

An Analytical Case Study
of the Music in
Three Hitchcock
Films

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Introduction

Throughout history, even back to the beginning days of humans, music has been affecting our emotions strongly. Many people have tried to understand why music has such a powerful hold on us. How can mere sound waves translate to powerful emotion? The answer still escapes us.

Scientists have been baffled by music's connection to emotion for centuries. One of the problems they find is the subjective aspect of music and emotion. We all experience the world differently, so there is much variation in the ways people interpret music, thus posing a problem for conducting experiments on the subject (Gutheil, 17). There is also much variation in music itself. For instance, in an experiment a scientist would have to control melody, rhythm, harmony, timber, overtones, volume, and form. Would the music be vocal? Instrumental? Played by a soloist? By an ensemble? Would the music be dance or march, popular or classical? Would the subjects listen to fragments of composition or the whole thing? And if the former, how much of the composition? (Gutheil 10).

The truth about the science of music and emotion is that no one yet knows the answer to the question of why music evokes emotion in us. Although the answer to "why?" still eludes us, we can understand better the emotional effects of music in films, because this is music specifically designed to evoke emotion. I analyzed the music of three of Hitchcock's¹ most famous films, *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest*. The scores for these movies were written by Bernard Herrmann, one of the most famous movie composers ever. The question I asked was "What does the music in *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest* accomplish?" I found that the music creates mood and atmosphere, acts as a guide from one scene to the next, gives us clues into what's happening in the movie, helps to evoke emotion, and even helps create meaning.

Music in Movies

Movie directors have long used music to amplify and alter the moods, emotions, and meanings portrayed in their movies.

"[Film music] can establish setting, specifying a particular time and place; it can fashion a mood and create atmosphere; it can call attention to elements onscreen or offscreen, thus clarifying matters of plot and narrative progression; it can reinforce or foreshadow narrative developments and contribute to the way we respond to them; it can elucidate characters' motivations and help us to know what they are thinking; it can contribute to the creation of emotions, sometimes only dimly realized in the

¹ Sir Alfred Joseph Hitchcock was an English director and producer. He was a pioneer in the genres of suspense and thriller films, and was known as England's best director, before he moved to Hollywood in 1939, becoming a U.S. citizen in 1955.

images, both for characters to emote and for audiences to feel.”

- Kalinak 1

Two well-known, non-Hitchcock examples illustrate the enhancements listed by Kalinak above. One is the torture scene from “Reservoir Dogs.” Music is used in this scene to create a creepy sense of irony. Mr. Blonde, the main villain, is torturing a policeman. The scene is accompanied by “Stuck in the Middle with You” by Stealers Wheel, a bubbly pop song. The song, of course, is highly ironic for the scene, as someone is being tortured to the sound of a pop song. Further driving this irony home, the music is being played onscreen out of a radio. The fact that Mr. Blonde chooses to play silly music while torturing someone drives home his sadism. (Mr. Blonde is shown below, with the silhouette of the cop. Img. courtesy of Youtube.com.)



The lyrics help add meaning to the scene as well. Another undercover cop is in the background throughout the torture. The catchphrase of the song “stuck in the middle with you” relates to what the police officer must be feeling. If he helps the cop being tortured, then he will blow his cover, but at the same time he can’t let the

other cop die. (Kalinak 2-8)

Another example that Kalinak gives in her book *Film Music: A Very Short Introduction* is *Beauty and the Beast*. She uses the song “Beauty and the Beast” as an example of the use of musical conventions. In this case, the song follows the conventions for romance: “...a major key, stable harmonies, a prominent use of violins...and a memorable melody with upward leaps in the melodic pattern.” These conventions for romance are powerful, and get the message through easily. (Kalinak, 14-15). However, when we watch the scene, we are aware of the song, more aware than we would be if the music was simply instrumental and served as background only. The song sticks in our heads, and we find ourselves humming/singing it afterward.

These are obvious examples of using music to manipulate a movie’s mood, but a lot of the time music in movies acts on a less than fully-conscious plane. When this happens, the music’s power is often intensified. (Kalinak,2-8)

This is very true of the music in the three films I studied. Composed by Bernard Herrmann², who lived from 1911 to 1975, the films' music is considered by many scholars to be pinnacle examples of using musical tools to build the audience's experience in subtle and unconscious ways.

In the sections that follow, I will try to show the ways that Herrmann does this.

Psycho

Psycho is certainly one of Hitchcock's most distinguished films, one of the most well-known thrillers. The movie takes place in and around Phoenix, Arizona. Marion Crane, one of the main characters, finds herself entrusted with 40,000 dollars by her boss, and decides to steal it and leave the city. She finds herself at the Bates Motel, which has recently gone out of business due to a diversion of the highway. She meets Norman Bates, the proprietor, and learns of his sick mother. That night, when she is taking a shower in her room, a mysterious figure attacks her and stabs her to death. Marion's sister Lila and boyfriend Sam Loomis send a private detective to investigate, who is then killed by the same mysterious figure. Finally, Lila and Sam go to the motel and unravel the mystery behind the killings. (Wikipedia - *Psycho* (1960 film))

This movie is shrouded in mystery and suspense, both aided by the visuals (especially the fact that it's in black and white), and the music. As I watched the film, several cues³ jumped out at me as particularly evocative. The prelude of the movie is driving and harsh, giving a sense of intensity. The cue starts with violins playing harsh discordant strokes. The cue eventually goes into a soaring violin melody, but then returns to the driving harsh part. The driving part of the cue reminds me of action music, but because of the discordant quality, it remains dark and mysterious.

In the opening scene, where the setting is established by showing a high view of the city, violins play long descending notes, as if we are spiraling down into the city. The camera is in fact slowly panning, and descending, so this cue is fitting, intensifying the feeling of descent and entry into a scene. The

² Herrmann is known best for his collaboration with Hitchcock on *Psycho*, *North by Northwest*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, and *Vertigo*. He also composed for many other films including *Citizen Kane*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Cape Fear*, and *Taxi Driver*. Herrmann also composed for radio dramas--composing for Orson Welles--fantasy films, and TV programs including *The Twilight Zone* and *Have Gun-Will Travel*. Herrmann won an Academy Award for *The Devil and Daniel Webster* (later named *All That Money Can Buy*.) Herrmann's last cue was the sombre soundtrack for *Taxi Driver*, directed by Martin Scorsese. Directly after he finished the recording, he watched the rough cut of what would have been his next film assignment. He died of cardiovascular disease that night. The films *Taxi Driver* and *God Told Me To* were dedicated to his memory. (Wikipedia - Bernard Herrmann)

³ A "cue" is piece of music composed for a movie.

opening cue is used as a theme throughout the film. As Marion is driving away from Phoenix, the opening cue begins again. When she pulls over, the music stops, then begins when she starts driving again, waking us up, and letting us know that the plot is going somewhere again.

And of course, the famous Shower Scene. This is the scene in which Marion is killed by the shadowy figure while taking a shower. The music in the scene is exceptionally good at evoking terror in the

Handwritten musical score for "The Murder" scene. The score is in 5/4 time, marked "Molto Forzando e Feroce" and "Vivo". It features staves for Violins (Vls), Violas, Violoncello (vc.), and Contrabasso (cb.). The score shows a sequence of notes and rests across 8 measures, with annotations like "Senza Sord." and "H-H-H".

viewer. At first all we can hear is the sound of the shower. Then the killer pulls back the curtain. Violins begin playing shrieking, piercing notes, combined with Marion's own screams. The violins begin layering, first just one note, then other violins come in to combine notes with the first one, then violas, then cellos, creating a harsh, discordant chord. (The image

above shows this part of the cue.) As Marion begins to slide down the wall, cellos play low notes of doom. The entire scene is perfectly composed to evoke terror in the viewer. According to Raphael Atlas, "The violins are mimicking the stabbing movement of the killer. Even the movement of their bows is a stabbing-like motion." This cue is used more than once. Whenever the killer appears, which is three times, the cue comes back, reminding us that it is the same killer. This use of themes is used in many films, including *Vertigo*, in which Madeleine's theme is used whenever the focus of the story is on her. I will explore this next.

Vertigo

Vertigo is another of Hitchcock's most well-known films. It takes

place in and around San Francisco. The protagonist is a detective who retires after a rooftop chase (which is the opening scene of the movie), in which he discovers his fear of heights. Despite his being retired, his friend hires him to follow the friend's wife, who hasn't seemed herself lately. Scotty (the detective) ends up falling in love with Madeleine (the wife), and after she commits suicide by jumping off a church clock tower, he develops an obsession. He later finds a girl who looks exactly like Madeleine, with red hair, and such is the intensity of his infatuation that he tries to "remake" Madeleine through her. He finds out, however, that the Madeleine he knew was not the real Madeleine, but the girl. Scotty's friend plotted to have it seem like his wife committed suicide, while he actually killed her. The movie ends abruptly and dramatically with Judy (the girl) falling off the same church clock tower. The music throughout this movie is dramatic and moving. "*Vertigo* is driven by music practically from beginning to end" (Sullivan 222). Many of the cues are melodious, but all tense and mysterious. The movie left me with a sick feeling, exactly the feeling of the film: obsession, insanity, and yearning. (The image above of the cover of *Vertigo* illustrates this point, with a man and a woman falling into a spiraling shape. Img. courtesy of Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.)



As in *Psycho*, several cues were particularly evocative and effective. The rooftop chase scene, which is the opening scene of the movie, is a dramatic opening for the film. As the criminal, the policeman, and the detective run across the rooftops, violins play buzzing runs, while horns play sforzandos. The cue is very chaotic. The violins' notes sound messy and murky, but the music still creates a sense of action. Finally, as the detective is hanging off the roof of a building,

and looks down, the vertigo chord makes it really seem like the viewer is looking from a great height. (The image above shows this scene. Img. courtesy of Image courtesy of pipocaenanquim.com.br) The vertigo chord consists of a discordant chord played on brass instruments, with fast strums on a harp. The chord really sounds like the dizzy feeling of vertigo.

Another prominent cue that I found was Madeleine's Theme, which is used whenever she is present. The theme is first introduced when Scotty first sees Madeleine. He is sitting at a restaurant bar, watching his friend and Madeleine have dinner. All other sound in the room is muted, and the theme begins to play as the camera moves in toward Madeleine. The music helps to bring the focus on Madeleine. The camera view goes back to a shot of Scotty, looking at Madeleine. The music is very romantic, with the melody played on violins, with soaring notes. Without any words spoken, or even much action, it is made clear that Scotty is falling in love with Madeleine.

The last cue that caught my attention was the cue that accompanies the driving scene, in which Scotty follows Madeleine as she drives throughout the city. The cue consists of a horn playing a single note in a regular rhythm with violins and then clarinets playing a soaring melody in the background. To me, the horn seemed to represent time ticking away, because much of the scene consists of waiting around for something to happen. The effect of the violins and clarinets seems less clear to me than the horns, for the cue would be effective if it were just the horns playing, however the violins and clarinets seem to add a sense of gliding along, and make the scene less monotonous.

North by Northwest

North by Northwest, in contrast to *Vertigo* and *Psycho*, is full of action, and reminiscent of a spy movie. It is certainly not a horror movie or a thriller. (The image below shows a scene from the film, illustrating this point. Img. courtesy of [Image courtesy of thebestpictureproject.wordpress.com](http://thebestpictureproject.wordpress.com).)



In the movie, a businessman named Roger Thornhill is mistaken for an FBI agent, George Kaplan, by two men working for a spy. After interrogation, Thornhill is forced to drink bourbon and is sent in a car toward a cliff. Thornhill narrowly escapes, though he gets arrested by the police, who assume he was driving drunk, and don't believe him when Thornhill tells them what actually

happened.

When he is free of the police, Thornhill goes to the United Nations building, where he heard the spy works (he still doesn't know he's a spy). There, he finds that the diplomat is a complete stranger. He is then framed for the diplomat's murder. A great chase ensues, in which Thornhill travels all over the country, pursued by the police, and all the while trying to find George Kaplan, who Thornhill believes will have all the answers to the whole fiasco. On a train he falls in love with a woman, who is actually working for the spy. Thornhill finds this out, and confronts her and the spy at an auction. Thornhill only just escapes by purposefully getting picked up by the police. Before they can take him to the station, however, a man intercepts them. He tells Thornhill that he works for the FBI. He also tells him that

Kaplan does not exist, and is simply a decoy to distract the spy from their real agent who is undercover.

He explains that the woman Thornhill fell in love with was the agent. Thornhill is then brought into a grand scheme to keep the agent safe. He will continue “being” Kaplan, until the agent and the spy leave for Russia. The agent is found out however, and Thornhill only just manages to save her.

Only one cue caught my attention in *North by Northwest*. As in *Psycho*, I found the prelude especially effective. The prelude is used as a theme throughout, mostly used when action is happening. The cue begins with drum rolls played by the tympani, followed with three eighth notes played on low brass instruments. The same tympani rumble is played again, with the brass instruments playing the same series of eighth notes.

This sort of call and answer slowly crescendos, getting higher and higher in pitch, with strings joining in on the tympani rumble on the third time. This series of motifs is a great example of creating an opening atmosphere for the start of the movie. After six of these motifs, the instruments begin playing the main theme, which is a variation of the starting theme, just much more melodic. The first part of the motif, which is the fast series of eighth notes, four sixteenths, then that repeated two more times seems to imitate running, and then the second part seems to imitate suddenly stopping and sneaking along. This creates a great contrast, and portrays the theme of the movie well.

Conclusion

I found, from my own analysis and from other sources, that the music in *Vertigo*, *Psycho*, and *North by Northwest* creates mood and atmosphere, leads us from one section of the movie to the next, gives us clues into what’s happening in the movie, and helps to evoke emotion. The music plays an immensely important role in the films, and they wouldn’t be half as evocative and effective at moving the audience without it. People go to movies in part to be moved in an emotional way. Without the music, movies wouldn’t be nearly as effective in doing this. Imagine watching James Bond without music. Imagine if the action scenes had no music, and they were absolutely silent, save the atmospheric sounds. Imagine if your favorite horror movie didn’t have that building tremolo on violins before that great blast of horns as the monster leaps out. These scenes wouldn’t be nearly as scary or exciting without the music. As we watch a movie, the music surrounds us, immerses us.

The music in *Psycho*, *Vertigo*, and *North by Northwest* is especially interesting because it is designed only to be listened to while watching a movie. Imagine trying to hum the shower scene, or listening to it at home for pleasure. Even the most melodic cues, such as Madeleine’s theme, do not follow the same sort of structure that we would normally associate with a hummable/listen-to-for-fun piece of

music--such as the theme to *Beauty and the Beast*, which I discussed before. Take John Williams, another famous movie music composer, for another example. Possibly his most well-known cue is the one for Star Wars Episode I, a melody that *everyone* hums and uses freely. Bernard Herrmann's music is designed for and only for that specific moment in the movie that it appears.

Unfortunately, not many people notice this phenomenon in movies. Kathryn Kalinak says it best, stating in her book *Settling the Score*, "Film music is a stimulus that we hear but, by and large, fail to listen to, a simple distinction that continues to inform the way we experience music in film." This research project opened my eyes to this largely unrecognized part of films, and gave me more insight into films themselves. By studying these three specific films, I was able to look closely at how music affects our emotions, answering many of my questions about the subject.

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