OVERTURE

Alfred Hitchcock employed more musical styles and techniques than any director in history, from Marlene Dietrich singing Cole Porter in *Stage Fright* to the revolutionary electronic sound track of *The Birds.* For nearly half a century he created films full of gripping and illuminating music. *Rebecca, Spellbound, Notorious, Rear Window, Vertigo, North by Northwest,* and *Psycho* are landmarks in the history of film music, unsurpassed in their power to hypnotize and bring to life ideas and emotions that cannot be captured by dialogue and images. Hitchcock's most radical experiments—*Rope, The Wrong Man, The Birds*—redefine film music altogether. The sustained quality of his music over such a long period—from *Blackmail* in 1929 to *Family Plot* in 1976—is a unique phenomenon.

Although music is essential in Hitchcock's concept of pure cinema, it is largely unexplored. The scores to *Vertigo* and *Psycho* have certainly received attention; indeed, a remarkable consensus among moviegoers and critics holds that the collaboration between Hitchcock and Bernard Herrmann was the greatest director-composer partnership in film history. But the special connection Hitchcock had with music began much earlier, with the dawn of movie sound, and continued until his final collaboration, with John Williams.

The premise of this book is that one cannot fully understand Hitchcock's movies without facing his music. Music is an alternate language in Hitchcock, sounding his characters' unconscious thoughts as it engages our own. What follows is an exploration of its meaning and an account of how Hitchcock interacted with its creators. Based on archival material and interviews with Hitchcock's composers, writers, and actors, including John Williams, Maurice Jarre, Joseph Stefano, Teresa Wright, and Janet Leigh, this book examines not only Hitchcock's scores but all the ways he used this most elusive and personal of the arts. Many of Hitchcock's most original films make music a crucial part of the narrative—sometimes the key to the mystery—and many more comment on his musical tastes and prejudices.[1] His characters are often musicians who play or sing music central to the story, sometimes in operatic set pieces; heroes and villains alike ally themselves with songs and musical themes, much like characters in opera or musical theater.

Hitchcock changed the way we think about film music. Films like *Vertigo, Psycho,* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* are indivisibly linked in the popular imagination with their scores; *Rebecca* and *Spellbound* were among the first to successfully use complex orchestral suites as marketing tools.[2] With lesser directors, music is often a form of hyperbole, blasting defensively onto the sound track to make up for a lack of pictorial distinction; with Hitchcock, the latter is taken for granted, and music is freed up to create its own realm of meaning, deepening or counterpointing memorable images with sounds that are far more sophisticated than what we hear in standard Hollywood scores. This phenomenon characterizes other directors who use music effectively—Curtiz, Fellini, Kubrick, and Spielberg, for example—but Hitchcock's innovations span a uniquely long period and have a dazzling variety. From the beginning, he ignored the convention that film music should stay in the background. Often its presence is so strong that it behaves like a character in the drama. In the rarely shown *Waltzes from Vienna,* a cinematic operetta about the Strauss family, he dramatized ideas about music that he would use for the next forty years. He also established a consistent pattern of shots that he would reprise in numerous films depicting orchestras and singers. Even Hitchcockians neglect *Waltzes;* here I shall try to bring it back to life.

Hitchcock rarely spoke on the record about music, but when he did, his words were incisive. Clearly, he regarded music as much more than accompaniment or an easy way to generate suspense. Like Erich Korngold, he compared film to opera. By the early 1930s, he was calling music a revolutionary medium with the potential to destroy or enhance a film, a counterpoint to the power of silence.

This book examines the full range of Hitchcock music used in his productions, including *Alfred Hitchcock Presents,* which unleashed a black humor new to television. I strongly agree with Peter Conrad in his riveting book *The Hitchcock Murders* that "anyone who is genuinely fascinated by Hitchcock will find all his work indispensable."[3] Even movies Hitchcock himself panned, like *Jamaica Inn, Stage Fright,* and *Topaz,* have superb scores and songs, impeccably woven into their textures. Rather than succumb to the temptation of covering the half-dozen films with the most famous scores, I launch into all of them. Leaving any out would be painful, and a disservice to Hitchcockians, who value detail and thoroughness.

The importance of music in Hitchcock has been acknowledged in a general or metaphorical way. The French compare Hitchcock's creation of an alternate universe of games and illusions to the state of music; the 1999 Hitchcock exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art compared his "no-accidents-permitted" storyboards to musical composition; Hitchcock himself connected his role as director to that of orchestrator and composer, commenting that he cut the picture beforehand in his imagination "just like a composer makes those little black dots to make music."[4]

Hitchcock's first image was a musical one: the frantic, spinning jazz dancer in the opening shot of *The Pleasure Garden,* his debut film from 1926. Beginning with his earliest talkies, he presented music as a mysterious force, something almost preternatural that floats over the action, influencing it for good or ill, sometimes dominating it completely. Its impact can be sexual, paternal, healing, or demonic; Orpheus's lute and Paganini's fiddle are equally resonant. Despite his reputation as a classicist, Hitchcock's vision of music was surprisingly Romantic: he felt no need to explain how a waltz travels from the villain's head to the heroine's or how the Prelude to *Tristan* playing on the radio causes a juror to have multiple epiphanies; and he did not regard having a song save a life as farfetched. Although Hitchcock's musical designs often depict an outer world of action and drama, providing a rhythm for his kinetic images—the sounds commonly associated with the "master of suspense"—the deepest, most original kind of Hitchcock music evokes inner turmoil and ambivalence, pitting subconscious desires and anxieties against behavior enacted on the screen.

If Hitchcock's underlying concept of music was Romantic, his openness to new sounds was refreshingly modern. He was knowledgeable about many kinds of music, from tonal British composers like Vaughan Williams to nontonal avant-gardists like Pierre Boulez and Karlheinz Stockhausen. Like John Cage, Hitchcock viewed music in extremely broad terms; his definition encompassed street noise, dialogue (especially voice-over), sounds of the natural world, and sonic effects of all kinds, including those produced by electronic instruments. It also included silence, the sudden, awesome absence of music, capable of delivering the most powerful musical frisson of all.

He also used every conceivable kind of dance music, among them waltzes, jazz, samba, and swing. He paid affectionate tribute to each of these even as he used them for distinctive, often ironic purposes. As early as his silent films such as *Downhill* and *The Ring,* he depicted dancers, dance halls, and stages as backdrops to disaster. Dancers and singers party on as their world crumbles beneath them, reinvoking Stephen Spender's haunting metaphor: “The war had knocked the ball-room floor from under middle-class English life. People resembled dancers suspended in mid-air yet miraculously able to pretend that they were still dancing.”[5] Hitchcock’s use of the dance as a cover for calamity began in England, during the period Spender was writing about, and continued in Hollywood, where it became a counterpoint to the gathering Nazi threat.

In other instances, Hitchcock adheres to the Shakespearean theme of music as healer: a close-up of a drummer’s eye saves an innocent man on his way to the gallows; a song wafting up a staircase saves a child and reunites a family; a vision of flames on a ballet stage gives a trapped American agent a life-saving idea for escape; a promise of music lessons helps keep two young boys sane after their musician-father is falsely imprisoned. Hitchcock’s music can go either way, toward tragedy or restoration, as can the quality of its performance: a hesitant rendering of a song can bring on violence or guilt; a confident one can restore life and sanity.

Hitchcock’s career was an unending search for the right song, whether a serenade, a music-hall ditty, a cabaret routine, a carousel tune, or a rock track. These are an essential part of his atmosphere, characterization, and story line. The attempt to find a felicitous song often resulted in tense behind-the-scenes negotiations and confrontations, many of which have never been recounted; they are an important piece of Hitchcock’s commitment to creating a compelling sound world and a barometer of the increasing corporate pressure he found himself under as movies entered the modern era. Many of these searches ended in failure, though not necessarily to the detriment of the film; others resulted in successes that were the movie’s crowning glory.

Hitchcock used the best composers of his various eras, among them Arthur Benjamin, Franz Waxman, Miklos Rozsa, Roy Webb, Alfred Newman, Richard Addinsell, Hugo W. Friedhofer, Dimitri Tiomkin, Bernard Herrmann, Maurice Jarre, and John Williams. How these artists collaborated or fought with him is part of this story. Critics tend to ignore or dismiss Hitchcock’s music, but composers viewed his involvement with their art as deep and intense. Herrmann stated that there were only “a handful of directors like Hitchcock who really know the score and fully realize the importance of its relationship to a film”; Williams said that Hitchcock’s mastery of music was a boon to all film composers. That Hitchcock knew the score is evident in his involvement in the earliest stages of the scoring process, providing his composers with detailed, sometimes witty music notes, an unveiling of which constitutes a significant part of this book. Hitchcock scores were often the defining moments in his composers' careers. That many of them were fellow émigrés was a subtle advantage: the rich blend of Hollywood glamour and European formality is precisely in tune with Hitchcock's sensibility and with the films themselves—with their casting, story lines, and Hitchcockian combination of Old World sophistication and New World brashness.

His music presents a fascinating tension between calculation and freedom, fanatical preparation and breakneck creativity. His work with composers resembled his method with actors, which, according to James Stewart, Hitchcock described as "planned spontaneity." After elaborate calculation and storyboarding, "he preferred to let the actor figure things out for himself. . . . Hitchcock believed that if you sit down with an actor and analyze a scene you run the danger that the actor will act the scene with his head rather than his heart, or guts."[6] It was much the same with music. Some of the richest scores were written the most quickly, under fantastic pressure, but only after Hitchcock made the concept forcefully clear. Others were brought to fruition only after behind-the-scenes machinations and close calls. Using detailed music notes, Hitchcock plotted sounds, effects, musical emotions, and even technical devices, then let the composer "figure things out for himself." This legendary control addict knew when to get out of the way.

But not always. His opinions about music were so specific and his need for control so large that he sometimes fought bitterly with composers. He quarreled with Franz Waxman on the set of *Rear Window,* angrily rejected Henry Mancini's score for *Frenzy,* and fired Bernard Herrmann in front of their colleagues, a tragic severance that ended a mutually enriching collaboration and a drama of clashing egos that I explore in this book. Yet with others he was so serene and sunny that the music process seemed like an extension of endless dinners and wine tastings; Chasens and other Hitchcock hangouts became the composer's conference room. Whether stormy or smooth, these relationships produced decisive music. *Psycho* might never have appeared on the big screen had its composer not insisted that Hitchcock listen to the terrifying, secretly composed shower cue; *Spellbound* reached a mass audience through advance radio broadcasts of the theremin-haunted score and championing by Leopold Stokowski.

Although this book is not a psychoanalytical exploration, it is fair to assume that Hitchcock's music reflects his own psychological conundrums as well as his characters'. As Donald Spoto eloquently shows in *The Dark Side of Genius,* Hitchcock was a complex person afflicted with doubts, phobias, and anxieties that he projected in his art; the blocked desire of Roy Webb's *Notorious,* the longing and loneliness of Bernard Herrmann's *Vertigo,* and the claustrophobic anxiety of the same composer's *The Wrong Man* were expressions of Hitchcock's inner turmoil. With source music and electronic sound—the macabre jocularity of Gounod's "March of a Marionette," the impassioned panic of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini,* the sinister chatter of *The Birds*—he could express his emotions more directly.

I have been greatly influenced by *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, François Truffaut's book-length interview with Hitchcock. Truffaut established once and for all that Hitchcock was an artist as well as an entertainer, and his insights into Hitchcock's films are more acute than anyone's. This compulsively readable book has a surprising number of musical ideas, many articulated for the first time. I have also, since I was very young, followed Royal S. Brown's innovative work on Bernard Herrmann, especially his pieces in *High Fidelity* magazine and his authoritative program notes. Another important resonance from the past is Donald Spoto's spellbinding Hitchcock class, which I was fortunate enough to take at the New School for Social Research in 1974, and which planted the seed of my own Hitchcock work.

The organization of this book is both chronological and topical, the latter occasionally interrupting the former; Hitchcock tended to make movies in pairs or threes, with musical strategies to match, but since he was so prolific, other projects often intervened. I have tried to incorporate this pattern by organizing the 1940s wartime dramas and the films incorporating waltzes in their own chapters (to cite two examples), even though doing so violates strict chronology. In general, I have presented the movies in chronological order. Hitchcock was involved with music for so long that it seems essential to tell the story from the beginning; there is a deepening musical richness and subtlety reflected in more detailed music notes as he gains experience with composers and new technologies, even though his themes and obsessions remained constant.

This is a book about Hitchcock for those who want to experience his work from a different point of view—to listen as well as watch. It is not about movie composers, though their careers and dealings with Hitchcock are an important part of the story. Nor is it about scores or harmonic analyses, though musicians will, I hope, find it interesting. I have pitched it to all who love Hitchcock, whether general readers and moviegoers or academics.

Hitchcock is unusual in that he appeals to both intellectuals and a larger public. My students, whatever their majors, revere Hitchcock and instantly recognize the shower cue from *Psycho,* a film they uniquely regard as a classic, not as a stuffy old movie; my colleagues in the literary world who sniff at the notion of taking movies seriously make an exception in Hitchcock's case. Jacques Barzun, normally skeptical about film, told me he regarded Hitchcock as "highly intelligent," one of the few directors "whose work holds up." Cynthia Ozick is "not even sure movies are art" but believes that in this case "the music is artful."

It is ironic that literary people applaud a moviemaker who had such a profound skepticism about language. A product of the silent era, Alfred Hitchcock distrusted words but came to trust music; it spoke a language deeper than dialogue, allowing the world of obsession and longing, his favorite subject, to have its say. Music "can tell you what people are thinking and feeling," observed Bernard Herrmann, who worked with Hitchcock over a greater length of time than any other composer, "and that is the real function of music. The whole recognition scene of *Vertigo,* for example, is eight minutes of cinema without dialogue or sound effects—just music and picture. I remember Hitchcock said to me, 'Well, music will do better than words here.'"[7] It does better in dozens of other Hitchcock films as well.