

Analytical Essay on the score of Psycho

The man behind the low woodwinds that opens Citizen Kane and the 'high pitched violins' of Psycho (1960). Bernard Herrmann was one of the most original and distinctive composers ever to work in film. He started early, winning a composition prize at 13 and founding his own orchestra at 20. After writing scores for Orson Welles' radio shows in the 1930s (including the notorious 1938 'War of the Worlds' broadcast), he was the obvious choice to score Welles' film debut, Citizen Kane (1941), and subsequently Magnificent Ambersons, The (1942), though he removed his name from the latter after additional music was added without his (or Welles') consent when the film was mutilated by a panic-stricken studio. Herrmann was a prolific film composer, producing his most memorable work for Alfred Hitchcock, for whom he wrote nine scores. He ignored the directors instructions - like Hitchcock's suggestion that Psycho (1960) have a jazz score and no music in the shower scene). He ended his partnership with Hitchcock after the latter rejected his score for Torn Curtain (1966) on studio advice. His last score was for Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver (1976), and he died just hours after recording it.

Bernard Herrmann is one of the most important film composers of the 20th century. He was one of the key figures in creating the *genre* of film music. He developed a musical language that was ideally suited to easily fitting to varying lengths of scene.

On the other hand, made strong use of short repeated rhythmic phrases and ostinati. These could be readily repeated to fit the length of a scene and provided a feeling of onward motion appropriate to strong filmic story telling such as suspense and thriller films. Repeated rhythmic patterns were of course well known to the improvising pianists and organists of the silent film days - the 'vamp 'till ready' technique. They had also become an idiosyncratic element of the highly original classical music of Janacek. we don't know whether Herrmann was ever familiar with Janacek's music, but his rhythmic techniques presaged those used by minimalist composers several decades later.

Herrmann's also developed a use of harmony that was particularly suited to film. It is no accident that he was the composer for some of Alfred Hitchcock's greatest films. He made strong use of augmented chords which provided a certain unease. However, he particular used overlapping harmonies that left a scene feeling unresolved - ideal for building tension in the storytelling of a thriller. Tensions was produced by overlapping harmonies and their ability to help build a powerful climax .

His orchestrations are inventive and chosen to underline the atmosphere of the film. At times, he deliberately limits his palette, as in *Psycho*. At other times, he calls on highly unusual forces as in (his unused music to) *Marnie*. The film score did not need to tie itself to the forces of the 19th century symphony orchestra. It also did not have to follow the constraints of an acoustic performance. Some instruments could be 'miked up' and others 'miked down'. This added a new tool for the orchestrator. However, it was a tool he used sparingly.

His musical style was bold and direct, yet certainly not typical of the day. Rather than full-blown themes, his talent was to select and develop simple mottos such as those high-pitched Psycho violins or in Vertigo those augmented chord arpeggios that seemed to encapsulate the whole concept of the movie. The orchestration also tended to be unusual but again tailored perfectly to the particular need. Psycho used strings only, which seemed to match the black and white photography. The orchestration for that rejected score for Torn Curtain was played using large numbers of flutes, horns and trombones. By way of contrast Fahrenheit 451 employs lots of tuned percussion. In a number of ways, Herrmann's musical style follows in the footsteps of Miklos Rozsa being bold and dark and an integral part of the film experience. In addition to the screaming effect, Psycho also has the agitated title music associated with the initial driving scenes through the rain away from the scene of the crime. As well as this there is the pervasive eerie atmosphere which reflects the creepy setting at the Bates Motel

heightened by feelings of guilt. For Vertigo it is the arpeggios moving in different directions at the same time which seem to be most closely identified with the movie and its title. Here are the films he scored in his life:

- **Citizen Kane** - *a busy theme tune, and the movie uses some classical music too, including Mendelssohn, Wagner, Chopin and Beethoven*
- **All that Money Can Buy** - *his one Oscar for this early score*
- **The Magnificent Ambersons** - *another Orson Welles classic*
- **The Ghost and Mrs. Muir** - *this re-used some material that Herrmann had earlier composed for an Opera version of "Wuthering Heights"*
- **The Day the Earth Stood Still** - *influenced Danny Elfman's Mars Attacks, recognisable as Herrmann despite the electronic tone-generator sounds*
- **Anna and the King of Siam** - *with some dramatic oriental music*
- **The Egyptian** - *it's not often that composers collaborate on a score, but Herrmann worked with Alfred Newman on this one*
- **The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit**
- **Hangover Square**
- **Five Fingers**
- **On Dangerous Ground**
- **The Snows of Kilimanjaro**
- **The Kentuckian**
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- **The Bride Wore Black**
- **The Man who Knew too Much** - *Doris Day sings the song "Que Sera Sera" by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans, and there's an appearance by Bernard Herrmann himself as the Conductor for the concert scene*
- **The 7th Voyage of Sinbad**
- **Vertigo** - *re-used on a recent car advert in the UK with David Duchovny*
- **Journey to the Centre of the Earth**
- **North by Northwest** - *instantly recognisable and very atmospheric*
- **Psycho** - *famous for the screaming strings in the shower scene, but the tension really mounts during the car journey through the rain*
- **The Three Worlds of Gulliver**
- **Mysterious Island**
- **Cape Fear** - *the original and the remake as used by Elmer Bernstein.*
- **The Birds** - *Herrmann is a musical consultant on this, the bird noises described as "sound construction" created using an early electronic instrument*
- **Jason and the Argonauts**
- **Marnie**
- **Fahrenheit 451** - *strings and tuned percussion and a wonderfully surreal fire-engine sequence*
- **It's Alive 1, 2, 3** (posthumously)
- **Taxi Driver** - *his last score and highly recommended*