

Things to Come, LSO, Strobel, Barbican review - blissful visions of the future

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Last night at the [Barbican](#) was my first experience of a film with live orchestra, which has become a big thing in the last few years. The film in question was Alexander Korda's extraordinary HG Wells adaptation *Things to Come*, from 1936, imagining a century of the future.

As ever with sci-fi, while it is fun to see what predictions turned out right and which wide of the mark, the main takeaway is what the film tells us about the anxieties of 1936. *Things to Come* has a notable symphonic score, by Arthur Bliss, the first to be released as a commercial soundtrack album, and the film that first brought the [London Symphony Orchestra](#) into the world of cinema.

And it is a very fine score, one which helped to form the template of orchestral film scores, by turns taut and dramatic, but also grand and aspiring. It is perhaps to modern sensibilities a bit odd to have the same musical language accompanying scenes from 1940 and a putative 1970 in which civilisation has collapsed, but it comes round full circle to be very fitting once again for the striving, idealistic ending. I was never quite sure if I was at a film screening at which the music happened to be supplied live, or at a concert performance which had the film projected for context. On a film soundtrack you

can pull down the volume of the orchestra at will, but live there is a limit to the dynamic range. This meant that at times what should be underscore overwhelms the dialogue – subtitles are provided at these moments – and the music is generally more prominent than it might otherwise be. And the flip side of that is that certain long scenes without music seem bare and – whisper it – even a bit boring.

But it's certainly a technical triumph. Conductor Frank Strobel (**pictured above** by Mark Allan), for whom this kind of thing is a speciality, did it all without a click track to help him find the tempos, and still made the hit points with a startling degree of accuracy. And this was not at the expense of musicality: the LSO were on fine form, clearly revelling in Bliss's scoring, and committing fully to the occasion.

The most notable thing about the film is its extraordinary production design, by Alexander Korda's brother Vincent. Apart from a few awkwardly obviously scale-models, the visuals are stunning for the time, and the transformation of 1930s London into a post-apocalyptic wasteland and then to a futuristic city must have been stunning at the time. The production is also unbelievably ambitious in scale, with hundreds of extras and massive sets. The prediction of a war in 1940 is spot on, although the pervading fears of gas attacks proved unfounded. There is a pandemic and a plan to go to the moon which is imagined for 2036 – reality got there nearly 70 years earlier. The script and acting stand up less well. There isn't much story to hang on to, with the 100-year time lapse. And there is something undeniably funny to modern ears about supposed peasants in 1970 greeting each other "hellair" or a child in 2036 asking "did they hev hyzes like thet in those deyz?"

But the inevitable anachronisms aside, I was pleased to see the film and particularly to hear Bliss's music, which in the rip-roaring "Entr'acte" and the *nobilmente* final sequence is really very good, and left me wanting to go and discover more of his (nowadays neglected) work.

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