



SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 14, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## MOVIES: The Scarily Good Combination Of Hitchcock and Herrmann on "Psycho"

### THE ART OF THE SCORE: NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

PSYCHO (1960) \*\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

I love film scores and movie music. My first story in a national publication was about [jazz-inspired film scores](#) that ran in Premiere magazine. I reviewed film scores and soundtracks for the now-defunct CD Review, including [this comprehensive round-up of Oscar-winning soundtracks](#). Heck, I used that clip to pitch an entire book -- a sort of Rolling Stone Record Guide devoted solely to soundtracks. Who better than me to write about everything from Max Steiner's ground-breaking score for 1933's *King Kong* to the pop songs on *Footloose*? It wasn't meant to be, but my passion for movie music remains. I've listened to soundtracks. I've watched movies intently with the score and use of music uppermost in my mind. And I've screened films with just the audio track featuring music turned up while everything else is turned off, so I can see the images of the film and hear only the music.

Guess what? None of that is as illuminating and fun as watching a movie projected on a big screen while the New York Philharmonic performs the score. You're watching and enjoying the film, but because the music is being performed live it is always uppermost in your mind. For seven seasons, The Art Of The Score has proven this again and again. You notice music cues more acutely, you appreciate when the score is NOT underlining a scene and you always get to hear the music in context. Listening to a score on its own can be a treat. Performing a score orchestrated into a symphonic piece can be enlightening. But nothing beats hearing a score with the movie it was composed for.

That proved the case with *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind* this week. It's the most austere and unsettling of scores by John Williams. And the famous, instantly recognizable five note cue that is the heart of the climactic scene isn't just a string of notes played over and over. It's a full orchestral conversation bursting with humanity and humor,



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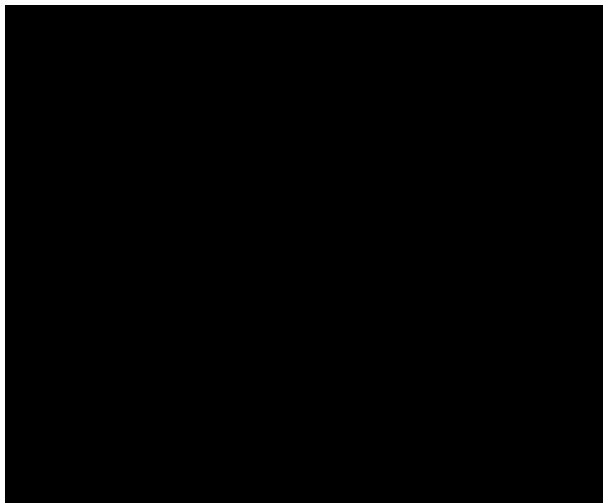
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both human and otherwise.

I may never recover from missing their performance of *Amadeus* last season, an audacious and challenging enterprise to be sure. If you can, catch *Psycho* on Saturday September 14 at Lincoln Center. Or book now for the Christmas treat of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* December 11-14, another John Williams score and an event sure to challenge *Star Wars* for the number of audience members showing up in costume (or at least wand in hand). Even better, *the Spring Gala on May 20 will feature Singin' In The Rain*. That's followed immediately by *Mary Poppins from May 21-23*, which I scandalously consider a better musical (yes) and the peak work of the Sherman Brothers. Seeing that in concert will surely prove how much terrific music is in that classic even when songs aren't being sung. (Follow the links to buy tickets.)

But first, we have *Psycho*. Alec Baldwin introduced the film with an amusing story about a father who wrote to director Alfred Hitchcock. His daughter saw 1955's *Diabolique* and was so freaked out by a bathtub scene that she insisted on taking only showers. Of course, then she saw *Psycho* and refused to take a shower either. Hitchcock wrote back: "Send her to the dry cleaners." Conductor Richard Kaufman cheekily pointed out this performance was taking place on Friday the 13th, (cheers and laughter from the audience), it was a full moon (more applause and laughter) and now they were all about to watch *Psycho*. Hitch would have approved.

Here's a six minute short featuring the droll Mr. Hitchcock (self) promoting his new movie *Psycho*.



*Psycho* is a low-budget, black and white flick shot down and dirty in 30 days with a crew used to working fast and cheap for TV. Since it followed Hitchcock's lavish color spectacle *North By Northwest*, critics were thrown for a loop. But audiences loved it all over the world, making *Psycho* the biggest hit of his career. Now recognized as a masterpiece, it may not have been the first of its kind, but it surely

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- ▶ 2014 (2)
- ▶ 2013 (5)
- ▶ 2012 (17)
- ▶ 2011 (15)
- ▶ 2010 (10)
- ▶ 2009 (43)
- ▶ 2008 (86)
- ▶ 2007 (781)
- ▶ 2006 (2412)
- ▶ 2005 (5)

inspired countless lesser slasher flicks and an obsession with serial killers. The performances by Janet Leigh, Martin Balsam and especially Anthony Perkins are so good it's remarkable to read that Hitchcock watched a rough cut and thought the film was a failure. He considered cutting it down to one hour for his TV show *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and writing off this experiment as a loss.

Composer Bernard Herrmann insisted on at least writing the music. Needless to say, after seeing the film with a score, Hitchcock changed his mind about how well the movie worked. If even a master like Hitchcock (who famously mapped out his movies before he shot a single frame) can reappraise a film dramatically like that, then you know just how powerful a score can be.

Of course, you're waiting for the shower scene, but the entire evening is a treat. Herrmann was on a tight budget and made do with a smaller orchestra composed only of strings. And as so often happens when artists face limitations, they use those restrictions to inspire creativity. The strings snap like percussion, they swoon like woodwinds, they wail like horns, they dance. Whenever someone is walking up the stairs of the Bates home, the music darts and dives around their feet (and even more so if the character is soon falling back down).

When Norman Bates (Perkins) and Marion Crane (Leigh) are chatting over a late night snack, the music is notably absent. Their talk is musing, confiding, even charming. And then Marion wonders if Norman might just put his seemingly abusive mother...somewhere. Norman leans forward, filling the screen (Hitchcock frames it so this seems very menacing) and Herrmann's music steps in and suddenly you feel very, very uncomfortable and perhaps this is the unconscious moment he decides to kill her. Put his mother in a madhouse? Never. "What do you know about caring?" asks Norman and all one can think is, "Run!"

A few scenes later, Norman is chatting with a private investigator and leans over as the man is checking out the hotel registry. The camera catches Norman at the strangest angle, sitting just under his chin and neck as Norman chews on some candy and chats away. You might not think about it or even clock how odd a choice it is at the time. But the idea that Norman is simply not like other boys -- might be more creature than human, chomping away with unthinking abandon -- is all in that shot. No music is playing, but I was conscious of the choice *not* to include it here and how that allows this subtly effective moment to inform the audience without calling attention to itself. (You can't help note when music isn't used because dozens of people are on stage but not playing. Indeed, when the conductor stands up, you are doubly aware a new musical cue is about to begin. It's just one more reason these performances are so valuable for appreciating a film's score.)

Yes, even when the score isn't playing, composer and "conductor" (ok, director) are working in tandem. And of course the scenes where they

are both present strike you all the more. Whether it's the shower scene with the brief glimpses of a bare stomach and the squealing, frightening violins or the scenes of Marion driving down the highway to the rushed, anxious feeling that the law (or a guilty conscience) is dogging her every move or the finality of the last burst of music in the last shot of the movie as a submerged coffin of a car is dredged up from a swamp, you appreciate two masters perfectly in sync.

*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day with top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.*

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 2:07 AM 

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