

PSYCHO

by
BERNARD HERRMANN

1 Prelude	2:07	19 The Office	
2 The City	} 4:36	20 The Curtain	} 6:40
3 Marion		21 The Water	
4 Marion and Sam		22 The Car	
5 Temptation	3:08	23 The Swamp	
6 Flight	} 8:47	24 The Search	} 2:25
7 The Patrol Car		25 The Shadow	
8 The Car Lot		26 Phone Booth	} 4:34
9 The Package		27 The Porch	
10 The Rainstorm		28 The Stairs	
11 Hotel Room	} 4:04	29 The Knife	} 6:09
12 The Window		30 The Search	
13 The Parlour		31 The First Floor	
14 The Madhouse	2:13	32 Cabin 10	
15 The Peephole	3:10	33 Cabin 1	
16 The Bathroom	} 2:03	34 The Hill	} 5:25
17 The Murder		35 The Bedroom	
18 The Body		36 The Toys	
			37 The Cellar
		38 Discovery	
		39 Finale	1:49

Total duration: 58:16

When it was first shown in 1960, *Psycho* – Hitchcock's first real horror picture, and his most daring production up to that time – was not in general very warmly received by film critics. Although the film proved a big box office success, only gradually did this macabre experiment in black humour become the object of closer scrutiny and more intense analysis. The consensus today is that *Psycho* is a classic of cinematic art and admiration for it is world-wide. Yet for all the amount of documentary and critical material on *Psycho* that has appeared and continues to appear, one of the film's most essential features has received the scantest of attention; the musical score by Bernard Herrmann. Only as late as 1974 was this omission repaired when Fred Steiner an old Hollywood colleague of Herrmann's and a composer of radio films and television in his own right prepared a paper on the *Psycho* score as a special research project for the University of Southern California Cinema Department. To Mr Steiner and to Elmer Bernstein, whose Film Music Club first undertook its publication in their bulletins, we are indebted for permission to make substantial use of this analysis here. All the introductory matter is Mr Steiner's, and the bulk of the analyses of individual cues; my own contribution consists mainly in adding some details of the scenario as the music unfolds, and in furnishing descriptions of those sequences not dealt with by Mr Steiner, both in the interests of a continuous but (as far as possible) non-technical commentary.

By the time he was commissioned to write the score for *Psycho*, Herrmann's name was already closely linked with Hitchcock's. Their association had begun in 1955 with *The Trouble with Harry* and continued with *The Man who knew too Much* (1956), *The Wrong Man* (1957), *Vertigo* (1958) and *North by Northwest* (1959). And although music by Bernard Herrmann was to be found on the screen credits of films by many distinguished directors – Welles, Dieterle, Robert Wise, Henry King, and others – to most of the cinema world he was *the* composer for Hitchcock pictures. But what is it about the *Psycho* music that sets it apart from other film scores composed before and since? The most noticeable departure from film music custom is that Herrmann elected a daring and controversial orchestral combination: strings alone. Now such a combination imposes severe limitations on the range of available tone-colours. This means a commensurate increase of composing problems, since generally it is important for composers to be able to call on the many resources of the symphonic ensemble – woodwinds, brass and percussion as well as strings – for variety and contrast in the treatment of musical material. But Herrmann's selection of strings alone deprived him of the many tried-and-true musical formulas and effects normally employed in the scoring of horror and suspense films (and for all its originality *Psycho* retains many of the features commonly found in traditional horror movies). And Herrmann also had to contend with the fact that in most people's minds the strings are associated first and foremost with romance. Nine times out of ten when a love-scene takes place on the screen the violins will soar in a big tune, the cellos throb in a

passionate countermelody. Why then would a composer decide on such a sweet-sounding ensemble for a film of chills and horror?

In an interview given in 1971 Herrmann explained that he had used only strings for *Psycho* because he felt that he could complement the black-and-white photography of the film by creating a black-and-white sound. Can such a thing exist in music? It can when we remember that the string choir of the modern symphony orchestra, the largest body within that ensemble, may have only one basic tone-colour, but it also enjoys certain other advantages not possessed by the other instrumental families when isolated from their normal symphonic context. The strings span the longest effective gamut of notes: they have an effective range of dynamics unmatched by the other groups; and within the boundaries of their basic single tone-colour they can command a great number and variety of special effects: pizzicato, tremolando, harmonics, playing near the bridge, and so on. Because there are so many of them the strings may be divided in numerous ways: antiphonal writing is possible and facilitates the mixing of all the different effects just mentioned within any single string section. In fact it is safe to say that no amount of ingenious scoring for a standard of symphonic ensemble could encompass the same range of expression, gradation of dynamics, or gamut of emotions as a large body of strings. And when the expressive range of the string orchestra is compared to that of black-and-white photography, Herrmann's analogy becomes perfectly clear. Just like the 'no colour' images of a black-and-white film, the string orchestra has the capability – within the limits of its one basic colour – of producing an enormous range of expression and a great variety of dramatic and emotional effects, with all the gradations in between.

One other out-of-the-ordinary feature of the *Psycho* music should be mentioned before we proceed to the score itself. One does not have to be a musician to notice a marked absence of tunes or melodies in the sense in which these terms are generally used (particularly in a film music context). For one of the hallmarks of Herrmann's style is a predilection for the use of small motifs which are often of an individual rhythmic character. It is safe to say that in *Psycho* Herrmann was simply following his own customary practice in this respect, but the result in this case is a special, disturbing quality, one which contributes greatly to the score's overall effectiveness as a 'black-and-white' counterpart to Hitchcock's classic thriller.

[1] *Prelude*. This starts with the main title credits and continues until they dissolve to the first scene, an aerial view of the city of Phoenix, Arizona. The music is fast, urgent, nervous, harshly accented – an apt accompaniment to the interlocking horizontal black-and-white bars created by Saul Bass who has done the titles for many a famous film. The constant hard, forward-driving motion anticipates the key emotion of the first part of *Psycho*: fear bordering on panic.

[2], [3], [4] *The City; Marion; Marion and Sam*. A long panning shot of the rooftops of Phoenix leads into the hotel room where Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) and her lover Sam Loomis (John Gavin) are snatching a clandestine hour together in Marion's lunch-break. This melancholy

music exemplifies Herrmann's tuneless approach – no melody, no clearly-defined motifs – only an oppressive atmosphere created by the slow descent and ascent of the divided strings. This music will reappear in other scenes, usually associated with the hopelessness of Marion's situation, and the melodic contours of the lovers' music move continually downwards in quiet despair, never upwards in aspiration or ecstasy.

[5] *Temptation*. Marion has left the real-estate office where she is employed as a secretary and is at home, changing her clothes. She has brought with her an envelope containing 40,000 dollars which her employer has asked her to place in a safety deposit box over the weekend; as the music starts we realise that she is planning to steal the money and run away, hopefully to a life of happiness with Sam. On the written page the music looks deceptively simple but the dramatic effect of the long, sustained muted high violin line with an insistent *sotto voce* rhythmic figure as counterpoint is strangely unnerving.

[6]. [7]. [8]. [9]. [10] *Flight; The Patrol Car; The Car Lot; The Package; The Rainstorm*. Marion packs her bags and drives away. She drives continuously throughout the afternoon and evening and pulls over to the side of the road for sleep. The following morning she is wakened by a highway policeman; though suspicious of her behaviour he lets her go but follows her to a small town where she uses part of the stolen money to exchange cars. Still she drives on, fear slowly giving way to panic; she loses her way in a blinding rainstorm and eventually pulls up in front of the Bates Motel. *Flight* and *The Rainstorm* bring back the music of the *Prelude* with its urgent, forward-driving motion and harsh accents. Now we begin to understand its true significance. The nightmare has begun; Marion is a fugitive, her fear and anxiety is intensified by the incident of the inquisitive highway patrolman, and she feels that she is now hopelessly trapped by forces outside her control. The dizzying whirl and hammering accents of this music carry us along with her as her car rushes headlong into the darkness. *The Car Lot* recapitulates the dull, empty calm of *The City*, *The Package* the inner agitation of *Temptation*.

[11]. [12]. [13]. *Hotel Room; The Window; The Parlour*. The Bates Motel is a little-frequented establishment some way off the main road and framed by a gigantic, sinister Gothic mansion. The proprietor is young Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) who lives with his mother in the old house. Once in her room, Marion unpacks and eventually decides to wrap the money in a newspaper (a varied version of the *Temptation* music). At this moment she hears distant voices and walks over to the window. Music from *The City* reminds us of that first scene in the picture when the voyeuristic camera stole in unawares on Marion and Sam. Norman and his mother are evidently having an argument, but very little later he reappears and invites Marion to eat with him in the parlour behind his office. As Marion surveys with some astonishment the contents of the room – huge stuffed birds and depressing Victorian bric-a-brac – *The City* music returns yet again but with a significant addition, a jabbing, pecking rhythm on the muted violas.

¹⁴ *The Madhouse*. Marion talks with Norman and suggests his putting his old mother in an asylum. Norman's reaction is one of growing anger, and music enters as he describes the cruelty and terrors of the inside of a madhouse. Although the result of the conversation is that Marion determines to return the money and cleanse herself of guilt, the music alerts us to the fact that something is badly wrong in the Bates Motel. The Strings are muted throughout, an eerie, disturbing atmosphere is created by the twisted configurations of the melodic lines, the dissonance of the counterpoint, and the constant use of crescendo-decrescendo dynamics. The music is quiet, unobtrusive but unsettling.

¹⁵ *The Peephole*. Marion says goodnight to Norman and retires to her cabin. The music begins as she exits; and continues through the scene as he watches her undress through the peephole in the wall between his parlour and her room. His face betrays no emotion as he does so; only the music suggests – with great economy and subtlety – the thoughts that must be flickering through his mind.

¹⁶, ¹⁷, ¹⁸ *The Bathroom; The Murder; The Body*. Norman returns to the old house and Marion goes into her bathroom; music from *The Parlour* with its subdued pecking rhythm accompanies her as she flushes the notes she has taken down the lavatory. She undresses and enters the shower, and what follows has been described by James Naremore as possibly 'the most horrifying *coup de theatre* ever filmed.' A tall, blurred figure appears, standing outside the shower, it whips open the curtain and raises a hand holding a giant knife to strike. We may surely consider the music which enters at this moment as one of the most horrifying cues ever composed. Several musicians and informed cinemagoers have referred to 'bird-shrieks' and 'distorted screaming bird-cries' in this connection. There are none. All we hear when Marion is killed is the sound of the running water in the shower, her terrified screams, and the shrill, stabbing thrusts of the strings in their topmost registers. The shrieking effect is created by reiterated, dissonant, sharp downbow strokes and wild glissandos: the brutal harshness of the sound is heightened by the wide spacing of the constituent notes, the use of the extreme high register of each instrument, and the addition of reverberation. Most listeners have associated this music with bird-shrieks, and we know that birds are important symbols in *Psycho*. But could it not also be likened to the repeated stabs of the long kitchen knife? Or could it perhaps be an echo of the terrified shrieks of the victim? Herrmann was once asked what thought was uppermost in his mind when creating this unique and hair-raising cue. He replied in one word 'terror'. The extraordinary fact remains to be noted that Hitchcock's original intention was to film this scene without music. Later when the director became very dissatisfied with the finished product, Herrmann prevailed upon him to try the murder with music, and the result exceeded his wildest imaginings, whereupon the composer reminded him of his initial ruling that the scene should be music-less. 'Improper suggestion' came the reply.

19. 20. 21. 22. 23 *The Office; The Curtain; The Water; The Car; The Swamp.* Norman comes racing down from his hilltop home, discovers the murder supposedly perpetrated by his mother, and proceeds to clean up. He wraps Marion's body in the shower-curtain, stuffs it into the trunk of her car, and sinks the car in a nearby swamp. The musical interval which dominates The Murder is the basis of *The Office*, the first music we hear as Norman reappears (and so, in effect, we are told by the music who the murderer is). The basic colour of *The Water* emanates from Hitchcock's close-up of the swirling, bloodstained water in the sink. Muttered accents and furtive tremolos serve to increase the urgency with which Norman performs his grisly chores. Constantly changing tone-colours and careful use of dynamics attest to Herrmann's skill in eliciting the maximum of dramatic effect from his deliberately restricted orchestral palette. In *The Swamp* the tortured, convoluted lines seem to draw us ever deeper into the twisted depths of Norman's mind, into unending darkness.

24. 25. 26 *The Search (a); The Shadow; Phone Booth.* Lila, Marion's sister (Vera Miles) has become alarmed at her sister's prolonged absence; and the real-estate office has hired a private detective, Arbogast (Martin Balsam) to try and recover the missing money. Arbogast searches in hotels and rooming-houses all over town, the music is basically that of the *Prelude* but played *pianissimo* and with mutes, thus negating the element of panic. Eventually, he arrives at the Bate's Motel where Norman arouses his suspicions. He telephones to Lila to tell her what he has found.

27. 28. 29 *The Porch; The Stairs; The Knife.* Arbogast drives up to the motel at night and finds Norman on his way to the cabins to do some work. Arbogast enters the motel office, calls out 'Bates!', and, satisfied that Norman has not seen him, goes up the path and into the old house, seeking Mrs Bates. He climbs the stairs slowly and carefully, and here Herrmann introduces one of his most original effects by combining a pizzicato tremolo in the massed lower strings with ghostly harmonics in the violins. The last eerie bars of this passage are followed by the sudden, ear-splitting shrieks of the murder music as 'Mother' rushes madly from her room and pounces on her victim.

30. 31. 32. 33 *The Search (b); First Floor; Cabin 10; Cabin 1.* When they hear nothing from Arbogast, Lila and Sam investigate on their own. They drive out to the Bates Motel and register as man and wife. Meanwhile a call from the local sheriff has alarmed Norman and he has carried an argumentative 'Mother' down from her room on the first floor to the fruit cellar; here the slow-motion, near-static character of the music, with its pyramids of chord-clusters, seems to suggest Norman's mind becoming ever more clouded and confused as the threat of exposure looms closer. Lila and Sam start examining the cabins and discover in No. 1 a scrap of paper which indicates that Marion has been there.

34. 35. 36. 37. 38 *The Hill; The Bedroom; The Toys; The Cellar; Discovery.* While Sam keeps Norman talking in the office. Lila climbs the hill to the old house, bent on interviewing Mrs

Bates. An insistent rhythm climbs with her from the cellos up through the violas to the second violins. In the house Mrs Bates' bedroom is the first she explores, then Norman's own, whose character is that of a nursery still. But by this time Norman has overpowered Sam and appears on the scene. Lila flees from him down into the cellar, and here Herrmann contrives an extraordinarily flesh-crawling effect – muted strings playing tremolo in the weirdest kind of chromatic *moto perpetuo*. Lila now discovers Mrs Bates but as a hideously mummified body with a skull in place of the head; yet hardly has she had time to recover from the shock when Norman dances in maniacally, dressed as his mother, knife upraised. At this point the murder music makes its third and last appearance, but takes a dramatic new turn as Sam manages to restrain Norman and overpower him, violins claw wildly in the air as, in James Naremore's words, 'he seems to disintegrate before our eyes in the tradition of old-fashioned monster movies like *The Mummy*'.

☒ *Finale*. In the local courthouse, a psychiatrist has just concluded a lengthy, Freudian explanation of Norman's dual identity; there is a cut to the detention room where Norman sits huddled and alone in a bare white-walled cell, calm, seemingly at peace with himself. Herrmann here reprises certain bars from *The Madhouse* which sound curiously poignant in this different context. The final grisly shot is of Marions' white car being pulled out of the black muck of the swamp, and the picture fades out on a low, heavy, acidulous dissonance – a chord without a resolution, a finale without an ending.

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