

THE THORN BIRDS and the DULCIMER

Composed, arranged and conducted by Henry Mancini

MILLIONS OF Americans - 110 million, to be exact - were riveted, to their television sets for four nights last March. They were watching **The Thorn Birds**, the ABC mini-series based on the best-selling novel by Colleen McCullough. While millions of eyes were glued to Meggie Cleary (Rachel Ward) and Father Ralph de Bricassart (Richard Chamberlain)- two lovers destined to remain apart - millions of ears were captivated by the strains of lilting music that heightened the drama of the sorrow-ridden couple.

Those who listened a bit closer may have heard one instrument that stood out from all the rest. Its soft, poignant tones set the mood for the bittersweet tale that unfolded. The affecting instrument may have been difficult to identify. But that was the intent.

When composer Henry Mancini was commissioned to create **The Thorn Birds** soundtrack, there was an immediate obstacle. "Was there a music that was indigenous to Australia?" he wondered. "In the very beginning, I was looking for the sound of it. I hadn't really anything in mind, so I found just about every record of Australian music - folk, ethnic - that was available. It all stemmed back to the Irish and the Dutch, and some English. A lot of it was very reminiscent of our country music - there were a lot of guitars, banjos, and mandolins. I knew that the whole music scene in Australia had stemmed from basic Irish, but I didn't want it to sound like Irish music - that was another danger. I felt there could be just a hint of that, because there's not really an Australian sound - at least, there hasn't been until now.

"I must have gone through 25 or 30 records. Out of all the albums, there was one track in one album that featured a **dulcimer**. The album was by one of those groups that does Australian folk music - something like the music of New South Wales. Their music was authentic; it had good people in it. It wasn't a pop album. The dulcimer sounded so unusual and so uncommon - these days you don't hear it much. Its sound gave me the link, and then I thought, 'Well, I'm going to see what I can do.' "

What Mancini did was to make the dulcimer the lead voice in the statement of the main theme. "I used the dulcimer because you don't know what it is," he says, "and therefore it becomes what you want it to be. In other words, if a guitar had played that solo, it [the setting] could have been in the South, it could have been in England, it could have been anywhere. But with the dulcimer playing the theme. you didn't exactly know where it was from. Therefore I say it's from Australia, and it's from Australia.

"Before I wrote the theme I talked to studio musician **Jon Kurnick** on the phone. He was recommended to me as one of the better players. I asked him what the instrument could do, because it does have extreme limitations. He came up to my office and he played for me. I saw how the drone strings worked, what the scale was for the melody, how it could be tuned, how it was played. Then when I had that in mind, I knew what kind of melody I was going to do. That's when it came! The next time Jon came to see me, I said, 'Well, here's the theme.' I had him play into a tape recorder, and then I took it over to Stan Margulies, the show's producer. I said, 'I think I have the sound that will set us off at the beginning.' I played the piece for him and he said, 'That's it!.' He was happy about that. I had three other tunes in mind before I settled on this one. "The dulcimer must have been featured at least ten times during the four shows. The

theme [played by the rest of the orchestra] was in the soundtrack much more than that. but the dulcimer was in at every closing. The dulcimer is so distinctive, you have to wait for an open spot - like I did -and just throw it in there."

Will he ever use the dulcimer in another film score? "I don't know," says Mancini. "It's so distinctive, I would have to think twice. It was a unique thought and it has a unique sound. The next time anyone hears a dulcimer they are going to think of **The Thorn Birds**. I just don't think I can repeat myself on a thing like that.~'

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