

# Hub

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## Issue 26 Contents

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## Buy Us A Beer

On Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> October, Hub plays host to an Open Night for the British Fantasy Society at York Brewery (in York). Members and non-members all welcome. As well as the opportunity to drink beer while chewing the fat (harder than it sounds!) there are a few activities planned. See [www.hub-mag.co.uk/bfs](http://www.hub-mag.co.uk/bfs) for full details, and to register (places are limited, and almost full).

## News: Hub has expanded

You may have noticed an extra name at the top of this week's issue. The multi-talented Trudi Topham joins us from the excellent eZine, Pantechinon. Trudi will be looking after our slushpile, as it has grown to monstrous proportions in the past six months. Her expertise and assistance will be most welcome!

## About Hub

Every week we will be publishing a piece of short fiction, along with at least one review (book, DVD, film, audio, or TV series) and we'll also have the occasional feature, too. We can afford to do this largely due to the generosity of the people over at Orbit, who have sponsored this electronic version of the magazine, and partly by the generosity displayed by your good selves. If you like what you read here, please consider making a donation over at [www.hub-mag.co.uk](http://www.hub-mag.co.uk).



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## *The Music Company*



by Eugie Foster

Lidi was flat on their bunk when Wilson stepped into their windowless, twenty-ninth story digs. The holovision blared some fem program with a glitzy off-world set and super gorgeous men and women prancing around, jiggling and rippling from all angles.

He muted it. With each step, Wilson's proxleg shot fire over absent nerves. The medics said the phantom pains should have faded by now, one year after he'd triggered that plasma snare. Yet, he still felt them every time he had to walk more than a metro bloc.

"Taro?"

His wife lolled in their slender bunk, her eyes opening to slits.

"Where's the boy?" he asked. "Taro! Come give daddy a hello." The single room had few hiding places for a not quite two-year-old, even one that had picked up the trick of outrunning his dada with remarkable precocity, although with imperfect brakes and steering.

Lidi tittered. "Have to call louder than that."

Wilson excused the derision in her voice; he knew she'd hoped for better when she'd married him, maybe even a chance to go off-world. Corporate hacking and security were big-ticket knacks back then, before the war started. The war still raged, shutting down most of the private sector economies, and leaving plebs like him suitable only for the military. But after Wilson had everything from his right thigh down sheared off in a trap, he wasn't even fit for that.

By the light of the holovision, Lidi's pupils were huge, expanded so wide the blue of her irises were thin rings. Lying next to her on the crumpled coverlet was a neon green, peel-off backing.

"You're kinked!"

"Utterly," she agreed.

"Where'd you get the credits?"

"Top of the line, lover. Got a whole strip of 'em. 'Nuff for you, too."

Wilson's hands gripped his wife's shoulders. "Where's Taro?"

"Gone gone gone." Her reply was a lilting sing-song. "Gone Daddy gone, Taro's gone awaaaayyy--"

He shook her until her head flopped like a broken doll's. "What did you do?"

Lidi plucked at his hands, the giggles shut off. "Q-quit shaking me."

He released her, and she fell back, boneless. Blinking through a haze of narco, Lidi sat and pushed a lock of dirty yellow hair from her face with a trembling hand.

"W-what're you doing home?"

"They couldn't use me. Where's Taro?"

The limb-quaver spread, shaking Lidi's body as though she had the chills. There was grim satisfaction in knowing he'd wrecked her high, but it was fleeting.

"Well?"

"I gave him something you couldn't." The wisp of defiance in her voice petered out mid-sentence.

"What's that mean?" His voice ricocheted off the dull walls.

Lidi glared. "Don't you raise your voice to me, you *gimp!*"

All his frustration, his desolation, peaked, and his hand lashed out before he could stop it. At the last moment, he regained enough of himself to open his fist, turning a punch into a slap.

Lidi pitched over, and her sobs filled the room. "I-I contracted him to the Music Company," she whimpered. "He'll get to go off-world, l-live it rich. He'll get to have everything we don't."

Wilson couldn't feel his hands, although the proxleg twanged like electricity over raw nerves. A joe did not hit a fem. Only monsters like the bangers in the inner cities beat on their fems.

"You were on the fringes when the recruiter came by, six days ago. They gave him tests. They said he scored tops and they wanted him." Lidi sniffled. "Wil, they told me he'll be well-treated, have a plush life."

He'd seen the adverts and recruitment blips; the Music Company looked for youngsters with so-called talent, promising off-world lives for the ones that made the grade.

"They'll turn him into a rich man's dress-up, bend-over doll," he said.

"He won't. The contract's solid. A legal stamped it." She grabbed the strip of narcopatches and dropped them in Wilson's lap.

"C'mon, Wil, fix one of these on." She peeled off one of the round, neon backings and extended the adhesive patch to him. When he made no move to accept her peace offering, Lidi stuck it to her own neck.

"Show me the contract," he said.

"It's on my chippy." Her voice became loose and happy as the narco took effect.

Wilson plugged his wife's personal data system into the reader. The PDS read the contract to him in the masculine, faintly Eastern voice that Lidi preferred.

The contract stipulated a transfer of full guardianship for Taro to the Music Company for a very generous fee. They promised to train him to be a recitalist, the price of his education paid by future commission earned.

It read clean, cleaner than a lot of the employment deals he'd signed. And there, glowing in gold letters, was the legal imprint.

Except. Except he hadn't had a chance to say goodbye, hadn't gotten to dangle the boy in his arms one last time. Except he'd never see his son again, never look in his laughing eyes, or hear him demand "Dada fly me!" as he came through the door.

Wilson was out of their digs and in the street before the thought coalesced. He would let Taro go, but only after he'd verified the Music Company wasn't a skin house.

Wilson heard the whoosh of the transit shuttle before its headlights turned his world monochrome--brilliant white and shadow. He didn't raise hand or head to summon it. The balance on his PDS was a fat null.

The opp that had taken him from Taro's side, the last in a long string of washouts, had been nothing but a techie chop. He'd spent his last credit on the transport to Burndock, six days of standing in lines, bribing middlemen for an interview, bunking in sleep-away coffins while he waited for his contacts to peep. Wilson would've swallowed his pride and jumped on as a low-grade mechanic, anything for an income. But they weren't looking for mechanics; they were in the market for runners and mules, joes desperate enough to load their brainpans with illegal tech and risk smuggling it across city sectors. One look at his proxleg and the interviewer had sneered behind his mirrorshades.

Wilson still had Lidi's PDS clutched in his hand. For once, he was glad she'd insisted on a full access marriage. She'd rationed his spending, tithing half of everything he made, but now he shunted an even fifty percent of the money the Music Company had paid for Taro to his account. When it flashed green, he summoned a cab and applied for a divorce.

His freshly positive balance dipped.

Leaving Lidi's PDS in the *incoming* slot of their, now *her*, digs, he keyed open the waiting cab and climbed in. Should it bother him that he'd never see his wife or the quarters they'd shared again? The ache in his leg troubled him more.

*Destination?* flashed on the cab's display.

"The Music Company," he said, enunciating into the voice grill.

Two street addresses appeared. One was located in the business district, an office in one of the soaring sky towers; the other was on the outskirts of the city, almost beyond the cab's limits. Neither address had a MORE link.

"Why can't I get more information?"

"Please repeat selection."

He scowled. "Music Company corporate headquarters."

One of the options, the rural one, disappeared, leaving the downtown one.

"Huh." Wilson contemplated the screen. "Try the Music Company *legal department*."

The display remained unchanged.

"Music Company *contract office*?"

Same address.

About to tap YES, Wilson paused. "Music Company *training center*."

The in-town address disappeared, replaced by the remote one. Of course. The shiny people in the swank buildings with the blue-sky views did all the recruiting and cajoling, but when they had the signatures, they ushered the plebs to the flats. The office wouldn't have Taro.

Wilson pressed his thumb to YES and swiped his PDS through the reader. His balance dropped, and the cab took off.

While the New Atlanta blocs wheeled by--sparkling glascrete side-by-side with dilapidated brick and mortar, microserfs in chic couture swaggering past joes in torn city-issue--Wilson tried to remember everything he'd heard about the Music Company.

The distinctive bugle blare and percussive march of the military's theme resounded through the cab's speakers. *Join the army, be off-world in five years!*

Wilson stabbed the NO button.

It switched to chiming bells and rippling synthichords. *10% off on generic stimjolts.*

"Stop with the ad-blips!" Wilson pressed his thumb on the NO and left it there.

Instead of dissuading other blandishments from materializing, a symphonic prelude from one of the old-style musics replaced the ringing modhop.

*Absolute repertoire in each recitalist from the Music Company guaranteed!*

Wilson snatched his hand back. The blip continued, layering voice to text.

"Available for exclusive off-world contracts, every recitalist delivers a flawless performance every time! Equipped with a comprehensive repertoire of all musical work, from today's shakers, to obscure last millennium favorites. 100% human, real, live performers!"

Wilson tapped the YES. On the screen, a posh, off-world setting emerged from a flashworks of stylized cosmos--lofty ceiling over a sprawling room, joes and fems in elaborate, prismatic garb that dripped luxury, a spread of eats so varied and colorful Wilson couldn't identify half the tidbits on display. The milling crowd settled, reclining or perching on strategically placed divans and settees.

Excitement and anticipation charged the air, overflowing to fill the cab's passenger cabin. Applause leached from the speakers as a youth strode into the parlor. He was escorted by a beautiful fem, elegantly sheathed in a cloth-of-gold jumpsuit, platinum trinkets dangling from wrists and neck. It was obvious--clever vid angle or merely the boy's presence--that the fem, no matter how luscious, was not the showpiece.

She led the boy to a synthichord, cleverly incorporated into the décor to appear like an antique piano, complete with black and white keyboard and lacquer finish. The boy perched on the bench and plugged a thin wire into a port at the base of his skull; his fingers splayed over the keys, and he began to play.

The tune was deceptively simple, repeating a single theme in crescendoing intensity. With each iteration, a complex fusion of counter melodies and percussion grew, creating a tapestry of sound that was stirring, exciting, and soulful. It was everything New Atlanta wasn't, no metro kill fields, no streets filled with filth and regret. Just a melody, clear and sweet, without anything of the dreary cityscape to mar it.

When the final bars played, he wished it could have gone on.

If Taro's fate was to be like that boy's, to share some beauty with a refined and appreciative audience, Wilson could forgive what Lidi had done, maybe even applaud it. It'd be better than what he could've offered his son, slogging for the govcorps fresh out of a public edu, slinging boxes and crates for starving wages. And at the end of the day, the fleeting bliss of narco.

At least Taro would never be so desperate for credit he'd contract for inspection, walking through tech shops, hunting for traps.

But Wilson wasn't a slowmoe to be sold on corporate actors and propaganda. He would make sure it was solid.

The Music Company training complex appeared in the distance, a sprawling campus of gray concrete surrounding a squat dormitory tower. An oversized welcome board pointed the way to the visitor's entrance in pulsing holovision.

Wilson gripped the cab's seat. "No! Not the front entrance."

"Please repeat selection."

"Drop me at the back, behind the barracks."

"There is no such drop point for this destination."

"Is there any drop point except for the main entrance?"

"No."

"Then leave me here."

"Confirm?"

"Here!"

The cab coasted to a stop. "Thank you for your patronage. If you found the service satisfactory, we hope you will consider us again the--"

Wilson slammed the door shut.

The gut instinct that had kept him alive scrounging the banger shops, which told him to skip some jobs and pass by certain alleys through years of ghetto warfare, told him to stay on the sly. Of course, this was the same instinct that had remained mute when he'd opened up that banger house and blundered into the snare. Best not to hover on that.

Wilson circled the facility, a long jaunt for his bum leg. The area was set off by a barrier of crisscrossing struts and wire stretching past his head. When he estimated he was opposite the Welcome Center, he scaled the fence. He'd expected lookie-eyes or guards, but it seemed the only security was the metal-grate wall. Perhaps out here they didn't fear metro thugs?

It wasn't a hard climb, as things went. He'd shinnied up sheer walls looped in razor wire in the city, navigating hostile borders to make it to food dispensers. His leg gave him trouble, stiffening up when he bent it and throwing off his concentration. He landed poorly as he cleared the barrier, staggered by pain and gravity.

He crawled to the closest wall, ignoring the hurt. No matter how lax security seemed, bad luck could always nail a joe. It'd be dumb to get caught because someone happened to look in the wrong direction while he was flat in the open.

The thick, gray wall belonged to a thick, gray building. The only feature that set it apart from its neighbors was a letter and number: C-5. On either side were C-7 and C-3.

The door to C-5 was unlocked, a condition that boggled. Wilson cracked open the door and peered in. Lit by a faint, ambient glow, he saw a classroom, a big one. Reminiscent of a more affluent era, he recognized individual cubicles filled with terminals. Each cube also contained a complex keyboard, the business end of a synthichord.

Seeing the trappings of learning almost sent him skulking away, back over the fence and gone. If this was a skin house, they wouldn't have bothered with classrooms and fancy tech. And yet. He wanted to say goodbye to his son. What was the harm in that?

The center building, the barracks, was isolated by a perimeter of road. As he lunged from the alleys between the classroom huts, the twilight deepened to shadowed dusk. The breadth of silhouette and umbra promised some protection, meager as it was. When a door appeared on the plain face of the center building, Wilson broke from cover in a shambling sprint.

Panting, he hunched in the doorway to inspect the lock's keypad. After one scan, his heart tumbled to his knees. There were no lookie-eyes or guards on the outer buildings because they didn't need them. They had this door, or rather this door's secure-loc. It was military grade with a rotating trigger and anti-intrusion safeguards. On his best day with a kit full of crackware, Wilson would've been hard pressed to jigger one of these, unplugged. To have a chance of popping it, he'd have to wire his tender, out-of-practice grey matter in. And if it was a particularly nasty model, it might zap his leads, frying him extra crispy from the inside out.

Still, he'd come this far.

He flipped open the output prongs of his PDS, gulped in a breath, and slid the pin-sized plug into the niche at the base of his skull. Alerted by his entry, the screen flickered to life.

*WELCOME* scrolled in green letters across the display.

Wilson relaxed into the interface, flexing unused muscles and stretching forgotten tendons. It was like rediscovering a lover's body in the dark, the planes and angles so familiar, but made alien by sightlessness.

Wilson sent his thoughts, modulated to machine-speak by a clever and fantastically illegal bit of tech, into the secure-loc. A gate opened. But the welcome was treacherous. A barb closed around the first tendril of data he launched, half-severing it and sending bile up his throat.

With a thought, he cut free the strand of executable. He unhinged the electronic teeth that

had worried his virtual limb. It spun off untethered into the digital void.

The guts of the secure-loc opened. Immediately, he was assailed by a melting collage of colors. They bled like chalk pictures in the rain, the hues and textures dissolving into a pixilated blur.

Not colors, he reminded himself. *Data*. Just binary switches. *Zeros*. *Ones*.

The churn of sickening gray sharpened, becoming a wash of textured spheres, punctured through by pinprick sticks. The impression was gross and organic, like putrid flesh riddled with pustules and needles.

Computers were not organic, nothing of flesh. He needed to find the pattern, the structure. Wilson shut his virtual eyes. His primary sense offline, his secondary ones clamored to play. A cacophony of sound flung itself at raw nerve endings, metal against metal, the crash of breaking glass, the liquid hiss of acid on skin. With each sound came its corresponding tactile stimuli--the fingernail grate of rasping steel, a shattered pane, and burning.

That was bona fide, a precursor to a real scorching of cranial synapses. It was a warning: pull out now or die.

About to unplug, Wilson heard the ghost of a tonal sequence, familiar. It was the melodic theme the boy in the ad-blip had played. He searched for the recurring phrase, found it, lost it, felt the heat wash closer.

A flash of choice and choosing, like wobbling, arms flailing on the edge of a precipice. Which way to fall? One side promised a net but no Taro, the other a chasm of pain and dementia, but maybe, if he was lucky, his son.

Wilson chose.

The stench of burnt carbon. He shut down both olfactory and tactile data receptors, the better to trace the auditory trail. It was a dangerous strategy, for these sensory translations were the only inputs that might warn him of speeding death.

The melody so faint, but growing as his attention honed closer, magnified by his fixation. It was a trail, winding through a forest of circuitry wolves and electric lions. He wondered if the damage coursing up his leads would leave him ambulatory. Or sane.

The music was a pattern, guiding him in a meandering, purposeful fashion. At journey's end, the crescendoing overture and a door.

He threw it open.

Wilson pulled enough of himself out of the secure-loc to register the outside. The pulse in his head beat a hobnailed jig in his skull. Night had thickened the sky as he'd assaulted the system. Silvery shadows turned opaque, bleeding to seamless black. The darkness hurt his eyes.

Gathering his tech, he pushed open the door.

Within, a corridor stretched to a blue light flashed above parted doors, the interior of an elevator.

The blip-blip was blinding in his fragile, post-burnout state. Wilson fought nausea, his sense of time pop-hopping, distorting and stretching. The elevator was spacious with a selection of buttons in an assortment of colors.

Green was Taro's favorite.

The subtle vertigo of his insides sinking to his feet told him the lift was rising. One too many pop-hops. He expelled the contents of his stomach onto the sterile floor. When he was done, Wilson felt better--and also guilty, ashamed at mussing the pristine chamber.

The doors opened on a room lit by a faint, green phosphorescence. Children sat illuminated in ordered regiments beside trim bunks. To his hazed eyes, they looked older than Taro, but definitely younger than the boy in the ad-blip.

He skirted the wet mess he'd made and sidled into the room. At his entry, banks of overhead lights awakened. None of the occupants registered either the change or his presence.

The brightness revealed what the shadows had concealed. Each child was wired to a synthichord, one with more knobs and dials than he'd ever seen. The music machines looked like menacing parasites with slender tendrils reaching for young limbs, clear brows, and nimble fingers. The boards thrummed sub-audibly, a vibration beneath his feet that spoke of muted power.

Nearing the first line of recitalists in training, Wilson glimpsed padded speakers nestled in young ears. Tech-encased fingers rested over soundboards, black and white keys like antique piano mock-ups. Some of the children sat in rapt postures of listening, their hands still, serene smiles on their lips. Others pressed keys with obsessive purpose.

The vague, empty look in each pair of eyes was terrifying.

He kneeled before a child—a dark skinned boy, maybe six or seven—and waved his hand in the boy's face. The child neither blinked nor tracked the movement.

He was blind.

So was the child beside him, a girl with a golden fringe of hair and eyes so clear they were colorless. And the child beside her and the child beside him. They were all blind.

He turned back to the dark skinned boy. "Hello?" Wilson's voice grated in his throat.

No response. The boy couldn't hear him over whatever the speakers were transmitting. Gently, Wilson removed one.

The boy wailed, an inhuman, wordless cry, and thrashed his arms, slapping with a clumsy backhand. Wilson stumbled back, the clamor in his head flaring to agony as the boy keened. Flailing hands struck the keyboard. A bray of disharmonious notes shrilled from the speaker bud and the boy calmed. He clapped one hand over his speakerless ear and played chords with the other—simple triads, then modulations of major and minor—tinny but clear from the receptor Wilson still gripped.

"Son, can you hear me?" Wilson whispered.

The child ignored him.

He tapped the boy's shoulder. "I won't hurt you. Please, I just want to ask you a couple questions. Do you know where the new recruits are?"

No response.

"Do you know a boy named Taro? He'd have arrived recently, in the last few days."

The boy began to rock back and forth, moaning softly.

"What's wrong with you?"

Unsettled, Wilson set the displaced bud back in the boy's ear. Immediately, he quieted.

When Wilson plucked both speakers from the gold-fringe girl, she screamed. He clamped his hand over her mouth. It only muffled the outcry. With trembling fingers, he replaced the speakers. She took longer to console, whimpering and crying for long moments before she returned her attention to the keyboard.

But touching her had shown him something. He'd felt it with his pain-sensitized faculties, the hard, smooth ridge of flesh behind her jaw, under her ears. Peering close, he saw the healed incision, traced the surgical line of it as it disappeared into her hair.

Wilson limped from child to child. They did not register him, his touch, his probing fingers, as long as he didn't disrupt the receivers in their ears. Each child bore a scar and a data port like his; each had been surgically altered.

What was the Music Company doing to these children? And had they done it to Taro?



He hated the idea of invading their minds, possibly hurting them, but he had to find out. Wilson crouched beside a boy with dark hair and pale eyes, like Taro, and unreeled the tiny input from his PDS. As gently as he could, he plugged into the boy's port.

The boy didn't respond, didn't seem to notice the penetration that was so intimate Wilson had never even wanted Lidi to share it with him. He read the data feeding to his screen. The details were beyond his edu rating, but for sure they'd diced the boy's gray matter. They'd cut into tissue Wilson knew you weren't supposed to muck with, severing visual receptors. No, not severed, burned out. Even visual implants and cutting-edge tech wouldn't be able to restore light to this boy's eyes.

Wilson sensed movement a moment too late. He gazed down the barrel of a tazer rod gripped in the beefy hand of a guard. A flash, and he went down, wrapped in insensate blackness.

#

Wilson woke mired in a zap net, bound to an operating chair like the kind medics used. His head throbbed in painful intervals, a counterpoint to his heartbeat. The joe who'd zapped him stood beside him, tazer in hand. He wore blue coveralls with the Music Company logo emblazoned on the breast.

"Hello, Mr. Wilson." The voice was monotone and concise. A fem garbed in civvies--gray trousers and shirt, again marked as Music Company gear--stepped into his line-o. She held his PDS.

"I'm Dr. Trefford. Would you care to tell me what you were doing, trespassing and downloading data from our trainees?"

"My son, Taro. You have my son. My wife had no right to sign him over."

"That's an interesting tale. Want to hear my theory?" She didn't wait for his reply. "I think you're a thief. Only a skilled hacker could've gotten past our gate. I think you were going to kidnap one of our protégés or maybe just the data from his brain?"

Wilson's instincts clanged. The fem hadn't threatened him with the law, hadn't said anything about charges. He was savvy enough to know that spelled a quiet death and disposal for him if he was lucky, a messy one if he wasn't. He willed his fizzing limbs to push off the zap net that wrapped his wrists and ankles, but every build-up of energy was met by an immediate shock that turned his muscles to slag.

"You're mutilating children," he snarled, "severing key cortical regions and blinding them."

Dr. Trefford activated his PDS and attached a familiar device he'd seen techies use, a hack strip. "Awfully perceptive for the worried parent line, aren't you? But yes, the destruction of their optic nerves is necessary."

"Why?"

"In order to achieve their potential, we subdue some of the left hemisphere pathways so the right has to take over. It gives our protégés an enormous capacity for musical retention and reiteration. Such talent is worth a lot of money, for them and us. You should be amiable to the concept of technological enhancement in the name of profit." She tapped his head, low where his port lay. "Hacker."

The joe leveled the tazer.

Wilson lunged and felt shocks run in a cascade through his limbs, sending muscles into a trembling, useless dance. All except his leg, his clumsy proxleg. The impulses that powered it were of a more rugged variety, built to withstand currents that would render flesh useless.

Wilson kicked and the flimsy net strands tore. He caught the doctor a glancing blow, an unintentional bonus. She stumbled, sending his PDS spinning to the floor.

The security joe charged, but instead of neutralizing the man still snarled in webbing, he rammed the barrel of the tazer into the spasming, violent leg.

Wilson screamed and overamped proxflesh lashed out. The super-charged kick caught the other man in the knee, and he dropped, howling.

Electricity coursed through the proxleg, spreading hellfire. Wilson used the biting, mindless thing to thrash apart the webbing, suffering the feeble twinges firing into frenzied muscles.

Limping, gagging on the pain, he staggered to the writhing guard and smashed his spasming leg on the man's neck. The guard convulsed and lay still.

Wilson's fingers were nerveless, jelly limp, but he gripped them around the tazer rod and swiveled to Dr. Trefford.

She huddled on the floor. So easily unsettled by a little violence? Surely this woman had never set foot in the metro fields.

"Where's my son?" He aimed the weapon. With fingers that felt as nimble as if he'd taped plump sausages to them, he dialed the setting to lethal.

"W-when did he arrive?" she stammered, her eyes riveted on the red, flashing indicator.

"Recently. Sometime in the last week."

"He'd be in the recovery wing, on orange."

"Recovery." Wilson's fingers vibrated on the trigger.

"All new contracts undergo the surgery within forty-eight hours." Dr. Trefford, so cold and confident before, cringed from the look on Wilson's face.

"Is it reversible?"

He knew the answer before she shook her head.

"Get up. The elevator. March."

En route to the double doors, Wilson scooped up his PDS. The stink of bile and partially digested food assaulted both of them when the doors slid open.

Dr. Trefford minced around the pool of vomit. Wilson kept the tazer steady and watched as she pressed the orange button.

When the doors opened, a faint, green light illuminated a floor gizmoed up like a hospital ward. As they entered, the brighter overhead switched on, displaying a dozen bunks arrayed in military-straight rows. Between each was a lifesigns monitor that clattered a stream of vitals in lines of green and blipping red. Each bunk held a child, head swathed in bandages. A synthichord trailed speaker leads to each child to ears protruding from stratum of white.

Wilson knew Taro, even under a thicket of gauze. The boy reclined, his head cocked in an attitude of listening.

Wilson kneeled at his side, the tazer clattering away. He remembered the brown boy and the gold-fringed girl in green sector. Instead of ripping the speakers free as he longed to, he reached for Taro's hand. He had to pry it from the synthichord's keyboard.

"It's Dada, son. You remember me, don't you?"

The boy's fingers explored Wilson's, taking in the calluses and the rough, wiry hair. Taro's other hand continued to press the keys of the synthichord.

Wilson glanced at Dr. Trefford. "Why won't he stop playing?"

"His Corpus Collosum is severed," she said. "We split it and the Septum Pellucidum."

At his blank look she gestured impatiently. "The right and left sides of his brain no longer communicate. The part of him that's exploring the musical curriculum we have programmed into his tutor is unaware of your presence."

Wilson plucked at Taro's other hand. It was harder to dislodge the boy's last link from the

machine, but when he did, Taro turned his muffled head to his father.

"Dada," he said.

"He knows me!" Wilson loosened the bandages, peeling off layers until he had a pile of white on the floor.

But his son's eyes, free of their binding, didn't light up, didn't register anything.

The boy reached for his left ear and removed the speaker bud. He groped for Wilson, smiling sweetly. When he touched his father's face, he pushed the bud at him.

Wilson guided Taro, let him set the device in place in his ear. The boy beamed and turned back to the synthichord. With more dexterity than a two-year old ought to have, his son began to play.

With only one speaker, the music wasn't fully dimensional; it came across flat and tinny. Even so, it was exquisite. Taro's hands were sure, nimbly teasing poignancy and beauty from the machine.

When Taro finished, he turned his glowing face to Wilson, waiting.

"That was great, Taro. Fantastic."

The boy grinned, basking in his father's approval.

"He was progressing nicely," Dr. Trefford said. "As you heard, he's already building his repertoire. All of our recitalists can play back, note perfect, any melody, any tune they hear after their first exposure. Because of our enhancement, music is their preferred means of communication. Your son will be worth a lot of credits in a few years and wealthy beyond your imagining in twenty."

"I'm taking him out of here. Now." Wilson retrieved the tazer rod.

"Our recitalists have special needs, special requirements. If you take Taro away and force him outside, he'll go mad. He can no longer gate out all the sounds and sensations he once could. He'll overload on all the auditory and tactile stimuli."

Wilson's grip on the weapon tightened. It would be satisfying to push the trigger home, to watch Dr. Trefford burn. But it wouldn't fix Taro, wouldn't give back what his son had lost.

"I won't leave him."

"You don't have a choice." Dr. Trefford dove to the ground. Before Wilson could react, he was enveloped in a glowing nimbus of electricity.

When he could think again, he was face down on the floor. He tasted liquid metal, his own blood where he'd bitten his tongue.

Someone was screaming. Was it him? But no, the voice was too reedy, too fragile. It was Taro.

"Dada! Dada!"

Every nerve jangled, flayed by sizzling energy. Wilson dragged himself upright.

"Shh, Taro, Dada's here." He touched his son. Immediately, the boy's shrieks quieted, becoming whimpers. A phalanx of Music Company joes bristled at Wilson's back, rods still crackling. Dr. Trefford held her hand up, the signal that had stopped them.

"You've traumatized him," Dr. Trefford said. "Your presence has accelerated the autism."

"He's not traumatized," Wilson rasped. "He just wants his father."

"Regardless of what you call it, it's derailed his training. Separation from you distresses him. He will require counseling and probably psychotropics that may block some of his ability."

"Then let me stay with him. Please."

Dr. Trefford snorted.

"I saw the fem on your ad-blip with your performer. All of your recitalists need an escort, an assistant, right?" It was a gamble. If he'd believed in a god, Wilson would've prayed.

"As I said, our recitalists are not capable of functioning on their own."

"And you pay these aides?"

"Of course."

"Let me be Taro's. You wouldn't have to pay me. Two employees for the price of one, and you can be assured I'll take the best care of him."

"You don't have the skills for it."

"Train me."

Dr. Trefford eyed him. "I'll need to contact my supervisor."

Wilson hugged his son. "Do that."

#

As the years passed, Taro talked less. Wilson fretted, but his son seemed so serene, so content to express everything but the most basic requests through his synthichord. He didn't even seem nervous today, his first concert. They'd done hundreds of private recitals to admiring clients and patrons, but this was the first that qualified as an Event. With the credits from this day, they could finally start reducing their debt to the Music Company.

Wilson led his son to the transport that would usher them both through the purple jungle, a delicate growth shielded by force domes from the empty space outside the colony's atmosphere. In the domes a paradise, without, a vacuum wasteland, the sun too far away to give more than a feeble glow. It was a fitting amphitheater for Taro's newest composition, *Heaven and Hell*, a requiem in three parts.

A year ago, Wilson had asked his son if he missed his sight or regretted his servitude to the Music Company. In response, Taro had composed this piece. Every time Wilson heard the soaring melodies that reached, straining for the cosmos yet anchored by the earthy bass refrain, he felt like crying. But whenever Taro played it, the boy laughed.

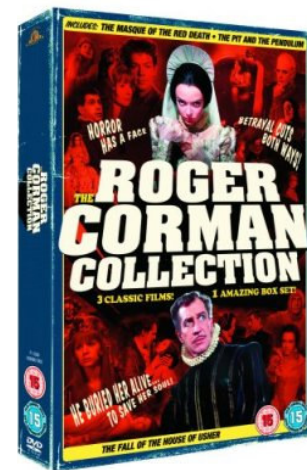
## REVIEWS

*Roger Corman Collection* reviewed by Paul Kane

### **Roger Corman Collection:**

House of Usher, The Pit and The Pendulum, Masque of Red Death.  
MGM Entertainment DVD, £24.99.

I was over the moon when this one came in for review, because more so than any other horror movies these take me right back to my youth – to a time when I was about eight or nine and my folks would let me stay up at weekends to watch the Hammer Films, the Universals and, of course, Roger Corman's Edgar Allan Poe 'adaptations'. For me, it was all about a mood they created – a creepiness that had little or nothing to do with blood and gore, but was more about psychological states of minds. And it was all about Vincent Price, who went with Corman's atmospheric pieces of celluloid like cheese goes with a fine wine. As with all things from your formative years, though, you tend to look back with rose tinted glasses. Was this still the case as I sat down to watch them twenty six years later? I was curious to find out myself...



Beginning with **House of Usher**, from 1960, we have the tale of a man seeking to find out what has happened to his missing fiancée. Philip Winthrop (Mark Damon) shows up at the House in the title, which is surrounded by an eerie fog, demanding to know what has happened to Madeline (Myrna Fahey). There he finds her brother Roderick Usher (Price), who has inherited the family curse of oversensitivity to light, sound, not being able to taste anything but plain food, and not being able to wear anything but the softest material. But that's not the only curse this family suffers from, it would seem. Roderick has persuaded Madeline that she is dying, as is he – a consequence of the evil things some of their ancestors have done. Needless to say, Philip is having none of this, and makes plans to take his true love back to Boston with him. However, when it appears that Madeline *has* died and is promptly interred in the family crypt, it seems that Roderick was right all along – or was he?

In **The Pit And The Pendulum** from the following year, we're given another dysfunctional family situation in another old mansion, this time by the sea. Here Price plays Nicholas Medina, who has married Elizabeth (another horror icon, Barbara Steele from Mario Bava's **Black Sunday**). When her brother (John Kerr) receives news of her death, he arrives to find out what happened. Apparently, Elizabeth became obsessed with Nicholas' father, who was one of the Inquisition's most ruthless torturers, and she used to wander down to the dungeon where a variety of his work implements are still present – one of them being that famous pit and pendulum. With Nicholas thinking he's going insane, backed up by the shifty Dr Leon (Antony Carbone), it begins to look like Elizabeth's death wasn't accidental at all. But I doubt whether anyone will guess the real twist at the end – nor who will end up on the wrong end of the pendulum's blade.

Finally, **The Masque of Red Death** (1964) rounds off the collection – taking us further into mind-bending 60s psychodelia than even the dream sequence in Usher promised. We start with a hooded figure dressed in red – and talking in Christopher Lee's voice – telling an old woman that the Red Death plague will soon be visiting her village. And so it does, killing people left, right and centre. Sadistic Satan worshiper Prince Prospero (Price) is eager to get back to the safety of his castle, a haven of hedonistic pleasures, but before he goes he takes with him a bit of totty, Francesca (Jane Asher – yes, she did have a career before cakes and **Crossroads!**), as well her father and the man she loves to play death games with. His wife Juliana (Hazel Court) is none too pleased that Francesca has caught his eye, so she makes her own pact with the devil to try and please her husband. Like he's bothered. He's more concerned with the party he's going to throw as the villagers are wiped out – and the Red Death doesn't have an invite. Or so he thinks...

I have to admit that age hasn't really lessened these films' power. Yes, they can be wordy and slow in places, if judged by modern standards, but when they get going they definitely pack a punch. The acting is of the scene-chewing kind, but that just adds to their charm, and the sumptuous cinemascope makes you long for the days of the huge single screen cinemas. Make no mistake, these movies are 'inspired by' more than faithful retellings of Poe's original tales, but old Edgar Allan's ghost still haunts every frame – and when you have a scriptwriter as good as Richard Matheson (who worked on **Pit** and **Masque**) you can't really complain. My only gripes are about the lack of extras - just one theatrical trailer for Usher - and that two of my favourite Corman/Poe movies weren't included: **Tales of Terror** and **The Raven** (the former boasting a splendid Peter Lorre turn in 'The Black Cat', and the latter featuring a fresh-faced Jack Nicholson). Perhaps they'll be in a future boxed set? I, for one, hope so because I really enjoyed this nostalgic trip back to my childhood.

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Coming soon... **New Kids on the Block – The Re-Match...**