
MUSIC

Hitchcock's Music Man

Terry Teachout

THROUGHOUT their history, movies have been accompanied by music, and ever since 1908, when Camille Saint-Saëns wrote the score for *L'Assassinat du duc de Guise*, composers of distinction have had a hand in creating it. In addition to Aaron Copland, Erich Wolfgang Korngold, Miklós Rózsa, Dmitri Shostakovich, and William Walton, each of whom devoted a significant portion of his career to writing film music, the roster of such distinguished composers includes Leonard Bernstein, Benjamin Britten, Arthur Honegger, Sergei Prokofiev, and Ralph Vaughan Williams.

Yet the fact remains that most of the countless film scores composed since 1908—many for films of the first rank—have been musically undistinguished. Indeed, the enduring paradox of film music is that it need not be good in order to be dramatically effective. The American director John Ford actually pre-

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ferred to accompany such grimly forceful films as *They Were Expendable* (1945) and *The Searchers* (1956) with sentimental scores based on folk tunes and popular ballads. More recently, a number of prominent directors, the best known of whom is Martin Scorsese, have gone so far as to “score” their films with pop records chosen solely for their evocative quality. Scorsese's *GoodFellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995) are cases in point.

Even when first-rate composers collaborate with first-rate directors, moreover, trouble can set in—as when William Wyler ordered a staff arranger to rewrite the main-title music to Copland's Oscar-winning score for *The Heiress* (1948). Such meddling long ago became a byword, which is one of the reasons why eminent composers often refuse to write for the movies. Still, commercially successful pictures *have* been married to scores of high musical quality. They include Michael Curtiz's *Captain Blood* (1935, music by Korngold), Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, music by Franz Waxman), Vincente Minnelli's *Lust for Life* (1956, music by Rózsa), John Sturges's *The*

Magnificent Seven (1960, music by Elmer Bernstein), and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974, music by Jerry Goldsmith).

OVER THE COURSE of the studio era in Hollywood, however, there was only one director who employed music with such unfailing sensitivity that the quality of the scores accompanying his films became one of his trademarks. That director was Alfred Hitchcock.

Indeed, Hitchcock made extensive use of music not only off the screen but on. Many of his characters sing or play an instrument, and in several of his films—including *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Lady Vanishes* (1938), and *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943)—the plot itself hinges on the recollection of a half-remembered tune. More ambitiously still, the climactic sequence of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934, remade 1956) portrays an assassination attempt in a concert hall midway through a performance.

As for the scores themselves, they were written by some of Hollywood's best-known composers, including Waxman, Alfred Newman, Roy Webb, and John Williams, and

a few became popular in their own right. Miklós Rózsa's music for *Spellbound* (1945) was among the first film scores to be performed and recorded independently of the picture for which it was written. The most famous musical "cue" in a Hitchcock film, the screeching violins that accompany the stabbing of Janet Leigh in *Psycho* (1960), long ago entered the common stock of pop-culture reference.

Unlike most Hollywood directors, Hitchcock closely supervised the writing of his film scores. The extent to which he was responsible for shaping them prior to actual composition is documented in *Hitchcock's Music*, an important new book by Jack Sullivan.¹ The first monograph to be written about an individual film director's relation to music, it makes illuminating use of surviving archival material like the notes prepared by the director for the guidance of the composers with whom he worked.

As these notes show, Hitchcock sought to employ music as (in Sullivan's words) "an organic part of a psychodrama rather than an outside effect or accompaniment." And he had clear, consistent ideas about how to accomplish this. Hitchcock disliked the once-common practice of letting quasi-symphonic music play continuously under long stretches of dialogue, preferring instead to leave certain scenes "open" and to "spot" his cues in unexpected, often startling places. At the same time, he appreciated the power of music to heighten the dramatic effect of the extended dialogue-free sequences that are the most distinctive feature of his mature directorial style, and in these scenes he (usually) gave his composers free rein. As Maurice Jaré, who scored *Topaz* (1969), put it, "Hitchcock wanted counterpoint, not icing on a cake."

Hitchcock had no formal musical training, and none of his biographers has shed any light on the extent of his musical knowledge. But John Williams, who scored

Family Plot (1976), his last film, told Sullivan that he appeared to know a great deal:

He talked a lot about English music, which he was very interested in: Britten, Walton, Elgar, Arthur Bliss, and Vaughan Williams. . . . I haven't met many film directors in my lifetime who had that breadth of interest and intimacy in the concert repertory.

But whatever the actual extent of Hitchcock's musical knowledge, there can be no doubt of the subtlety of his touch—even if, for a long time, there was a noticeable gap between that subtle touch and the quality of the music itself. The composers who scored Hitchcock's early sound films in England were studio hacks. After emigrating to the U.S. in 1940, he worked with many of Hollywood's top musicians, but the results varied in quality. Prior to 1955, the strongest scores were yoked to second-rate pictures—*Spellbound* and *Rebecca* (1940, music by Waxman)—while the two best feature films he made during that period, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951), were scored by Dimitri Tiomkin, a Russian émigré whose florid orchestral rhetoric was out of keeping with the director's increasingly cool and sardonic approach to the making of virtuoso thrillers.

IT WAS NOT until 1955 that Hitchcock began to collaborate regularly with a composer whose idiom was fully compatible with his own, and it is no coincidence that three of the films he made thereafter—*Vertigo* (1958), *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho*—were among his most critically acclaimed. All three were scored by Bernard Herrmann. Though Hitchcock was notorious for his reluctance to share credit, he himself admitted that Herrmann's music was central to the appeal of these remarkable films.

Born in 1911, Herrmann was a New York-based radio composer

and conductor who had been brought to Hollywood by Orson Welles to score *Citizen Kane* (1941). Unlike most of the composers working there at the time, Herrmann was a musical modernist (if a conservative one), and he had broken with the late-Romantic idiom that was the *lingua franca* of Hollywood film scoring. *Citizen Kane* immediately established him as a major figure in film music, and between 1941 and 1955 he wrote eighteen equally impressive scores for such movies as John Brahm's *Hangover Square* (1945), Joseph Mankiewicz's *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (1947), Nicholas Ray's *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), and Henry Hathaway's *Garden of Evil* (1954).

In a 1945 essay published in the *New York Times*, Herrmann summed up his artistic credo:

Music in the films is a vital necessity, a living force. . . . Music on the screen can seek out and intensify the inner thoughts of the characters. It can invest a scene with terror, grandeur, gaiety, or misery. It can propel narrative swiftly forward, or slow it down. It often lifts mere dialogue into the realm of poetry. Finally, it is the communicating link between the screen and the audience, reaching out and enveloping all into one single experience.

The way in which Herrmann accomplished these goals was deceptively simple—in part because of his own musical limitations. Unable to write distinctive-sounding melodies, and uncomfortable with large-scale organically developed musical forms, he chose instead to build his film scores out of two- and four-bar musical "cells." These consist of sequences of chords, juxtaposed and (on occasion) chromatically altered in such a way as to make them sound tonally unstable, superimposing brief, stammering fragments of melody atop the shifting harmonies. The cells are spliced together and

¹ Yale, 354 pp., \$38.00.

repeated at will with little or no development, thereby creating an unsettled musical atmosphere that is heightened by Herrmann's darkly luminous orchestral palette.²

Unsympathetic colleagues dismissed Herrmann's scores as repetitive, and one of them, Lionel Newman, went so far as to claim, no doubt accurately, that "he couldn't write a tune to save his ass."³ On the other hand, the fact that his music had so low a melodic profile also meant that it never covered or overshadowed the scenes it supported. In the end, it was his ability to create such neutral yet emotionally charged musical backgrounds that made him the ideal composer for a director like Hitchcock, who conceived of film not as a vehicle for the exposition and dramatization of ideas but as (in François Truffaut's phrase) "a truly abstract art, like music."

HERRMANN'S collaboration with Hitchcock lasted for eleven years and seven films: *The Trouble With Harry* (1955), *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956 version), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *Marnie* (1964). In addition, he worked closely with Hitchcock on the electronic effects heard on the soundtrack of *The Birds* (1963). He can also be seen conducting the London Symphony on camera in the remake of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*—a cameo appearance that helped to establish him in the public eye as Hitchcock's "official" composer. Though the partnership ended in bitter acrimony when Hitchcock rejected his score for *Torn Curtain* (1966), Herrmann clearly regarded their collaboration as the high-water mark of his composing career.⁴

Like Hitchcock, Herrmann had an uncanny knack for knowing where and when to "spot" a music cue, and both men had a well-developed appreciation for the power of silence.⁵ At the same time, Hitchcock recognized that Herrmann,

who had a romantic streak, could also write music that filled his silences with emotional import. In his music notes for the wordless love scene in *Vertigo*, for instance, Hitchcock instructed the sound engineer to fade out all street noises "because Mr. Herrmann may have something to say here," a suggestion to which the composer obligingly responded with a music cue of near-Wagnerian intensity.

Vertigo, the first of the three major films on which the two men collaborated, is a psychological thriller about a detective who becomes sexually obsessed with the woman he is shadowing, a theme that inspired Herrmann to write his most passionate score. *North by Northwest*, by contrast, is a fast-moving comedy-drama in which Hitchcock returned to the witty style of his films of the 30's; no less acutely sensitive to this very different tone, Herrmann produced a score whose title theme, a kaleidoscopically orchestrated fandango, is a deft musical representation of (in the composer's words) "the crazy dance about to take place between Cary Grant and the world."

For *Psycho*, a horror story about a murderous madman, Herrmann created a score that even by his own standards is unusually concentrated and intense. Hitchcock shot *Psycho* in black-and-white in order to save money, to which Herrmann responded by writing for an orchestra consisting exclusively of strings. His harmonic palette here is ambiguous to the point of near-atonality, a device that brilliantly evokes the disordered mind of the lunatic who is the film's central character.

Though Hitchcock was as exact in his instructions to Herrmann as he was to all the craftsmen with whom he worked, the equally strong-willed composer rebelled when ordered not to write music for the scene in *Psycho* in which Anthony Perkins stabs Janet Leigh to death while she is taking a shower. Scoring the shower scene with shocking explicitness, he

then showed the result to Hitchcock, who agreed on the spot to incorporate it, later telling an interviewer that "33 percent of the effect of *Psycho* was due to the music."

IN AN indication of the esteem in which he is held by movie critics, Herrmann is the only composer with an entry in David Thomson's *New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (2002). Thomson praises his "uniquely psychological" scores in the highest possible terms:

He knew how to make music that came not just from the action we are seeing or the characters, not just from the heart of a film or the incoherent dream of its director, but from the unique marriage of a particular film and the large medium.

The question of Hitchcock's own artistic standing, by contrast, remains open. That he was a great *popular* artist seems beyond doubt, but his films are extremely uneven—far

² Unlike most film composers, Herrmann orchestrated his own music, often for highly unorthodox instrumental combinations. His (unused) *Torn Curtain* score, for instance, was written for twelve flutes, sixteen horns, nine trombones, two tubas, two sets of timpani, eight cellos, and eight double basses.

³ This near-complete lack of tunefulness is the main reason why Herrmann's concert works, which include a cantata based on *Moby-Dick* (1938), a four-movement symphony (1941), and a clarinet quintet titled *Souvenirs de voyage* (1967), have never been taken up by classical performers.

⁴ *Bernard Herrmann: The Film Scores* (Sony Classical SK-92767) contains performances by Esa-Pekka Salonen and the Los Angeles Philharmonic of excerpts from *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, *Psycho*, and *Marnie*, along with three cues from the unused score for *Torn Curtain* and suites from two films by other directors, François Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* (1966) and Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1975).

⁵ The most celebrated example of this is the scene in *North by Northwest* (1959) in which Cary Grant, who is alone on a deserted country road, is inexplicably attacked by a cropduster that appears from out of nowhere and chases him into a nearby cornfield. The scene plays without music until the exact moment when the plane crashes into a passing truck.

more so than Jack Sullivan is willing to acknowledge in *Hitchcock's Music*—as well as narrowly restricted in their expressive concerns.⁶ It is, I suspect, no coincidence that only one of them, *Vertigo*, has figured in the lists of the ten greatest films of all time chosen by noted critics and directors and published at decade-long intervals in the British film magazine *Sight & Sound*.

Yet Hitchcock remains the best-remembered director of the first half of the 20th century, as well as one of the most acclaimed, and even those critics who recognize his faults acknowledge the quality of his best work. “Although Alfred Hitchcock is the most primitive of major directors,” Charles Thomas Samuels wrote in 1970, “he belongs in their company.” As Samuels went on to explain:

Hitchcock has produced a new experience, a new kind of art. It is low but powerful; it does not exploit the full range of his medium, but it takes to the limit one of the things that film can do more fully than any other art. . . . [H]e has understood that no other medium can simulate action with most of life's reality but none of its limitations.

This thoughtful appraisal points to the reason why music plays so im-

portant a part in Hitchcock's films: it endows them with an emotional depth they would not otherwise possess. And it also helps to explain why *Vertigo*, *North by Northwest*, and *Psycho* are widely regarded as the best of the films he made in Hollywood. Although *Notorious*, *Rear Window*, *Shadow of a Doubt*, and *Strangers on a Train* are of comparable quality, none of them has a score of comparable musical distinction.

Herrmann clearly understood the significance of his contribution to Hitchcock's films, remarking that the director “only finishes a picture 60 percent. I have to finish it for him.” At the same time, he had doubts about the viability of most film music, his own included, when extracted from the context of the dramatic action it is intended to support. But he did not seem overly troubled by this. Film music, he said in a lecture given in 1973,

ought not to be written so that people going to cocktail parties can say, “Play me that bit.” Music for film should no more be noticed than the camerawork. . . . I don't think, for example, that one can do a film score that has the musical vitality of, say, a work by Richard Strauss, and get away with it. I mean that in all seriousness. If you could do a score for a

picture, and really play Strauss's *Don Juan*, no one would watch the picture. The music would completely sweep you away and the film would not be seen.

To me this frank admission seems nothing more than the truth, and it explains why none of Bernard Herrmann's film scores, not even *Vertigo* or *Psycho*, has yet entered the standard orchestral repertoire either in whole or in part. Still, his music is more widely known and admired today than it was during his lifetime, and many of his best scores have been recorded in their entirety and can be heard on CD. To listen to them apart from the films they were written for is always a fascinating experience, if in the end no more satisfying than watching a film with the sound turned off.

The film composer, like the opera librettist, is by definition a practitioner of a dependent art. But he is an essential one nonetheless—and nobody has practiced this art better than the man who finished Alfred Hitchcock's greatest pictures for him.

⁶ Revealingly, Thomson describes Hitchcock as “an impoverished inventor of thumbscrews who shows us the human capacity for inflicting pain, but no more. . . . [T]here is a degree of spiritual coarseness and callousness in [his] work that chimes with the career-long taste for brutalizing our nerves.”