which is to say that they did not view, or contemplate, particular filmic moments and then set about creating, in effect from scratch, music to match those moments; rather, they studied scenes of the film and then selected materials from their vast collection of tape-recorded sounds – triggered not so much by store-bought equipment as by hand-made circuits that often burned up as soon as they were animated by electricity – and in numerous ways transformed them, or combined them, into aural materials that they felt in genuinely musico-dramatic ways suited the film's assorted romantic, comedic, or frightful needs (Leydon 2004; Wierzbicki 2005). It is also true that producer Dore Schary, who originally commissioned the Barrons to come up with only a few futuristic sound effects but eventually came to believe that what they had done quite on their own indeed constituted a serviceable film score, only at the last minute changed his mind about what to call the Barrons' work; probably troubled by a

[3]Wise's ear, or his attention, might also have been caught by 'a ten-minute thunderstorm sequence with an entirely electronic accompaniment' (Brend 2012: 147) that Mellé supposedly included in his very first Hollywood project, an otherwise conventionally scored made-for-TV action-thriller titled *Perilous Voyage* that was made in 1968 but not aired – without a storm sequence but with an odd electronic flourish at its start – until 1976. Assuming that Mellé indeed fitted an early version of this low-budget Universal product with an extended bit of electronically generated storm noise, it seems possible that Wise, as he set about working on his high-budget project for the same studio, at the very least had heard *about* Mellé.

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Figure 1. Title credit for Louis and Bebe Barron's contribution to the 1956 film *Forbidden Planet*.



Figure 2. Title credit for Oskar Sala's contribution to the 1962 film *The Birds*.

memorandum circulated by MGM's legal department that in effect wondered if the powerful Hollywood chapter of the American Federation of Musicians might object to a film score that involved not a single human performer, Schary just days before *Forbidden Planet*'s release decided to identify the Barrons' work, in the opening credit sequence, not as electronic 'music' but as 'electronic tonalities' (Rubin 1975: 12) (see Figure 1).

Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 *The Birds* came up not at all in Larson's extended interview with Mellé, and one can only wonder what Mellé's reactions might have been if this film's electronically generated sonic elements had been brought to his attention. *The Birds* is unusual, not just for Hitchcock but for Hollywood in general, in that its only two instances of music *per se* (a fragment of a Debussy Arabesque tinkled on a piano, a ditty sung by children in advance of the assault on their schoolhouse by a vicious murder of crows) are innocuously diegetic. Yet as François Truffaut observed in his book-length series of interviews with Hitchcock, 'the bird sounds' throughout the film seem to be 'worked out' as if they were components of 'a real musical score' (Truffaut 1985: 297). Truffaut called special attention to the film's penultimate scene, which depicts a four-and-a-half-minute avian attack on an isolated house; this climactic scene contains no dialogue, and *all* of its sounds – not just the bird-related screeches and squawks but also the noises of windows being shattered, logs being tossed into a flaming fireplace, furniture being dragged across a wooden floor, and nails being hammered into makeshift barricades – result from a synthesiser called the Mixtur-Trautonium (Wierzbicki 2008).

Hitchcock did not need to be reminded by Truffaut that this particular sequence of electronic sounds, like various shorter sequences scattered throughout the film, was deftly put together by someone who throughout his long career thought of himself not as a technician but as a composer. Reluctant to call it 'music', Hitchcock in the title sequence for *The Birds* nevertheless acknowledged that the significant contribution made to his film by German Trautonium expert Oskar Sala amounted to much more than mere sound effects. For contractual reasons granting pride of place in the credit sequence to Remi Gassmann, an American who had studied with Sala in the 1930s and who in the making of *The Birds* played no role whatsoever except to broker the relationship between the filmmaker and his former teacher (Wierzbicki 2008), Hitchcock rightly described Sala's work not just as 'electronic sound production' but also, significantly, as 'composition' (see Figure 2).

2.3. Different working methods

Without MGM executives aware of what they were up to, and working only from a rough cut of the complete film, Louis and Bebe Barron, whose previous cinematic experience amounted to providing sonic support for just a few non-narrative avant-garde films, pieced together what eventually came to be accepted as *Forbidden Planet*'s full score entirely within the small confines of their New York apartment. Responding to film reels sent to him from Hollywood, Oskar Sala, who by this time had worked often with German filmmakers and was quite familiar with the idea of sound/image synchronisation, generated all of his sonorities for *The Birds*, bit by meticulous bit, at the West Berlin facility that housed the one-of-a-kind Mixtur-Trautonium that he had spent years developing. Hitchcock and a sound-related entourage indeed paid a visit to Sala at his West Berlin studio, but this was just before the film's release, and largely for publicity purposes; in advance of this face-to-face meeting, Sala's communication with Hitchcock had consisted only of cablegrams and the trans-Atlantic exchange via postal services of film reels both with and without sound (Wierzbicki 2008).

Very much in contrast to how the Barrons and Sala devised their electronic sounds for *Forbidden Planet* and *The Birds*, Mellé concocted his *Andromeda Strain* score *as* the film was being made, during nighttime hours at a well-equipped recording studio on the Universal Studios lot that during the day was used for more conventional purposes. For the sake of a 17 January 1971 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, music critic Martin Bernheimer twice observed Mellé in action, the first time when at least some of the music in the face of projected portions of the still in-progress film was being created, the second time 'a few weeks later', when 'the scene [had] shifted' from the nocturnal workroom 'to a dubbing studio' in which director Wise and 'attendant console engineers', equipped with what was considered to be 'the finished print' of the film, were attempting to mix Mellé's music with both dialogue and sound effects (Bernheimer 1971, Y1 and Y42).

Bernheimer wrote that at the time of his second visit to the Universal lot 'ten weeks had elapsed since Mellé began working on the film' (Bernheimer 1971, Y42), and more than a decade later Mellé told Larson that the *Andromeda* project 'took me ten weeks of recording' (Larson 2005: 25). There is good reason to believe, however, that Mellé in fact worked on the film score for quite a bit more than just ten weeks. A credible note on the Intrada label's 2010 CD re-issue of the film's so-called 'soundtrack album' informs us that the content of this album was recorded at Universal Studios not just on 13–14 December 1970 (which would have been five weeks before Bernheimer's article was published) but also on 12 and 14 October 1970 (which would have been *thirteen* weeks in advance of Bernheimer's article).

However long Mellé in fact worked on his music for *The Andromeda Strain*, it surely was early in the process that he decided on his sonic materials, which included not just sounds produced on electronic instruments of his own making but also conventional yet

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Figure 3. Title credit for Gil Mellé's contribution to the 1971 film *The Andromeda Strain*.

easily transformable sounds produced by a small group of hand-picked instrumentalists (bassist Dave Parlato, flautist Gretel Shanley, percussionist Brian Moffat, pianist Peter Robinson) and likewise easily transformable noises that he collected at such sites as bowling alleys, lumber mills, and Pasadena's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. These materials, once they had been tweaked to Mellé's liking, were stored on the individual bands of a 24-track tape. Then, either before or as clips of the film were made available to him, with his fingers on the tape deck's numerous sliders, Mellé in effect 'improvised' his music 'in real time' for the sake of a two-channel recording device (Larson 2005: 26).

Some of Mellé's recorded cues, upon being matched with film in the dubbing studio, had to be re-done, not because they were sonically faulty but because director Wise felt that a certain timbre or gesture hinted even slightly at the 'standard background music score' that, in this particular film, he wanted very much to avoid (Leeman 1995: 199). Indeed, Wise had charged his composer of choice with creating what Mellé described as 'a kind of non-score', something that would be theatrically viable yet which featured 'no themes, no chords, no harmonic structure' (Larson 2005: 26). Eager to please a director whose keen ears had earlier been applied to the successful making of such diverse films as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *West Side Story* (1961), and *The Sound of Music* (1965), Mellé repeatedly adjusted his cues until they met Wise's desire for a sonic 'underpinning' that would 'heighten the tenseness of the film' but which on the whole was less like conventional music than like 'sound effects' (Leeman 1995: 199–200). At last satisfied, Wise – doubtless aware of how MGM had labelled the Barrons' score for *Forbidden Planet* and of how Hitchcock had labelled the panoply of electronic sounds that figured so importantly in *The Birds* – hesitated not at all in calling Mellé's work what in fact it was. Without qualifiers, the credit sequence describes Mellé's contribution to *The Andromeda Strain* simply as 'music' (see Figure 3).

3. Mellé's *Andromeda* music

Closely based on Crichton's novel, Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* is very much a science-fiction film, that is, a film whose fiction has quite hugely to do with real or imagined science. But it is not, unlike most efforts in the sci-fi genre, in any way futuristic. The situation it depicts happens in the here and now, not on some remote planet but on Earth, in the immediate aftermath of NASA's 1969 landing of astronauts on the moon. At the very same time that journalists and scientists around the world wondered if the 'moon rocks' so eagerly gathered by the Apollo 11 crew might contain elements somehow dangerous to humans, Crichton penned a frightening tale in which a small satellite whose surface has been corrupted by a mysterious something-or-other crashes near a remote town in New Mexico. As both Crichton and Wise tell the story, the American military, anticipating just such an emergency, calls in a team of pre-selected specialists to investigate what seems to be an extraterrestrial contagion that has quickly killed all but two of the town's residents; having in hand not just the small satellite but also the two survivors (an infant and an aging alcoholic), the two members of the team who actually explore the stricken town soon enough meet up with colleagues at a research facility buried deep beneath the Nevada desert, a still new and top-secret facility that apparently has been built precisely for the sake of studying the effects on humans of pathogens collected from outer space. It is within the close confines of this high-tech facility, aptly named 'Wildfire' and equipped with a nuclear bomb that will automatically detonate should the seals on any of its laboratories be broken, that over a four-day period the quartet of scientists work rigorously not just to determine the nature of the infectious agent but also to learn how it was that both the old man and the baby managed to escape the agent's ravages. A disaster is averted, but just barely. And the powers that be are left to wonder about what to do, not so much *if* but *when* a comparable crisis next arises.

Details of this tension-filled story are included in the ensuing discussion of Mellé's *Andromeda Strain* music, music that – interestingly – exists in two very different forms.

One of these forms is the music's monophonic reality within the film itself, which was premiered in New York on 21 March 1971 and a few weeks later released around the country and then abroad. The other is its representation on a limited-edition stereo recording (Kapp Records KRS 5513), not a circular disc but a six-sided thing whose shape makes reference to the tiny hexagonal crystal that scientists eventually identify as the source of what might well be worldwide trouble.[4] Aside from the obvious differences in the number of aural channels involved and the fact that on the vinyl recording the music is free of dialogue and diegetic noises, these two manifestations of Mellé's *Andromeda* music feature notable differences in the amounts of time allotted to various musical items; intriguingly but not altogether surprisingly, when one remembers that, as noted above, its sonic content had been recorded more than a month before the film's dubbing sessions had even begun, the so-called 'soundtrack album' includes a sizeable piece of music that seems to have been used in the film not at all.

3.1. The album

According to Universal Pictures' legally necessary and thus quite official cue sheet, the music labelled 'Wildfire' that underscores the film's main title sequence lasts precisely two minutes and twenty-nine seconds, but on the album the same-labelled track is extended for twelve seconds more than that. More remarkable, the album tracks labelled 'Xenogenesis' and 'Strobe Crystal Green' are both much longer than the corresponding cues that occur late in the film and which sonically animate things that the

[4]The oddly packaged vinyl album, released simultaneous with the film itself, has been long out of print and is now something of a collector's item. As was noted in the text above, in 2010 the album's sonic content was re-issued on an Intrada CD (Intrada, Special Collection Vol. 21; CD B0013842-02), and that content is readily available on-line at such sites as https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-R0kuHyBb8 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Xj0DaqU_p0.

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scientists see through their high-powered microscopes; according to the cue sheet, these compositions have lengths of 1:32 and 1:47, respectively, yet on the album they have lengths of 2:40 and 4:55. In the film, the three interrupted parts of the cue labelled 'Desert Trip', which accompanies a pair of the scientists' dusty arrival at the research facility, last in toto just 1:24, but on the album the same-titled music is afforded an interrupted duration of 4:14. According to the cue sheet, the music labelled 'Op', which underscores a routine body-cleansing procedure, lasts a mere twenty-four seconds; on the album, the same-titled music sounds for almost three minutes.

Whereas most of the album's six tracks involve extensions of same-labelled film cues, two of them are compressions of what is heard in the film. Early in *The Andromeda Strain* Mellé's music for a short while accompanies the exploration by two of the mustered scientists of the town where the satellite has been recovered; later in the film – beginning at the 0:53:20 mark, just before the start of what is quietly labelled Day Three of the main story's four-day timeline – this same grim music for a much longer while haunts not just the chief scientist's recollections of his own visit to the decimated town but also the troubled dreams of two of his colleagues who, even though they themselves had not seen the town's dead bodies, nevertheless have deep-rooted anxieties about infections run amok; on the cue sheet labelled 'The Piedmont Elegy' Parts I and II, these pieces of music have lengths of, respectively, 0:57 and 2:24, but on the album the sonic material is presented as a single item lasting 2:22. Similarly, twice in the film, first (at the 1:17:58 mark) when the two scientists who have been microscopically scanning the satellite's surface first discover a peculiar speck of debris, then later (at the 1:47:33 mark), after the deadly spawn of this minuscule speck has at last been assigned a codename based on the sector of the skyscape from which the satellite seems to have descended, Mellé illustrates the researchers' much-concerned reactions with music labelled 'Andromeda'; according to the cue sheet, the first instance of this dire-sounding music, impactful even though its sonic essence is subordinated to dialogue heavily laden with technical language, lasts an unusually long 6:02, and in its second instance, offered in circumstances hardly more optimistic, it lasts 1:56; on the album, the 'Andromeda' music that contains the sonic essence of both of these dramatically crucial film cues has a duration of just 2:33.

The title of the second of the album's eight tracks, 'Hex', corresponds with nothing listed on the official cue sheet, and careful listening suggests that the main content of this richly textured music in fact occurs nowhere in the film score. The liner notes for the album, authored by Universal Studios publicist Harold Mendelsohn and surely based on information provided by the composer himself, state that the 'Hex' music is 'heard during the sequence depicting the search for Andromeda through the scanning microscope' (Mendelsohn 1971), and an enthusiastic reviewer of the CD re-issue declares that the 'brilliantly conceived' 'Hex' motif – characterised by 'six other-worldly flutes' that 'resonate and join with a mid-register pulsing rhythm and pizzicato bass adorned with an electronic rendering of a harpsichord with shimmering metallic effects' – enters the film whenever the scientists visually contemplate the alien entity's 'purity of form' (Lysy 2020). Doubtless drawing upon this erroneous yet nonetheless published information, the Artificial Intelligence robot that lately has taken control of the Google search engine assuredly informs us that the 'Hex' music is repeatedly heard in scenes 'where the Andromeda organism is being studied under the electron microscope' and that it 'specifically underscores the moment when the crystal is bombarded with X-rays and begins exponential replication' of itself'.[5]

Actual human intelligence – of the sort that involves a functioning brain and a keen set of ears applied to repeated listening to the relevant portions of the film – informs us that this is simply not the case. Composed and committed to a master tape long before the film's dubbing sessions took place, Mellé's not insubstantial 'Hex' music may well have been intended for footage of the sort that the AI robot so eloquently describes; it may also well be that, as often happens in the making of films, for one reason or another this perfectly worthy music was at the last minute consigned to the cutting-room floor. In any case, it seems at least possible that one of the 'Hex' track's sonic elements – not the dark mix of low-register flute sonorities that marks the start of each of its three main sections, and not the high-register keyboardish tinkles that close them, but, rather, the sibilant 'throb' that several times over the music's course waxes and wanes – was recycled in some of the shorter cues that Mellé composed, perhaps under considerable time pressure, relatively late in the post-production process.

In the album liner notes the 3:57 'Hex' track is described, glossily but not inaccurately, as being made up mostly of the intermixed and 'altered electronically' sounds of no less than six flutes peppered with articulations based on the noise of 'buzz saws' (Mendelsohn 1971). In similar fashion, the liner-note author describes the title music as 'a rapid-fire display of counter rhythms and polymeric excitement', employing 'ten electronically processed pianos in the low undulating section[s]' as well as 'rhythmic accents' derived from sounds recorded in 'a bowling alley'. About the album's other six tracks, Mendelsohn rhapsodises quite a lot but offers little solid musical information. writing only that the 'Piedmont Elegy' music uses 'electronic piano and string basses as [its] principal voices', that the 'Desert Trip' track makes use of an invented instrument that Mellé called the Percussotron III, that in the 'Xenogenesis' music there is heard 'an amalgam' of sounds produced not just electronically but also quite conventionally by 'contrabass, percussion and electric piano', and that the 'Strobe Crystal Green' music features, along with a 'pizzicato bass' and 'electronically produced' bass clarinet passages, 'a single [Percussotron] performance by the composer [himself] without benefit of overdubbing' (Mendelsohn 1971).

3.2. The film score

Wise's *The Andromeda Strain* has a duration of 2:10:10. The three-page official cue sheet – dated 22 March 1971, one day after the film had its first showing in New York – lists twenty-three items attributed to Mellé (see Figure 4).

The longest of these, as mentioned, is the 6:02 first iteration of the music labelled 'Andromeda' that is heard early in the ninth of the film's fourteen reels. Other relatively long cues previously mentioned include the 2:29 main title music, the tripartite 1:24 'Desert Trip' music in the fourth reel, the 2:24 second iteration of the 'Piedmont Elegy' music in the sixth reel, the 1:32 'Xenogenesis' music in the eleventh reel, and, in the twelfth reel, both the 1:56 recapitulation of the 'Andromeda' music and the 1:47 'Strobe Crystal Green' music. Longish cues not previously mentioned, both of them heard in the film's fourteenth and final reel, are the 2:45 'The Central Core' music that excitedly accompanies the de-

[5]These articulate but factually wrong statements were issued by Google's now apparently pervasive AI robot on 8 February 2026 not in response to a posed question about how the 'Hex' motif was used in *The Andromeda Strain* but in response to a simple search whose items consisted of 'andromeda strain', 'hex motif', and 'usage'. Subsequent Google searches using the very same trio of items yielded AI-generated responses that differed in phrasing but not in substance.

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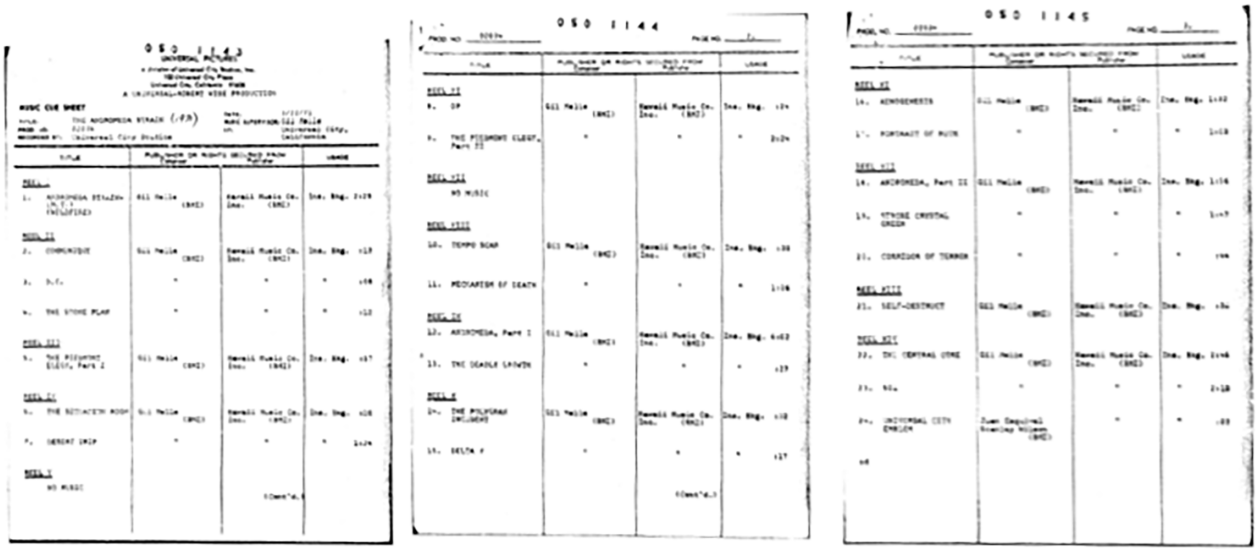


Figure 4. Universal Studios' cue sheet for *The Andromeda Strain*.

activation of the research facility's self-destruct mechanism and the 2:10 '601' music (named for a coded signal for 'system overload') that in the film's epilogue provides a barely audible underscore for the chief scientist's warning to governmental officials that just because the so-called Andromeda strain no longer poses a threat (due not to anything the scientists did but only to a fortuitous mutation that the scientists simply observed) hardly means that similar threats might not arise in the future.

Granting that the content of the three-page cue sheet as reproduced above may not be clear unless the reader magnifies the image, I offer here a partial transcription of the cue sheet that itemises not just cue titles and their durations but also the specific reels in which Mellé's music is or is not heard:

Reel I		
	1. Andromeda Strain (M.T.) (Wildfire)	2:29
Reel II		
	2. Communique	0:13
	3. D.C.	0:08
	4. The Stone Plan	0:12
Reel III		
	5. The Piedmont Elegy, Part I	0:57
Reel IV		
	6. The Situation Room	0:10
	7. Desert Trip	1:24
Reel V		
	No music	
Reel VI		
	8. Op	0:24
	9. The Piedmont Elegy, Part II	2:24
Reel VII		
	No music	
Reel VIII		
	10. Tempo Scan	0:39
	11. Mechanism of Death	1:06
Reel IX		
	12. Andromeda, Part I	6:02
	13. The Deadly Growth	0:27
Reel X		
	14. The Polygran Incident	0:32
	15. Delta V	0:17
Reel XI		
	16. Xenogenesis	1:32
	17. Portrait of Ruth	1:03
Reel XII		
	18. Andromeda, Part II	1:56
	19. Strobe Crystal Green	1:47
	20. Corridor of Terror	0:44
Reel XIII		
	21. Self-Destruct	0:36
Reel XIV		
	22. The Central Core	2:45
	23. 601	2:10

A mere glance at this listing is probably enough to give anyone the not inaccurate impression that Mellé's music for T*he Andromeda Strain* is more abundant in the film's second half than in the first. This impression is made all the more clear by a graph that shows the distribution of Mellé's cues over the film's entire duration (see Figure 5).

That the film's longest stretch of music – the Reel IX cue labelled 'Andromeda, Part I', represented in the graph by the thickest of the red-coloured vertical bars – begins almost precisely at what Pythagorean-minded analysts might call the 'Golden Mean' of the film's duration is perhaps just coincidence. What seems hardly coincidence is the fact that this extended musical cue, even though it very much plays under dialogue – marks the film's turning point, that is, the exact moment when two of the sequestered scientists realise, with unconcealed horror, that what the Wildfire team has been dealing with is not a germ or a virus but, rather, a still inexplicable entity that seems to replicate itself by drawing energy from whatever it neighbours.

The obvious climax of *The Andromeda Strain* happens shortly before the film's end, when, amidst alarms and laser blasts from robotic sentries, one of the team members heroically climbs up through the research facility's central core and, with seconds to spare, deactivates the facility's self-destruct mechanism. (It is important to note that by the time of this late moment in the film, as in the novel to which the screenplay closely adheres, the so-called Andromeda strain has mutated, quite on its own, into something that no longer poses a threat to earthly organisms but

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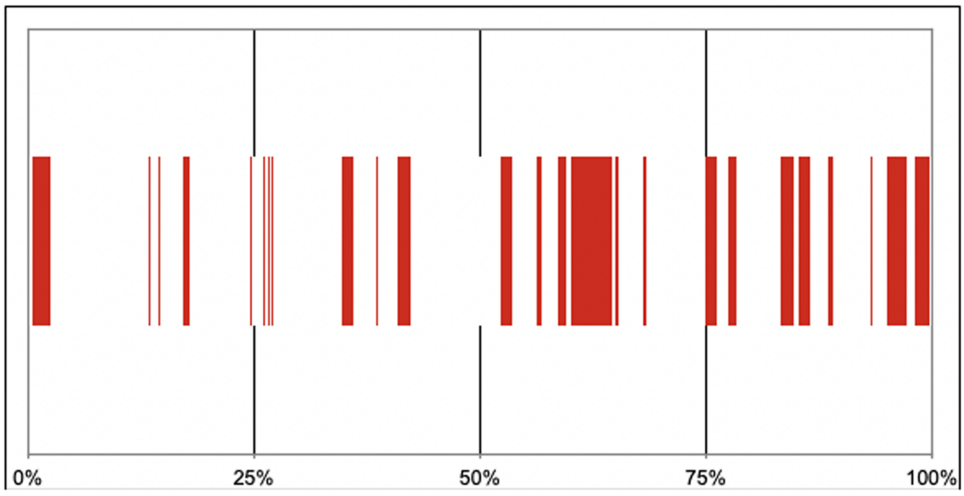


Figure 5. Chart showing the distribution of Gil Mellé's music over the entire duration of *The Andromeda Strain*.

which nevertheless, as had just been demonstrated in the film's 'Polygran Incident' scene that depicts the demise of a military pilot who for the sake of yet another 'look-see' flies over the originally infected town, has a seriously corrosive effect on plastic; it is only the corruption of some of its plastics-based seals – not its sensing that a possibly dangerous contaminant has invaded its environment – that causes Wildfire's electronic brain to automatically shift, as it had been programmed to do, into its self-destruct mode.) With a racing underscore and loud bursts of diegetic noise, the film's 'Central Core' episode, both in presentation and placement, holds very much to the 'grand finale' model established by decades' worth of cinematic thrillers. It could be argued, however, that the film's true peak had occurred some thirty minutes earlier, in the visually brilliant yet musically quiet scene that features the first of Mellé's 'Andromeda' cues.

As noted above, director Robert Wise requested from Mellé a score that had less in common with conventional film music than with sound effects. Accordingly, Mellé provided the 130-minute film with a half-hour's worth of material that at least in three instances has *so much* the quality of sound effects that the casual listener – that is to say, the typical movie-goer – might be hard-pressed to think of it as music.[6]

All three of these sonically ambiguous instances occur early in the film, and each of them for just a few seconds (in the Reel II cues labelled 'Communique' and 'D.C.', at the 5:15 and 17:16 marks, in the Reel IV cue labelled 'The Situation Room', at the 32:38 mark) stridently accompanies the presentation of textual information of the sort that screenwriter Nelson Gidding, in the 28 May 1970 final version of his 'cinescript', describes as resembling 'a teletype printout, in white letters', that 'CLATTERS across a black band at [the] bottom of [the] frame' (Gidding 1970: 6, 20, 44). Had director Wise assigned the making of these quasi-printouts' noise to the sound crew headed by James Alexander, the results – as with all the hisses and hums and whirrs and clicks associated with the research facility's high-tech machinery, and as with the jerky rat-a-tat that accompanies (at the 9:52 mark) a close-up view of an actual teletyped message – likely would have been convincingly realistic but neither impactful nor memorable. By instead giving the assignment to Mellé – and one can only wonder if this was perhaps at the composer's request – Wise injected into *The Andromeda Strain* a subtle yet potent element that seems to have gone unnoticed, or at least unmentioned, even by the most ardent of the film's many online fans.

The just-mentioned teletyped message whose black-lettered content is plainly visible not just to the film's audience but also to whatever unseen filmic characters might be looking on is in fact very much relevant to the film's barely started narrative, for it specifically names the individuals who are to be recruited in the case of a 'wildfire' emergency. In marked contrast, the three texts whose bold white letters, as per Gidding's instructions, flash from right to left across the screen have nothing at all to do with the narrative; seen only by the film's audience, these texts' terse content serves only to establish the locales of discussions (one of them at an Air Force base, two of them in Washington) by assorted bigwigs. As scored by Mellé, however, these extra-diegetic texts seem to be already *infected* by the mysterious whatever-it-is that the scientists only later in the film manage to identify. Hardly mere clatterings, all three of these brief cues within their thick percussive textures very much contain what Mellé later would suggest was the single most important element of his *Andromeda* score, an element that was not 'a musical sound in any sense' but just 'a pulsation' that would 'communicate to the audience [the idea] that the virus' even though unseen was nevertheless 'in the vicinity and [thus] posing great danger' (Larson 2005: 26).

Whether based on electronically generated sounds or transformations of noises recorded at a bowling alley or a lumber yard, Mellé's 'pulsation' motif – always irregular, and not so much percussive as raspy – is clearly audible in all of the cues that in the film's second half support the scientists' microscopic examination of the alien substance, and it emerges quietly, and thus ominously, at the conclusion of the film-ending '601' cue that accompanies the

[6]Especially in science-fiction films, there has long been an intriguing blur between diegetic sound effects (that is, sounds apparently produced by a film's futuristic equipment and apparently heard by whatever filmic characters are within earshot of that equipment) and extra-diegetic underscore (that is, music heard only by a film's audience and somehow illustrative of a scene's dramatic content). This blur – resulting from the often audible fact that science fiction's sound effects have bleeps, bloops, and other sonorities in common with the underscore – was very much discussed by this essay's author in his 2005 monograph on the score for *Forbidden Planet*, and it has been discussed as well by William Whittington in his 2007 *Sound Design & Science Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press) and several of the contributors to the 2010 *Sounds of the Future: Essays on Music in Science Fiction Film*, ed. Mathew J. Bartkowiak (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company); outside the realm of the sci-fi genre, the increasingly common slippage between scoring and sound design has been explored, for example, by Danijela Kulezic-Wilson in her 2020 *Sound Design Is the New Score: Theory, Aesthetics, and Erotics of the Integrated Soundtrack* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) and by James Buhler and Hannah Lewis in their 2020 *Voicing the Cinema: Film Music and the Integrated Soundtrack* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press).

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chief scientist's post-crisis debriefing. In this late-in-the-film music, of course, the motif has semiotic significance, its symbolism having been solidly established in the extended first 'Andromeda' cue, during which an 'unmistakable heartbeat' sound becomes ever louder as the camera zooms in on the projected microscope image and then 'ceases when [the camera] cuts away' (Winters 2008: 16). But early in the film this 'pulsation' motif, sounded aplenty in the title sequence and then recapitulated in the three scene-marking cues, *has* no specific meaning. Whereas filmgoers equipped with full knowledge of everything that transpires in the Crichton novel might suspect straightaway what this motif suggests, filmgoers not so equipped likely hear these 'mechanical typing sounds' (Niebur 2022: 238) only as a sonic irritant. Impossible to ignore, and perhaps most jarringly evident in the 'Communique' cue that just minutes into the film introduces the scene at the Air Force base, the 'pulsation' motif in the first half of *The Andromeda Strain* illustrates not the source of the problem at hand but only the fact that a problem exists. More than anything else, it is Mellé's deft handling of this most simple of ideas not just late but early in the film that gives the entirety of *The Andromeda Strain* its director-desired 'edge and nervousness' (Leeman 1995: 200).

4. Conclusions

As per Wise's explicit instructions, Mellé's work *does* come across more like sound effects than like traditional film music, and perhaps for this very reason – even though it was nominated for a Golden Globe award for 'best original score – it was imitated not at all by the Hollywood composers who in the long wake of *The Andromeda Strain* made use of increasingly available electronic instruments. Perhaps for this reason, too, Mellé's effort was largely ignored by early reviewers. Indeed, my scouring of *The Andromeda Strain*'s paper trail revealed only one opinionated reference to Mellé's score, at the very end of a 5 April 1971 *New York* magazine piece by John Simon – titled 'Women of Today, Men of Tomorrow' – that pays most of its attention to Elaine May's *A New Leaf* and George Lucas's *THX 1138*. Simon deems that the screenplay of *The Andromeda Strain* is largely melodramatic and filled as much with clichés as with stereotypes, but he grants that the film's emphasis on 'supergadgetry' has about it 'a certain beauty', and he concludes that in support of this singularly attractive aspect 'the special effects are efficient' and 'the music is appropriate' (Simon 1982: 35). Coming from Simon, a notoriously hard-to-please critic whose collected writings touch rarely on soundtracks, the assessment of Mellé's electronic music as being 'appropriate' for Wise's film amounts almost to high praise; its implication seems to be that the invented sonorities as spread throughout the film do neither more nor less than what the narrative requires, and doubtless this pleased both the seasoned director and the neophyte composer.

Perhaps thinking that his electronic music for *The Andromeda Strain* would be a ticket to fame and fortune, Mellé was doubtless pleased as well to be asked to provide the music for the 1972 *Future Shock*, a 43-minute documentary by Alexander Grasshoff based on the same-titled 1970 book by sociologist Alvin Toffler. A few segments in this short film's second half, focused on recent scientific developments and featuring genuine imagery not far removed from what fictitiously often dominates the screen in *The Andromeda Strain,* are accompanied by sounds comparable to what Mellé had generated at Wise's request; most of the film, however, features a jazz-propelled score perhaps remarkable for its energy but in its orchestration wholly conventional.

Meant here not at all as a pejorative, the adjective 'conventional' describes not just the sonic palettes but also the compositional essence of pretty much everything that Mellé did in Hollywood during the thirty years subsequent to *The Andromeda Strain*. Persons wanting to quibble with that generalisation can of course point to the eerie theme that Mellé composed for Universal's *Night Gallery* television series even as his work on Wise's film was still very much in progress, and perhaps even to the often 'swoopy' score he wrote for the decidedly low-grade 1977 Canadian made-for-TV film *Starship Invasions*.[7] But even his champions would likely grant that after *The Andromeda Strain* Mellé's not infrequent use of electronic instruments – most of them, as the 1970s rolled on, not of his own making but of the Moog-ish store-bought variety – was largely for colouristic purposes.

It was only in *The Andromeda Strain* that Mellé, a newcomer to Hollywood ignorant of and thus not yet bound by the industry's conservative norms, and encouraged by a director who adamantly insisted on something very much out of the ordinary, was able to demonstrate his ability to create a film score that not just in sound but also in substance was almost unprecedented. By my reckoning, Mellé's 1971 music for *The Andromeda Strain* is still just a runner-up, certainly after the Barrons' 1956 music for *Forbidden Planet* and arguably also after Oskar Sala's 1962 telling contributions to *The Birds*, in the competition for Hollywood's first-ever all-electronic film score. But even a second- or third-place win in such a contest counts as a major achievement.

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[7]Dominated by horns and percussion and featuring just a dark 'wash' of synthesiser sonority, Mellé's 30-second theme was used in *Night Gallery*'s first two seasons, which aired on the NBC network from December 1970 to January 1971 (six episodes) and from September 1971 to March 1972 (twenty-two episodes). The music is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdSjgzqRna0. Mellé's full score for *Starship Invasions*, should readers want to indulge in the film's inanities, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QESnwxRUxyw.

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