

# ***Bebe Barron, 82, Pioneer of Electronic Scores, Is Dead***

By **Dennis Hevesi**

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Bebe Barron, who with her husband Louis composed the first electronic score for a feature film the eerie gulps and burbles, echoes and weeeooooos that accentuated invisible monsters and robotic creatures in the 1956 science-fiction classic “Forbidden Planet” died Sunday in Los Angeles. She was 82.

Her son, Adam, said she died of natural causes. Louis Barron died in 1989.

The score for “Forbidden Planet” the tale of a starship crew that travels 17 light years from Earth to investigate why settlers on the planet Altair-4 have gone silent “is truly a landmark in electro-acoustic music,” Barry Schrader, a professor of electro-acoustic music at the California Institute of the Arts, said Thursday.

While the Barrons created electronically produced themes for the film’s characters and events, Professor Schrader said, their score crossed the traditional line between music and sound effects.

“At some points it’s actually impossible to say whether or not what you’re hearing is music, sound effect or both,” he said. “In doing this, they foreshadowed by decades the now-common role of the sound designer in modern film and video.”

While later electro-acoustic scoring became more melodic, the Barrons’ breakthrough fixed the technique’s otherworldly identity in public consciousness. Perhaps the most memorable character in “Forbidden Planet” is Robby the Robot, who brews bourbon and performs herculean feats; for him, the Barrons composed a mechanically bubbly theme. For the invisible monster Id, a percussive sinking sound with a descending pitch punctuates every hole his footsteps leave on the planet’s rugged terrain.

Contemporary electro-acoustic effects are digitally synthesized. The Barrons used vacuum tubes and tape recorders. When it came to amplifying vibrations from a stylus on a record, vacuum tubes were a major advance from the days of the

phonograph horn. Mr. Barron designed vacuum tube circuits, organizing them in patterns that controlled the flow of electricity to produce combinations of pitch, timbre, volume and other variables. The sounds were recorded on tape.

Bebe Barron  
Adam Barron, 2005

Mrs. Barron would sort through hours and hours of tape. Together the Barrons would cut and splice; play segments at varying speeds to change the pitch; run segments in reverse to create new sounds; or induce delays to produce echoing feedback.

Charlotte May Wind (her husband nicknamed her Bebe) was born in Minneapolis on June 16, 1925, the only child of Frank and Ruth Wind. She earned a music degree at the University of Minnesota in 1947, then moved to New York, where she worked as a researcher for Time-Life while studying music composition. Soon after, she met and married Mr. Barron, who was trained in electronics. Attracted by the avant-garde music scene in the early 1950s, the couple lived in Greenwich Village.

Their fascination with electro-acoustic music began with a wedding gift: a tape recorder. Part of their apartment became a studio. There the composer John Cage recorded his “Project of Music for Magnetic Tape.” In 1952 the Barrons recorded the score for “Bells of Atlantis,” a short based on a poem by Anaïs Nin, who appears on screen.

Then, in 1955, the Barrons crashed an art party in Manhattan for the wife of Dore Schary, the president of MGM. They told him about their unusual recordings. Ten days later they were driving to Hollywood, where Mr. Schary signed them for “Forbidden Planet.”

The score drew critical praise, but a dispute with the American Federation of Musicians prevented the Barrons from receiving credit for it; their work was referred to as “electronic tonalities.” That slight was soothed in 1997, when Mrs. Barron was given the Seamus Award of the Society for Electro-Acoustic Music in the United States.

The Barrons divorced in 1970. In 1975 she married Leonard Neubauer. Besides her husband and her son, of Los Angeles, she is survived by a stepdaughter, Dylan Neubauer of Santa Cruz, Calif.

The Barrons never scored another feature film. But “Forbidden Planet” is etched in the mind of Professor Schrader, who first saw it at the Majestic in Johnstown, Pa.

“I was a 10-year-old kid who went to the movies every Saturday,” he said. “I sat through it three times and was still there for a fourth. Then I heard my father’s voice from the back of the theater, ‘Barry, where are you?’ ”