



Pearson

Bernard Herrmann: *Psycho* – ‘Prelude’, ‘The City’, ‘Marion’, ‘The Murder (Shower Scene)’, ‘The Toys’, ‘The Cellar’, ‘Discovery’, ‘Finale’ (for component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

The composer

Bernard Herrmann (1911–75) was an American composer and conductor best known for his work on film scores such as *Citizen Kane*, *Jason and the Argonauts*, *Fahrenheit 451* and *Taxi Driver*. He won an Academy Award (‘Oscar’) in 1941 for his score for *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. His name is particularly associated with the films of **Alfred Hitchcock**, scoring seven films between 1955 and 1966 (when Hitchcock rejected Herrmann’s score for *Torn Curtain*). Of these, his scores for *Psycho*, *North by Northwest* and *Vertigo* are regarded as classics of the genre, Herrmann’s uncompromising music perfectly matching the twists and turns of Hitchcock’s filmmaking. (Herrmann was also ‘sound consultant’ for Hitchcock’s *The Birds*, where a musical score was replaced by electronically manipulated bird sounds.)

Unlike the previous generation of film composers (who had all migrated from Europe, and whose musical styles were very much rooted in late 19th and early 20th century Romanticism), Herrmann was born in New York, studying at the Julliard School, and his influences were far more varied and modernist. He studied with Percy Grainger, loved the music of Delius, and, as a conductor, championed the music of the early American experimental composer Charles Ives. In fact, his early career was as a conductor and classical composer, and it was only after he began working with the actor/director Orson Welles that he turned to writing music, first for radio and then for films. Renowned as quite a ‘prickly’ character, with a (justifiably) high opinion of himself, he insisted from the very beginning on artistic freedom, whenever he took on a film (something that few composers, then or now, have ever achieved!). Part of this independence was that he always orchestrated his own scores, meaning that he could have complete control of the actual details of the sounds being made. As a conductor who had given first performances of many new works in the 1930s and 1940s, he had a comprehensive working knowledge of 20th-century musical styles, and employed this in his own music – in *Psycho* there are ‘echoes’ of Debussy, Bartok and Stravinsky. His last score, for *Taxi Driver*, was completed in 1975, just before his death.

Herrmann, Hitchcock and *Psycho*

Psycho was the sixth collaboration between Hitchcock and Herrmann and is one of the classic horror/thriller movies, perhaps establishing the genre. Hitchcock always acknowledged the importance of Herrmann’s music to the success of the film, saying that ‘33% of the effect of *Psycho* is due to the music’. Herrmann, for his part, commented that

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'Hitchcock only finishes a picture 60%: I have to finish it for him.' It is very noticeable that on the opening credits of the film, Herrmann's name comes up on the screen alone, immediately before Hitchcock's, and in the same large font size. (This importance was underlined in another area, when Hitchcock doubled Herrmann's original fee to \$34,500.) Herrmann's response to Hitchcock's disturbing, violent masterpiece was to match the stark, cold, black and white images of the film with music 'in black and white', as he put it, by using only the string section of the orchestra in his score. Writing no less than 40 cues for the film, Herrmann created tense, cold, ruthless music, evoking madness at times, but also with occasional moments of tenderness. Using a **dissonant** and sometimes **atonal** musical style, Herrmann 'broke the mould' of previous film score styles by his widespread use of **ostinati**, while achieving musical unity by the use of **leitmotifs**. The film's most iconic scene, where the character Marion is murdered in the shower, is one of the most famous in cinema history, as much for its music as for its images. Yet this scene was originally intended to have no music, and Herrmann had to work very hard on Hitchcock to get the (now integral) string chords added to the images. He succeeded, and the rest is history!

Performing forces and their handling

Herrmann's boldest decision in the scoring of *Psycho* was taken before a note had been written: that of limiting the forces to the orchestral string section. Without the contrasting woodwind, brass and percussion timbres, Herrmann was forced to be enormously creative in his string writing, using the instruments in a way that was very different from the norm in Hollywood. Perhaps his motives in making this decision were in trying to reflect the film's stark black and white images and tense claustrophobia with what might seem like a similarly limited 'closed-in' sound world. Writing for a conventional five-part string section (violins 1 and 2, violas, cellos, double basses), Herrmann created a bold score where the varied use of string textures is crucial. (Many see the film without realising that there are no other instruments present.)

Another important 'blanket' decision made by Herrmann was to instruct the string instruments to play *con sordino* (muted) for all the music cues in the film – apart from one – the shower/murder scene. This decision not only gives the full, piercing chords of that scene even more aural power, but also creates a 'repressed', sombre sound for all the other cues, whether loud, soft, fast or slow.

Some of examples of string textures in the extracts are as follows:

Prelude

- Opening 'hammered' chords (see example 1 below).



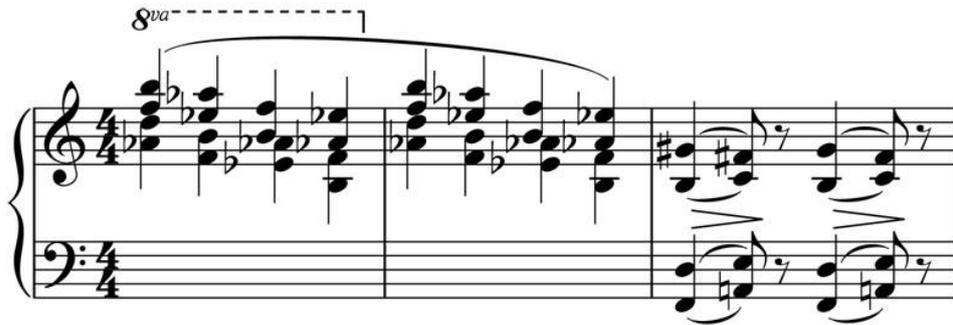
- 'Obsessive' quaver ostinato figures (bar 3 onwards).
- Pizzicato cello and bass notes, sometimes as a pulse (b5-14) and sometimes as

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- syncopated punctuations (Bass in bars 21-24)
- Fingered tremolo (bar 41).

The City

- Lush, eight-part bowed string writing, very romantic in style, with octave doublings and very high writing in all instruments (see example 2 below). Played *pp*.



Marion

- In some ways the most conventional of all the cues.
- Straightforward, mid-range, between three- and six-part arco string writing.
- Opening melody repeated an octave lower in the second violins.
- Dynamics important here.

The Murder

- ‘Shrieking’ ultra-high notes towards the top of each instrument’s range.
- Played ***sffz*** and *senza sordini* for maximum impact.
- Texture builds from the top note downwards, each of the eight *divisi* parts coming in after the other to create a complex eight-note **chord cluster**.
- As a complete contrast, from bar 17, the upper strings (violas/violins) alternate *arco* and *pizzicato* low cluster chords, while the cellos and basses play sinister off-beat figures, also low in their registers (starting in octaves and ending with a diabolus Diminished 5th).

The Toys

- Violins (*divisi*) play downward parallel seventh chords.
- Underneath this, an **ostinato double pedal** operates – viola plays *arco* F crotchets (using down bows), underpinned by pizzicato Es a ninth below in the cello and held E pedals a further octave below that in the double bass.

The Cellar

- Begins with D octave doubled trills in all instruments.
- Bars 5–46 *tremolando* passages moving in quavers, building up a **fugal texture**.
- Musical phrases here are shared between ten *divisi* parts, with each half of the section overlapping the other by a quaver each time.
- Bar 47 *tremolando* continues, but now with a change of sound by playing *sul ponticello* (near the bridge) in half of each part, while the other half play *arco normale* and *senza tremolando*.

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- At the same time the cellos and basses begin to play longer notes, again splitting the section between normal *arco* and *sul ponticello* bowing.
- The cue finishes with contrasting sustained chords, building a chord from the cellos and basses and ending with a high, unresolved chord in the first violins.

Discovery

- Aggressive, highly rhythmic dissonant chords, with accents strengthened by pizzicato in the double bass.
- Rapid downward parallel seventh chords in the upper strings.

Finale

- ‘Bleak’ string texture beginning with a lone viola line, joined by high violins in a chromatic, polyphonic texture.
- Viola introduces three-note ‘Madness’ motif at bars 15–16, taken up in octaves by cellos/basses bars 17–18.
- Concludes with dissonant **ff** low register chord combination.

Structure

One of the roles of music in any film is to bring unity to the often rather fragmented visual language of cinema. In *Psycho*, Herrmann used **leitmotif technique** to unify the musical cues, associating musical textures and gestures with characters and psychological states on the screen. In Herrmann’s case the **leitmotif** is usually a more complex musical gesture than the Wagnerian model, including harmony, texture and rhythm, as a well as melodic shape. Three of the extracts under study here are used in this way:

- ‘Prelude’
 - Used in **six** cues, mostly associated with characters escaping in cars.
- ‘The City’
 - Used in **six** cues, associated with characters in mundane situations.
- ‘The Murder’
 - Used **four** times, associated with the act (or result) of the murder.

A more conventional **melodic** leitmotif, a three-note motif, associated with Norman Bates’ madness, is woven into the score in several places, appearing for the purposes of our study right at the end of the Finale music. (There are other leitmotifs in the score, most notably one representing ‘Temptation’, but these are outside the scope of these notes.)

Despite the relative ‘modernity’ of his material at times, Herrmann does favour phrases which are built up of **two-, four- and eight-bar units**.

Prelude – *played under the opening credits.*

- Built up of four ideas, assembled into a flowing, driving whole:
 1. Bars 1–3 ‘stabbed’, **syncopated ‘Hitchcock’** chords (see **harmony**).
 2. Bars 3–20 busy, obsessive ideas made up of short **ostinato**.

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3. Bars 21–24 repeated **dotted rhythm block chords** answered by an off-beat low bass pizzicato.
 4. Bars 37–48 a more conventional melodic line, moving **stepwise**.
- These ideas are played in various orders (1 always precedes 2, while 3 and 4 are interpolated into the texture more unpredictably).
 - All ideas undergo some **variation**, either of idea or by **transposition**.

The City – *played as the camera pans over Phoenix and down to the hotel room.*

- Based on varied repetitions of the opening three bars (see example 2 above).
- Bars 4 and 5 reverse the music of bars 1 and 2 in a literal **retrograde**.

Marion – *played during Marion and Sam’s clandestine meeting in the hotel.*

- Simple AABA structure, based on four-bar phrases.
- Rounded off with a paused ‘**Hitchcock**’ chord.

The Murder – *played during the shower scene.*

- The famous ‘slashing’ chords build up over eight bars.
- These are **repeated**, with *glissandi* up to each note.
- The rest of the cue consists of repeated two-bar phrases before a more sporadic final five bars.

The Toys – *played as Lila (Marion’s sister) explores Bates’ bedroom.*

- Descending parallel chords over an ostinato double pedal – three-bar phrases in the upper strings.

The Cellar – *played as Marion descends the cellar stairs.*

- Builds up a **fugal texture** from eight-bar units, beginning at bar 5.
- Four (related) contrapuntal ideas eventually combine.
 - Bars 5–12 ‘subject’ cellos/basses
 - Bars 13–20 ‘subject’ violas – countersubject 1 cellos/basses
 - Bars 21–28 ‘subject’ violin 2; CS1 – violas; CS2 cellos/basses
 - Bar 28 violin 1 ‘subject’ – NB enters a bar early, overlapping
 - Bar 29 CS1 violin2; CS2 violas;
 - Bar 32 CS3 cellos/basses
 - Bar 40 CS4 violas (based on CS3 but metrically displaced)
 - Bar 45 CS1 gradually becomes downward chromatic scales
 - Bar 47 ‘subject’ shared among all instruments, with bass/cello sustaining first note of each phrase
 - Bar 68 final chord builds up.

The Discovery – *played as the figure in the chair is revealed to be Bates’ dead mother.*

- Repetitive highly rhythmic idea in homophony and homorhythm (bars 1–18) then disturbed by cross-rhythms in the cellos and bass.

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- Descending chords followed by a final chordal gesture.

Finale – played at the end of the film as Bates sits in the police station, with his mother's voice heard on the soundtrack.

- Recaps material from the '**Madhouse**' cue (not part of this study).
- Makes prominent use of the 'Madness' motif – **F–E \flat –D** in the last four bars.

Texture

- *Psycho* is full of interesting string textures (see Performing forces – above).
- There are examples of more general textures:
 - **Monophonic – Finale (bars 1 and 2)**
 - **Homophonic** – bars 37–48 in **Prelude**
 - **Homorhythmic** – bars 1–3 **Prelude**
 - **Polyphonic**
 - **Fugal (contrapuntal) textures** in up to four parts – bars 5–46 in '**Cellar**'
 - Three-part free polyphony bars 1–17 **Finale**
 - **Ostinato** – many examples, but bars 27–34 in **Prelude** layers three ideas.

Tonality

- *Psycho* generally avoids traditional **tonal centres** and **key schemes**.
- The music is sometimes basically tonal (**Marion**), but at the other end of the spectrum there are atonal cues (**Murder, Finale**).
- Some cues use a dissonant, chromatic language with some reference to a tonal centre.

Harmony

- In *Psycho*, chords are used for their *sound*, rather than for their role in the prevailing tonality (tonic, dominant).
- This **non-functional harmony** avoids traditional progressions such as cadences.
- Much of the harmony here is **chromatic, dissonant or atonal**, avoiding conventional triads for the most part.
- Several complex chords are used here:
 - The opening of the Prelude (see example 1 above) uses a dissonant chord which has become known as the '**Hitchcock**' chord. Consisting of a minor chord with an added major seventh, this chord stands starkly as an immediately unstable sound at the head of the film. More importantly, it does not develop, or indeed lead anywhere. This chord used throughout the Prelude, both in its 'rhythmic' version (ex. 1) and as an accompaniment to other material (**Prelude** bars 47–48, 126–130; **Marion** bar 17).
 - Dissonant **chord clusters**, based on chords with notes a semitone apart. The famous chords at the beginning of **Murder** (bars 1–16) use the notes E \flat , E, F and G \flat , but with the intervals inverted to form descending **major sevenths** between the notes of the chord.
 - Other chords are based on interlocking **augmented fourths** (**Murder** – bar 18 – combines D/G \sharp and G/C \sharp).

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- **Extension chords** which make major triads dissonant (**Prelude** – bar 21 is a C#7 chord with a minor ninth (D) added to it; the end of **Discovery** uses this chord for a longer period (notated enharmonically in D \flat))
- Chord components with roots a **diminished fifth** apart (closing chords of **Finale** – D bass with A \flat minor triad above).
- More conventional harmony is occasionally used:
 - Harmony based on a falling chromatic scale, but basically still tonal (**Marion** bars 1–4).
 - ‘Impressionistic’ use of **diminished seventh** and **half-diminished chords** (**The City** – bars 1–3, see ex. 2 above.) Here, the first chord of bars 1 and 2 is a **diminished seventh chord**, while the rest are inversions of the same chord with the D changed to an E \flat , making it **half-diminished**.
 - **Parallel chord movement** by step (**Toys** – chains of **major seventh** and **minor seventh** chords; **Discovery** bars 26–35 rapid parallel movement from a four note chord C/D/E \flat /B).
 - Juxtapositions of chords a semitone apart – (**Prelude** – bars 37–40 E \flat minor, bars 41–44 E minor).

Melody

- Herrmann favours the use of **motifs** (short melodic cells) from which he builds longer melodic structures by **repetition**, **sequence** and **development**.
 1. The melodic component of **Prelude** Idea 2 (violin 1 – bar 5) is constructed from two interlocking major thirds – E/G# and F/A. This cell is also used to create the accompaniment ostinato from bar 29 – a figure similar to one from **Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring**.
 2. The melody of **Marion** begins with a long descending melodic sequence, with the **rising/falling perfect fifth** in every phrase (except for the very first note). The middle section of this cue retains the rhythm of this idea, but changes the intervals to a rising **diminished fifth** and a falling perfect **fourth**.
- A figure first heard in bar 3 of **Prelude** – an upwards semitone – is used in many ways throughout the film. (Some commentators connect this semitone figure to the ‘duality’ of Norman Bates’ mind – it is sometimes called the ‘Steiner’ motive.)
 1. As an **ostinato** – (**Prelude** bar 3 onwards).
 2. Doubled in thirds and simultaneously **inverted** (**Prelude** bars 9/10, 15/16).
 3. As a ‘sighing motif’ – **inverted** – (**Prelude** bars 45–46).
 4. With note values **augmented** and intervals **inverted** (**Murder** – bars 17–28 cellos/basses).
 5. With intervals inverted to **major sevenths** to create **widely spaced chord clusters** (**Murder** bars 1–16).
 6. As a **verticalisation** (played as a chord) in the bass of **Toys** (**viola, cello and bass**).
- A three-note idea (**F/E \flat /D**) associated with **Madness** (**Finale** bars 15–18). This figure appears only briefly in our extracts, but features quite prominently in the cue **Madhouse**.
- In **Cellar** Herrmann creates melodic material for his **Fugal texture**. The ideas here are all related. There are four ideas here:

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1. An eight-bar '**subject**' which rises sequentially. Internally, bars 2 and 4 are related sequentially, while bars 2 and 3 also bars 4 and 5 seem related in terms of **melodic inversions** and possibly **retrogrades**.
 2. **Countersubject 1** – chromatic scale patterns and moving downwards in sequence.
 3. **Countersubject 2** – with crotchet rests separating the notes of the idea in order to maintain the excitement of the quaver movement.
 4. Further development of the **subject**, this time using **three notes to a bar (CS 3 and 4)**.
- All these ideas eventually evolve into 'empty' downward chromatic scales as the cue draws to a close.

Tempo, metre and rhythm

Of the eight cues here, four are broadly fast in tempo

- **Prelude, Murder, Cellar, Discovery.**

While four are in slow tempi

- **The City, Marion, Toys, Finale.**

The tempi are chosen to match the mood/psychological intentions of the scene concerned.

Prelude

- 2/4.
- Strong rhythmic drive fuelled by incessant quaver movement.
- Interrupted by the syncopated rhythm (ex. 1) of the 'Hitchcock' chord.
- A nervous Bartok-like triplet semiquaver figure (Idea 1 first violin bar 5).
- Contrasting dotted quaver/semiquaver figure (bar 21) always concluded by a **syncopated pizzicato** accent in the bass.
- Moments of relaxation in Idea 4 (bars 37–48).

City

- 4/4, slow tempo.
- Equal note values throughout (every note happens on a crotchet beat), so it creates a feeling of **pulse** rather more than of **rhythm**.

Marion

- 4/4, slow tempo.
- Syncopated rhythm, with an **anacrusic** start.

Murder

- 3/2, fast tempo.
- The downbow accents in bars 1–16 create a vicious **pulse**.
- From bar 17 onwards the regular upper string chords are counterpointed by the **rhythmically displaced** bass/cello notes.

Toys

- 4/4, slow tempo.
- Three slow phrases (an **augmentation** of the rhythm of **Marion**).
- Heard against a 'throbbing' viola/cello/bass **crotchet pulse**.

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Cellar

- **2/4**, fast tempo (*Allegro molto*).
- The contrapuntal ideas here maintain a ***moto perpetuo*** stream of continuous quavers in order to build up the tension. This excitement is heightened by the use of tremolandi.
- Rests are inserted into the third and fourth ideas here, to vary the rate of progress through the material
- The much longer note values in the concluding bars 'settle' the end of the extract, dissipating some of the tension

Discovery

- Opens in *2/4 Allegro feroce*, driven forward by off-beat accents and rests.
- **3/8**, fast tempo (one beat in a bar) (bar 26).
- Rushing semiquaver figures against two-bar bass notes.

Finale

- *3/4* and *4/4*, slow sad tempo *Adagio e mesto*.
- 'Bleak' and rather 'directionless' rhythms, avoiding a sense of metre.
- Syncopated viola idea bars 12–14.
- **Madness** motive heard three times (bars 15–18), with the third statement rhythmically displaced to begin on the third beat.
- 'Heavy', slow, off-beat chords in the last two bars – perhaps referring to the opening bars of **Prelude**.

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